

The Legend of Sebastian Chiffon

The tale of a courageous soul who
never lived until he faced death

by Jonash Jemson

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Dedicated to My Father and Mother

Innsidh na geòidh as t-fhoghar e.
The geese will tell it in autumn.
(All will be revealed in due course.)

To the Flynn family
You are an inspiration.

Foreword

An account of the discovery, translation, and
publication of Jonash Jemson's singular work,
The Legend of Sebastian Chiffon

In the summer of 1965, my father travelled to Europe. A business trip took him to exotic lands shown in books with pictures rich in details, faraway destinations that would entice any child enthralled with history. I imagined the countries, cultures, and customs he would encounter. I wanted to go with him. I pleaded until he said it was impossible. However, he promised the next best thing. He would send postcards and return with a present.

Two weeks later, after mailing messages from a number of countries, he flew back with a gift that he handled it as if were invaluable. He sat upon the couch. I hurried to a spot at his feet and waited patiently. He knew I was an imaginative boy and that I loved history. He told me that just any present would not do. He stressed the need to find something special. He told my mother and me how he looked and looked, but nothing seemed appropriate. He then revealed how he found the gift he tapped softly.

My father had been wandering through the cobbled streets of Kirkcaldy, Scotland. Oh, how I smiled when he mentioned that name—Kirkcaldy. He was there and in every other venue depicted on the many postcards he sent. I scooted closer. I listened to his every word.

In Kirkcaldy, he found a shop clad in cedar siding and topped with a dull, metal roof as grey as a storm-covered sea. The shop had a sign hanging from chains that swung when the wind skipped off the bay and raced up the shore. Though it had long served its tour of duty and should have been retired and replaced by younger and more able signage, the old plaque continued its mission. Faded letters spelled, *Found Things*.

I giggled. "That's a funny name."

My dad nodded and continued. Found Things was a business much like flea markets in America. The owner, an old, gruff sailor, found anything and everything someone might want. When my father explained to the mariner of his mission, that he was seeking a gift for a boy captivated by history, the old man gave my father a tour. The sailor showed him things he had found from around the world. Not taken by any of the items for many reasons, my father continued his search alone.

He had all but given up when, by chance, he spied an object in a dark corner of the shop. Hidden, but not by design, he found a gift, the perfect gift. My father laughed and told us how the crusty proprietor had said this object was not fit for a boy. But my dad stood firm and bought the present.

You see, he found a box used by numerous travelers, a simple, old, wooden box sporting dings and gouges from years of rough handling and poor stowage upon ships. The box toured the world until it landed in the seaside village of Kirkcaldy and was found by the sailor as one of the things someone might want. That someone was my father.

As if to impart a lesson, he looked at me directly and said, “This box is not just a box. No, this was the means of storing valuables and records for men and women who journeyed to distant lands. The box protected their lives to a great extent. The box preserved their security, privacy, and wealth.”

“How do you know the box was owned by a lot of people? How do you know the box went to lots of destinations?” I asked.

My father showed me the exterior and pointed to a list of people, those unknown and long gone. They had scribed their names, dates, and destinations in succession. From 1678 until 1867, an exhaustive accounting revealed two centuries of history.

I stretched my arm and touched the box and asked the obvious question any boy searching for treasure would pose. “Dad, what’s inside?”

He replied, “There is nothing in the box.” While my enthusiasm waned a bit, my father said, “The gift is the box and the stories that come with it.” My father cultivated the idea the box offered more stories than I could ever create, stories of people who went to or from places during times of turbulence and periods of calm in a world evolving for good or bad. With this fresh perspective, I shifted to my knees and rested against my father’s legs. It was then that he handed me the gift.

History was in my hands and I was mesmerized. I paused and scanned the lid. I looked at my father and smiled. I thanked him as I examined this unique gift. I thanked him for thinking of me, for taking the time to find not any present, but this treasure. After he offered a humble nod, I pored over the names and places inscribed on a box which changed my life.

The old box was exactly as he described. Weathered, worn, bumped, and scarred, the surface revealed a recording of owners, dates, and destinations marked by etching, quill and ink, burning, chiseling, and scratching by nail. Based upon strong strokes of the pen and fine

lines of cursive, some of the listings were made by refined and wealthy people, while others were from the lower class as reflected by misspelled words and poor penmanship. I wondered how those without monetary means came to own such a proud possession, a costly item used for important documents.

My imagination took flight. This box was a guidepost which directed me all over the world. I was inspired and gave this artifact a position of prominence on the table in my room directly opposite my bed. I saw it before I went to sleep and when I woke each morning. For years I thought of new stories and visited old ones. I delighted in a world of fiction. My father and I journeyed with characters who became incredibly real. From love and heartbreak, daring and strife, conquest and thievery, we conjured up details and plots which rivalled the works of master storytellers.

Years later as I made my way into the world, I took the box with me. For this artifact, far more than a novelty, was a gift which kept giving. I credit the box as a primary motivation for becoming a professor of history.

Then, in 1990, as I entertained colleagues in my home one evening, the box surprised me with yet another gift. By chance, a friend stopped in front of a table upon which the box rested and did something curious. He pushed what appeared to be paper back inside the box, paper which had somehow slipped through a crack along the side and the bottom. Momentarily dispossessed of restraint, I stood and yelled, "Jim, what was that?"

The room stilled. Idle banter ceased. Everyone looked as if I had accused someone of a committing a trivial crime. I realized my poor judgment and excused my abrupt reaction. I shared that the box was empty. Jim disagreed. He said papers had poked through and he had simply pushed them back inside.

"That cannot be!" I hurried to his side. Those who were curious came forward and formed a huddle. I looked at those assembled and described the history of the box in greater detail than anyone knew. I assured everyone the box had never been used for storage. To do so would have ruined the gift like a demotion of a general to a lieutenant or a teacher to a janitor. Such hyperbole underscored the impossibility anything was in the box.

Mike stepped forward. My best friend and far more insightful than most, he looked at me and said, "Mate, this box is much more than what you have known for years."

All eyes darted to the gift.

“What?” I asked. I secured the box and moved to the couch and, as if it were a porcelain vase from the Ming Dynasty, placed it upon the coffee table.

With Mike sitting next to me, we surveyed the box and noticed a dowel protruding slightly beyond the surface near the lower right-hand corner. Mike pointed to other side. The dowel was no longer flush on the left. We surmised the dowel had become dislodged which may have caused a piece of wood inside the box to separate. A gap, no matter how small, granted paper a means of egress. A treasure-hunt-tension filled the room.

Mike lifted the box and turned it sideways. I then pulled the dowel gently toward the floor until it slipped slowly into the world as any newborn babe, pure and innocent. A collective murmur rolled through the gathering like thunder-filled clouds forecasting pending rain. A century old mystery in search of resolution was on the verge of showering us with a rare opportunity.

After Mike righted the box, a thud sounded. He turned to me with a look of surprise, one of his hallmark half-smiles. When he turned the box on its side again and righted it a second time, the thud sounded as distinctly as the first. I shouted and asked Neal to retrieve the key to the box in the drawer of the table.

“There is no key!” he yelled.

“To the far left! In the corner!”

“Got it!”

My friends ferried the key faster than the most heated game of Hot Potato. I unlocked the box and raised the lid until the hinges took hold. As soon as I peered over the edge, I knew my friend was correct. The box was more than what I had known.

Approximately an inch from the base of the box was a trap door which had been freed when we extracted the dowel. A blue ribbon attached to the underside of the trap door was visible. I reached into the interior and took hold of the ribbon and pulled it upward. The trap door followed and arced to a perpendicular position and stood at attention like any dutiful sentinel reporting to the Sergeant of the Guard.

“What is this?” I asked.

At the bottom of the box lay a slightly browned manuscript colored by age. No longer a prisoner to darkness, rather, resurrected from a secret tomb, the papers were about to share a message with the world. Mike described the discovery to those watching, for each were fellow historians. Intrigued, they shouted queries. Meanwhile, instantly baptized as a curator of antiquity, I was determined to

preserve this ancient manuscript. Rich grabbed a towel from the bathroom closet which I placed over the table. Working in tandem with Mike, we turned the box onto its side and, to our delight, the pages passed smartly in review until they halted when aligned in formation.

We, scholars all, were mesmerized. A spell had been cast and we were held captive and captivated at the same time. To our relief, the papers were largely unscathed.

Typeset in Gaelic, on the top of the first page was the name Jonash Jemson with a date of February 27, 1877 and the location, Kirkcaldy, Scotland. The document had no title. Neither chapters nor paragraphs structured the body of the work. We concluded the papers were originals and had to be printed on an old press. Each page had been crammed edge to edge and corner to corner and wherever words could have been placed. With judicious economy, no space was unused. Whatever Jemson wrote, a story, religious treatise, or scientific paper, he made effective use of his resources.

I called my father and told him of the discovery and visited him days later. He marveled at the find. He encouraged me to learn as much as I could about the author and the content of this mysterious work. Given the age of Jemson's document, knowing that language evolves over time, at his behest, I promised to have the text translated in Scotland. An accurate translation would be best achieved with native speakers and experts. My father then made a special request. He asked me to return with the history of the author and the translation. He asked that I read Jemson's work with him.

"Do this for me, son," he said.

"Absolutely," I replied.

Within weeks I flew to Scotland and drove to Kirkcaldy. I was not surprised to learn the Found Things shop no longer existed. A local tavern took its place. Some of the seasoned locals swilling beer from heavy glass mugs knew of the old sailor and confirmed his death.

I directed my search to the civil parishes of Kirkcaldy and Dysart. Each had limited information about the author. However, I discovered a relevant fact. A family by the name of Jemson lived on the outskirts of Kirkcaldy in the 19th century. They had four children, three of whom had died at birth. The first child, Jonash, was born on December 20, 1837. The documents revealed nothing about his life, marriage, or death.

I visited the Kirkcaldy Museum and Art Gallery which also served as the main library. Old and thick books with a musty smell and more than thin, dried pages disclosed the Jemson family was of the lower class and Jonash Jemson was largely self-taught. Sparse details

revealed they had rented a small farm and raised sheep. Young Jemson worked the farm and apprenticed for a printer in Edinburgh. When of age, probably when he was fourteen years old, he moved to Edinburgh and began a career in the printing trade.

I continued my investigation at local churches. Places of worship were social hubs in centuries past and often possessed information. I was disappointed though. After visiting Bennoch, Abbotshall, Pathhead, St. Bryce Kirk, and St. Marie's, the records netted no additional insight. I wondered whether young Jemson was far too busy surviving and, as a result, lacked the time to budget for church and God.

At a dead end, I focused on the manuscript. I hoped the text might contain clues about Jemson's life. Since I had already canvassed local universities for able translators before I arrived in Scotland, I drove to the University of Edinburgh and spoke with Professor Joseph MacInnes. He was an expert with two doctorates in languages and linguistic studies and a native of Scotland.

MacInnes was thrilled with the discovery of Jemson's work. Given the importance of the manuscript, he set aside all nonessential tasks for two weeks. His superior knowledge of Gaelic proved essential. However, his wisdom beyond translation affected me profoundly.

When he finished reading Jemson's writing, MacInnes was elated. "Young man, I have not seen anything like this in a long time. This is a sweet and stirring story."

"A story?" I asked. I must have sounded as though I was disappointed. I had hoped for a major discovery.

"Yes, a story." Professor MacInnes reassured me by offering greater insight. "While it is uncommon for manuscripts to survive in such a preserved state, it is even more uncommon, given the date of 1877, for a self-taught man of negligible means to have had access to resources and to have produced such a testament of intellect and spirit."

"What do you mean, Professor?" After hearing MacInnes' words, I realized I may have discovered a truly remarkable manuscript after all.

MacInnes continued. "Jonash Jemson was driven and creative. He was a profound thinker and clearly a passionate man. Had Jemson benefitted by educational opportunities the wealthy took for granted, I am certain he would have become a master writer. His prose is good, not great, but good. However," Professor MacInnes paused.

"However?" I asked.

Professor MacInnes continued. “However, Jemson’s content is truly exceptional.”

“How? In what way?”

Professor MacInnes reclined, removed his bifocals, and thought for a moment. “Jonash Jemson tackled subjects most people avoid. In our modern age of abundance, instant gratification, and easy living, we don’t seek truth as Jemson did. We don’t explore the deeper meaning of life in the same measure and manner as people did in former times. We may think we do, but this is not true.” He waved his finger and tapped it on his desk. “Jemson’s work proves as much.”

“How did you arrive at this conclusion?”

“Well, for example, Jemson wrote with a unique tone and expressed timeless lessons which could only have been culled from years of experience and introspection, lessons he taught himself, wisdom he chose to share for and with all of humanity. He wrote as if he had a calling to distill spiritual secrets. As such, his themes, which are quite remarkable, make his work one of distinction.”

MacInnes paused. He wanted to support his position with examples. “Consider this. Jemson lived in a time of great struggle. He, like most men, had to be gritty and tough. Life demanded such traits. People relied upon their survival instincts as a matter of life and death. In such an era, through his experience, he acquired enlightened moral discernment and this, to be certain, was largely uncommon for those of the lower class. He made insightful spiritual deductions. He probed until he unearthed answers to deeply embedded queries which would give any sober man a reason to pause and think.”

“Professor, I have not read his work. I vowed to read it with my father.”

“Well, this I appreciate. When you read Jemson’s words, you will understand why I give him such credence and then you must make some rather important decisions.”

“How so?” I asked.

“You have a charge, my son.” Professor MacInnes shunned his role as a scholar and translator and waxed paternalistic. “God has blessed you with a work which must be shared with the world.”

MacInnes was direct, but gentle, and I was no less taken aback by the implications of his conclusion. While the discovery was exciting, suggestions that I now had a burden to perform were not what I desired. Moreover, because these suggestions had been articulated from someone as learned as Professor MacInnes, I felt even greater and, perhaps, undue pressure. I deflected this calling as quickly as he suggested it.

“Professor, are you not overreacting?” I asked, hoping to temper his enthusiasm.

He chuckled lightly to himself. He knew something he wanted me to appreciate. Yet, he seemed uncertain of my ability to do so.

“Sir, am I missing something?”

“Oh, I beg your pardon. I was thinking of the Ark of the Covenant.” He looked at me as if to gauge my knowledge and then continued. “As you are aware, the Ark was a wooden chest built by the Israelites, a holy work commissioned by God. The Ark was a box, so to speak, a holy box, and of such importance, only chosen men known as Levites were permitted to carry it.”

“And?” I asked.

“The Levites,” he said, “knew the import of what they carried.” MacInnes had a twinkle in his eye. “You do not.”

“Professor MacInnes!” I recoiled at the weight of his last statement.

“Now, now, now,” he replied in an attempt to pacify me. “I encourage you to listen closely.” He paused again. “I am an old man and I may be set in my ways, but,” he shrugged, “I have a right to be. However, I am not so established that I am closed to new insight.” He shared personal information which he would not have offered to a general audience. “After reading Jemson’s work, though I have not altered my beliefs, I am inclined to re-evaluate my thoughts about life and death.”

“What?” I was incredulous. “Jemson’s work did that to you?”

Professor MacInnes smiled and raised a finger as a gesture of caution. “Jemson did that for me.”

I noticed MacInnes’ emphasis on the words *Jemson* and *for*. I began to understand. “Professor, if you were moved intellectually and emotionally by Jemson’s story, are you suggesting his thoughts must be carried into the world as if a divinely inspired message?”

He pointed his finger directly at Jemson’s original work and said, “Exactly, and you are the chosen who carried the box and now you must reveal Jemson’s spiritual wisdom to the world”

“I am curious. Do you agree with Jemson?”

“It is not a matter of agreeing with the author. I do not know whether Jemson is right or wrong. I do not know if I am right or wrong about various topics. Beliefs are one thing, truth is another. However, I do know this with certainty.” MacInnes reflected as he swiveled to one side, crossed his legs, and leaned forward in his chair. “Jemson compels his reader to go where most do not and will not. Jemson prods and he prods hard. This prodding is what man needs.”

“Well, this is not good,” I said.

“What is not good?” MacInnes asked.

“I must solve another mystery. I must determine the best way to introduce Jemson’s writing to the world.”

“Well,” he chuckled again. “You have done a fine job so far.”

“Professor MacInnes, as far as I am concerned, what I have accomplished to this point has been easy. As for the next phase, as for publishing Jemson’s writing, I am uncertain how I should proceed.” I looked at my advisor and asked, “What do you recommend?”

He was pensive and for good reason. I gave him his due, for I had no doubt he wanted to share the best he could offer. “I suggest you read Jemson’s entire story. Break it into chapters and paragraphs. Give it a title and,” he thought for a second, “let Jonash Jemson share what he wanted known.”

“So simple.” I added.

“’Tis lad.”

“Are there any challenges?”

“Yes. You must make one major choice.”

I waited silently.

“Jemson has a unique writing style, no different than a man’s fingerprint. His style is his and his alone. You must honor it.”

“I will.”

MacInnes was not satisfied with my quick response. “You see, Jemson undertook great efforts to convey broad themes and establish specific conclusions. Even so, his prose is underdeveloped. I don’t believe his writing style ever matured into fully polished expression. In my humble opinion, had Jemson received a complete education and guidance, he would have vetted his themes into unparalleled depth and breadth and penned an unassailable argument. With honed skills and refined reasoning of his thoughts, I am convinced Jemson’s work would have become a substantial thesis about life and death. However, given dearth of resources and absent a mentor, I must say Jemson’s prose is, nonetheless, laudatory.”

I thought about MacInnes’ observations. He spoke of Jemson as a man who sought God’s purpose for his life. By all appearances, Jemson’s singular manuscript was a defining attempt to fulfill a divine mission. I was humbled by both Jemson’s achievement and MacInnes’ recognition of this remarkable and unknown author.

Professor MacInnes continued. “You have two options. You must either publish Jemson’s work in its entirety or rearrange the work with added commentary.”

“Who am I to rearrange, much less comment? I do not know of Jemson’s intentions.”

The professor smiled. “Then you see my point.”

“Yes sir, I do.” I considered the obvious. “Should anyone add commentary?”

“I would not,” the professor replied.

“Why not?”

“What revered work did the Ark of the Covenant hold?”

I thought and replied, “The Ten Commandments.”

“Who wrote the Ten Commandments?”

“God.”

MacInnes smiled broadly. “Is there a need to explain God’s writing?”

“No!” I was the one chuckling now.

Professor MacInnes continued. “I am an author of many books. I would not want any of my works altered. While I would entertain someone providing comments, they would have to be contemporaries and equal to the task.”

“And Jemson’s work?”

“No one is Jemson’s equal today. His document is dated and we have no one who is able to adequately empathize with or appreciate the context of Jemson’s experience and subsequent insight. We know practically nothing about the author. Given the circumstances he endured and the quality of his finished work, we must safely conclude that Jemson was a man of solid character with an indomitable spirit. As such, skilled and specialized thinkers of our day may not be malleable enough to surpass their own prejudices about life, death, and God. They may not adequately frame Jemson’s conclusions in proper context and render objective commentary, unless,” MacInnes hesitated, “unless their commentary offered alternative interpretations and qualified analysis of Jemson’s observations.”

“Are you suggesting Jemson’s book is a radical departure from prevailing summations about life and death and his content and claims are distinctively his and his alone?”

MacInnes frowned. “No. I am merely conveying a professional assessment and, as such, I suggest no one should alter Jemson’s work or provide commentary prior to the first publication.” MacInnes placed his arms on his desk and tapped his fingers resolutely. “Do not both Jemson and his readers deserve an initial printing of what is a virgin expression of his ideas?”

“Yes!”

“Should his work not pierce public consciousness without scholars blurring his intentions and objectives?”

“Yes, but why did you suggest the two options?”

“Great question. By broaching this topic now, you will have cleared it out of the way. Rest assured, within the publishing world, you will be pressured to deviate from Jemson’s original work in order to satisfy marketing demands and increase sales and profit.”

“Oh, I see.” After a moment of thought, I said, “Professor, I am missing one vital point and I do not know what it is. Please tell me. I am certain you know.”

MacInnes smiled and proceeded. “Everyone is a critic. Everyone judges. While these are sweeping generalizations, I make them quite firmly. Now, listen to me, as I want to be crystal clear.”

I sat more upright and focused my attention.

“While I believe Jemson’s story is sweet and stirring, I assure you much effort will be required by the average reader to grasp not the story, but the weighty content which develops and envelops the work. In order to emphasize the characters and plot, publishers will want to make marginalize the content that challenges the mind and heart. They will attempt to either delete or change chapters and dumb it down, so to speak. You must resist such efforts.”

Professor MacInnes knew the question I was about to ask and gave the answer. “Not all books are meant for everyone. This is true for Jemson’s work as well. I believe Jemson wrote his book exactly as he intended. And I will tell you why. He wanted select readers to labor through lengthy expositions. He wanted to ensure that his readers would arrive exactly where he intended and with greater awareness so they could make different choices for their lives.”

“Where did he intend for his readers to arrive?” I asked this question with a note of hostility. I was becoming impatient.

“I believe he wants readers to arrive where few will go. He wants them to wade through serious subjects as a rite of passage. Those who refuse to dignify Jemson’s personal exploration will not appreciate the work and the depth of the story, and, consequently, will not make life-defining choices after finishing. Rather, they will remain exactly as they were before they started.”

Professor MacInnes was adamant. “Jemson wrote with deliberate intent. It is my considered assessment that he wanted those who are weak to put the book aside. He wanted the contentious to quit in disgust. He wanted the unteachable to never start. I sense this because Jemson was and is consistent and genuine throughout his work. Through his prose, he sought to inspire those with the inclination

to learn. He sought to inspire those with character, those with the mettle to turn impossibility into possibility. He wanted the teachable to dig and drastically alter their lives. He hoped for newly minted mavericks to radically move families and communities when most others would not. He wanted to touch the lives of those who were and are on the verge of the extraordinary.”

Over the last two weeks of close contact with Professor MacInnes, I came to know him as extremely credible. However, his next comments proved he was in a class by himself.

“I became the youngest tenured professor of Edinburgh University. I have taught here for nearly fifty years. I could be condescending and aloof to most everyone, but my strength rests in my willingness to humble myself for one goal. Even today, I prefer to learn above all else.” He moved his hands across his desk and said, “Young man, hear me. Jonash Jemson is my superior. I learned more from him than I ever expected from his writing and I am grateful.”

I was amazed by MacInnes’ words. Such high praise for Jemson from a man as learned as MacInnes was more than affirming. Professor MacInnes had directed a critical topic to a salient conclusion. And I sensed my impatience with his explanation was exactly the frustration readers might experience with Jemson. This was MacInnes’ point.

Assuredly, I looked at Professor MacInnes and said, “I will honor Jonash Jemson and his manuscript. His words will be published as written.”

Professor MacInnes smiled. He cleared his throat and said, “If you do, the inimitable Jonash Jemson will change lives. He will change the world. Mark my words, he will glorify God.”

I left Professor MacInnes in a fever pitch. A box that was a gift became a blessing decades later. My intent and mission, adroitly shaped by Professor MacInnes, were fully known and ready for execution.

I called my parents and informed them of my return in two days. I was alive and as energetic as any boy about to share a victory with his father. Notably, I was the one returning from Kirkcaldy with a gift for him.

When I arrived, I jogged up the sidewalk lined with flowers emitting scents of spring. My thoughts and emotions were equally fresh and alive. My mother, who was looking through the window, rushed to open the door and greeted me in a most unexpected way. I saw her face. I felt as if a cold wind hit me. “Mom?” I asked.

“He’s gone, dear.” My mother lowered her head and wept.

My mind stumbled as I sought to establish some basis for her comment. Questions jockeyed for position. “What? Who? How?” Though my mother could not respond, I knew. “I spoke to him from the phone at the airport!” I said in a state of confusion. I was blown away by a tsunami of despair.

My once solid belief system seemed to evaporate. It appeared as though everything I understood was no longer true. My life was in abject upheaval. Tectonic plates could not have shifted within the earth and disrupted continents equal to the shock caused by my father’s death. I struggled to process a torrent of thoughts. My heart searched in vain; I found nothing but sorrow. Death took my father and robbed me of life.

I leaned against the door jamb while my mother collapsed into my chest. I hugged her tightly as we, two souls shaped by a man without comparison, faced the unknown. A sign hanging on chains swung amidst winds of grief. *Life and Death* was the name of a shop storing things for potential buyers. I was in that shop and I refused to purchase anything.

I flailed helplessly and without hope in an ocean of bewilderment that was as limitless as the horizon. I did not understand and I struggled to express emotions no one wants to feel or endure for any length of time, much less for years. Death became an immediate, unwanted unknown and life lost its meaning. Quite shamefully, I readily admit, I was fearful and angry. Moreover, I was in no position to search, know, or accept the truth about life and death. Truth be told, I was unwilling.

After the funeral, I did not revisit Jonash Jemson’s work. I never shared with my mother what had occurred in Scotland. I hid the truth. I reasoned wrongly from a selfish perspective that since I could not give my father his gift, I would not deliver Jemson’s gift to the world. I was being small when my father would have wanted me to be larger than life, to be selfless, purposeful, and loving. I was none of these noble attributes. I was not my father’s son.

Twenty-eight years later, in 2019, as I walked through the park on a cool autumn day, I saw an old man sitting upon a bench reading a book. He wore bifocals and sported a tweed jacket. His sparse, grey hair moved easily with the fall breeze. I came to an abrupt halt. I stared. He looked like Professor MacInnes.

As if an omen, a long-lost yearning was resurrected. I hurried home at a speed most men my age could not handle. I bolted through the front door and attacked the stairs and reached the attic. In no time, I unpacked a heavily protected, wooden box and lugged it to the living

room. I thought of MacInnes. I placed the box carefully on the coffee table as if it were the Ark of the Covenant.

Apparitions gathered around me and formed a huddle, old friends, historians all. I opened the box and raised the trap door with a belief my colleagues watched with ripe anticipation. I lifted the original manuscript and MacInnes' translation with reverence. Without hesitation, I read Jemson's work for the first time. I honored MacInnes' strong admonitions and labored through Jemson's prose. His exposition challenged my soul. His writing changed my life.

Jemson's story was sweet and stirring. Immoveable on the couch, my mind and heart soared to new heights. I was soon immersed in the travails of Sebastian Chiffon, the main character, who, according to Jemson, as I reasoned, was to be fully alive before he died. Jemson did not state this theme explicitly, but the message was evident. This message struck me as the kind of insight which drives a man to evaluate his purpose in both life and death.

I finished Jemson's work long after nightfall. While my heart was fresh and hopeful, my mind cycled through profound concepts. I was inspired, my soul was unmoored even more. Something troubled me. Slowly, ever so slowly, as I weighed Jemson's story, my emotions tightened like a wet rope tied in a knot while my thoughts splintered here and there. I wandered without direction and landed in a quagmire. Then helpless and hopeless, I reflected upon my own life. In a word, I was lost.

An hour later, as the fog cleared, as if the apparitions nudged me and Professor MacInnes guided a willing student, I saw my father resting in a chair in front of me. He waited to hear of his son's victory. I stretched my arm toward him. "Dad?" When his image faded, I began to cry.

I knew then what Jemson understood at forty years of age in 1877. I had no doubt he knew he was a spiritual being made for a divine purpose and that distinct purpose affected his relationship with life and death. Jemson advocated this understanding for readers who were willing to discern the finer secrets of life and death, those who would aspire to be with and for a grand purpose and to love as God loves.

By virtue of reading Jemson's work, I re-evaluated how I related to myself, my father, mother, friends, and strangers, how I related to truth and lies, how I related to hope and purpose, how I related to life and death, and, without question, how I related to God. I confronted a startling revelation. I had failed to dignify my relationships time and again out of fear, weakness, and ignorance, and each of these traits involved worn and ineffective routines which

limited my choices. As Jemson suggested in his work, I had no reason to be bothered by what occurred in the past or my many flawed perceptions of those dated events. Rather, I had every reason to be in the here and now and love with purpose regardless of the circumstances and outcomes. At Jemson's urging, I embraced this simple truth. I made a vow to heed his wisdom. I vowed to embrace life and every experience as a new beginning.

This unexpected introspection, spurred by Jonash Jemson's work alone, led me to a notable observation concerning my father. When he made his requests about Jemson's work before I flew to Scotland, he was giving me another gift. My father wanted me to hope with an unceasing hope. He knew grown men inevitably dispense with dreams and defer to a sense of duty which often devolves to a drudgery until drudgery becomes a regrettable weakness and a point of resignation. Thus, when he asked me to bring my discoveries home from Kirkcaldy, he did what he had always done. He motivated me to enter the unknown and to do so bravely. Ironically, like a man watering a tended garden, my father hoped to receive a far greater gift. He yearned to learn what his son had gleaned about a manuscript hidden in a gift which had become more than a box. He hoped to relish in my joy. In his own unique way, he loved me and he loved loving me, as if this were his divine purpose as a father with a son.

This is why Jemson's book moved me in a manner I did not expect. I did not receive my father's last gift and he did not receive the gift he wanted, a gift I was prepared to offer. Sadly, with his death, I had withheld Jemson's work from the world. As Jemson explained, I had believed a false perception, a great lie. I had shunned truth. If Jemson's premise is true, and I believe it is, I had ignored a divine purpose and I did so willfully.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, these hard truths are the reasons I cried while I read Jemson's work. Truth became evident. Filled with Jemson's poignant themes, I cried because my life paralleled the path of a young lad named Victor who battled death. I cried because my father was none other than Mr. Flynn and my life was worthy for knowing this truth. I cried because Jemson, like my father, encouraged me to hope and live unbridled and without fear. Both Jemson and my father wanted me to live and die victoriously.

Professor MacInnes was correct. Jemson's work was challenging. However, though it was difficult to digest the weighty content, I discovered that Jemson's lengthy expositions were appropriately placed. His princely prose is perfect for those seeking a truly noble adventure.

After speaking with lawyers, editors and copyright experts, after securing the rights to a work which could have been deemed within the public domain, having finally honored Professor MacInnes' call to dignify Jemson's writing, my final obligation was to arrive at a title and subtitle. Without difficulty, I readily penned the name of the book, The Legend of Sebastian Chiffon. The subtitle, *The tale of a courageous soul who never lived until he faced death*, came after some reflection. Once you read this book, you will understand its significance.

If you are weak, contentious, or far from teachable, please do not give The Legend of Sebastian Chiffon a second thought. To the few who intend to read and finish this book, please know Jonash Jemson would sing your praises. He would thank you for persevering with purpose into truth in both life and death. May you fulfill your divine purpose to God's glory.

Editor

The Legend of Sebastian Chiffon,
a work of fiction by Jonash Jemson
June 7, 2020

Note: The process of translation is not exact and often requires approximate use of words when the literal translation is not possible. Every effort has been made to honor the author's words and intent.

The Legend of Sebastian Chiffon

Part One

Context

Nature gives and nature takes.

Whether man's inhumanity to man, a raging storm, or predatory attacks by animals, survival is the goal.

Occasionally, a supreme sacrifice inspires human consciousness to fundamental and eternal elements.

Those elements are truth, love, and hope.

I

Edinburg, Scotland, April 1, 1854.

If the death threat was not enough to scare me, I never expected the assailant to say I did not live life as I ought. Curiously, it was the latter thought which jarred me more than the former. Let me explain.

As a man of twenty and four years and without a care in the world, as I walked through the Scottish Highlands alone, I pondered the task at hand. I would work a fortnight on my grandfather's farm just as I had done the last three springs.

The day was typical. The sky was cloudy. The air was cool and moist. With a battle-tested coat, a bag of provisions, and a blanket roll, I had all a man needed for the two-day trip. I was young and ambitious and this meant I was eager to help my mother's father and my greatest inspiration.

Life, at least to my way of thinking, was good, in fact, it was better than good. Perhaps I was too comfortable. Maybe this is why I got so bloody scared when the unexpected occurred, when a stranger said he would give me my life, which I understood to mean he would not kill me.

You see, no one was within eight furlongs of my location and only a gentle wind made the slightest whisper. I rather relished my solitary journey. To my understanding, silence does something to a man. It places him in deep thought which makes silence even more silent, to the point of spiritual immersion, as if one becomes silence itself. I was with nature and nature's God and life was better than good.

Well, that coveted silence did not last long. Quite unexpectedly, a cackle rang out, a loud and wild cackle. Not a laugh, but more like a disturbed cry, a mix between a crazed man with no sense of reason and a feral cat. This wild sound chilled me to the bone.

I am not the least bit embarrassed to say I stopped dead in my tracks. "Hello?" I called out reflexively. No one answered. Though I saw no one, I was afraid to take another step. I grabbed my blanket and gripped the hilt of a knife hidden in my waist. The wind blew harder for a moment. Except for my heavy and quick breathing, I heard nothing else. An eerie quietness loomed large. I turned and listened. After a full minute, after I concluded there was no trace of another living soul, I continued my journey. However, within seconds the cackle cracked the silence a second time. My muscles tightened; my spine fused into a steel column; hairs prickled upon my neck. I was senseless for an instant. I nearly leaked my drawers.

I brandished my knife and twisted to the left. Then, as if a final warning, the cackling cackled louder like a lightning bolt affirming the prior one. I circled. I saw no one. Nothing.

With yet another blare of that disturbing scream, I twisted about in a frantic search and almost fainted when I saw a sight worse than the cackle was frightening. A head sat atop a winding stone barrier. A head and only a head rested upon a thick layer of moss. The mouth opened and closed rapidly and silently which made the ugly globe appear to bounce. My stomach leaped at the sickly sight. Then the apparition, whatever or whoever it was, cackled crazily and stopped. I jumped back when the face contorted quickly and quietly into one expression and then another. At first it was stoic and then happy and then frowning before it smiled and cackled again. The eyes opened and closed; the nose wriggled; the lips puckered and pursed in rapid succession before the cackling began anew. That cackle. That bloody cackle!

I ran backward some five yards without losing eye contact with this gruesome sight. The situation became worse still. What had been frightening turned truly hellish. The head shot upward and a body followed. I fell to the ground and scrambled. For all I knew, the attack was underway and I would die. I prayed for protection.

A little man, shorter than me, jumped over the wall, kicked his heels, and waved his arms erratically. "I got ye! I got ye!" he exclaimed. "I got ye good, didn't I lad!" He was giddy, too giddy for a man his age, too giddy for my fearful state.

I stared in disbelief. Slowly, I came to a kneeling position and made the assessment that I was safe. I tried to regain my composure and present some form of manliness about myself. I groped for words. "Arrghhhh!" I yelled. "What in the bloody the Hades are ye thinking, man?" I stabbed the ground with my dagger. "What of it, mate? Are ye a leprechaun? Did ye sneak over from Ireland?"

The man giggled still. "No, lad. I be a traveling man like yourself." He kicked his feet off the ground, bowed to me in a princely manner, and said, "I am glad to be of service to ye."

"Service?" I asked incredulously. I breathed harder more from anger than fear.

"Aye."

"Why would I want help from the likes of you? Ye must realize ye scared the wits out of me?"

"Well, you are right on that score. But I assure you, a wee bit of fun 'twas all I was 'aving. I meant ye no harm, lad."

The bizarre man seemed sincere and, it being in my nature, I was not willing to be disrespectful. I gazed at the ground and then rested my eyes upon his face. I glanced at the wall. He must have placed his chin in a crook and squatted or knelt upon the ground. Yes, he was a bizarre man indeed. It was not easy, but I tempered my anger. "But how? How do ye serve?" I asked.

"I'm from the Family of Lorne."

"Lorne?"

"Aye."

"Well, what of it, Mr. Lorne? How do ye serve then?"

"Me family is a wise one to be sure."

I wanted to laugh, but I stared at him without saying a word. In my opinion, no wise man makes such an initial impression. I expressed disbelief with a frown and Mr. Lorne was none too pleased.

He crossed his arms and stared. "I assure you," he said with a tinge of bitterness, "I speak the truth."

I felt ashamed. "My good Sir, forgive me poor manners. Please continue."

"The Family of Lorne has but a simple mission. We share our wisdom with those we meet."

"Well, if ye have wisdom to impart, on with it then. My grandfather is expecting me before dusk."

"No lad. 'Tis not that easy." He paused. "You see, we offer our wisdom in the form of a trade. We do not give our wisdom freely and we accept nothing without paying for the same."

I sensed Mr. Lorne had many sides to his colorful personality. He was funny, serious, vulnerable to sleights, and a fair-minded businessman.

"Mr. Lorne, you presume I want your wisdom."

"Aye, and ye do." He nodded confidently.

"And how do ye come by this conclusion?"

"I see it in ye eyes. I see it in ye posture. I hear it in the tone of ye voice. I know it by the words ye use."

I chuckled at his assuredness. He was a confident man, truly.

He was getting impatient and crossed his arms a second time.

Beholden to yet another indiscretion, I sought his forgiveness. "My apologies, Sir. I insulted you and dishonored my parents by my impoliteness."

He lowered his arms and continued. "All sane men are curious. As such, men want to know. Are ye sane, lad?"

I could hardly answer in the negative. "Yes, of course."

"Then what would ye be carrying in your satchel?"

I looked below my shoulder and back at him. I was confused.

“A trade,” he said. “What ‘av ye to trade?”

“Some bread and a bunch of Maggie pears.”

“All right then. I propose a simple exchange. I will give ye the finest of the Family of Lorne wisdom for a bit of bread and one of ye Maggies.”

The trade made no sense. If the wisdom he wished to impart was worth what he would receive in exchange, it was not valuable in the least. However, I did not express this negative sentiment in word or action. So, I thought for a minute and gave his proposal ample consideration, as I did not want to appear too eager and, in some way, foretell my lack of wisdom, as this would further underscore my need for his services. Furthermore, I wanted to create the impression that I valued my bread and Maggies. And, probably most important of all, I did not want to disclose my genuine interest in the Family of Lorne wisdom from the outset.

“Some bread and a Maggie?” I asked.

“Aye. And I will make this additional offer. Now, the wisdom I will give ye for sure; but, if ye solve me riddle, lad, I will give ye your life.”

“Is that a death threat? Are ye threatening me?” I grabbed the hilt of my knife and glared. “My wisdom tells me to run, Mr. Lorne.” Seeing a stranger is rare enough in these parts, but to receive a death threat from a man who did not look the least bit violent was unexpected.

The man laughed. “Me? A death threat? I am not a violent soul,” he said. He chose his next words carefully. “No, my good man, I wish to give ye something ye ‘ave never ‘ad.” He was quite sure of himself. He leaned against the stone wall, folded his arms, and waited.

“And what is that exactly?” I asked.

The man chuckled lightly. “Life, my man! I am talking about life—your life!” He saw confusion in my expression. “Ye ‘ave never lived!” he shouted. Solve me riddle correctly and ye shall know how to live ye life sure enough. Rest assured, ye will begin to live life this very day!”

Now, I know I had enough sense to make a run for it. To be sure, he was more than odd and his offer became equally unsettling. But I must confess, I was intrigued. “But I am alive. I live now,” I replied. I felt foolish for stating something so obvious.

“No.” he said in a near whisper. He shook his head. “No, ye don’t.”

He was confident. I was not.

“How do I not live?” I asked with a hint of contempt. “All men live, do they not?”

“Aye, that is what ye and others think.” Mr. Lorne looked at me as if searching for my capacity to comprehend a concept as foreign as it was undiscoverable. After a long pause he said, “If ye understand the question I am about to ask and if ye answer in a manner worthy of movin’ forward, then, and only then, will I ask me riddle. If ye solve the riddle correctly, I will share *how* to live your life today. Are ye agreed, lad?”

He emphasized the word *how* which gave his proposal a serious and rather educated tone. I nodded slightly. I waited with a small degree of excitement.

“Here is the question,” he said, after clearing his throat. “Does one learn how to live, or does one simply go about life as if he is living?”

I understood the premise and without delay, I said, “No one learns how to live life. Man simply lives without specific instruction beyond what he is told by his parents and their example, whether that example is good or bad.” I thought for a second and added, “And since parents are not taught how to live, they add nothing of value beyond the norm for their children.” I offered my conclusion. “So, in theory, one does not learn how to live life.” I added a final thought. “Generally, one simply lives.”

Mr. Lorne smiled. “Aye. Aye, indeed. Now, here is the polish on the Maggie, shall we say. Do you want to live, lad?”

Suddenly I realized how much I desired this mysterious something the little man had to offer. I nodded. “Mr. Lorne, I agree to answer your riddle.”

He was delighted. His ears climbed a good inch and I saw two perfectly arrayed rows of teeth. By his current disposition, I had a sense he lived life every time he met another being and posed his riddle.

Mr. Lorne confirmed his offer. “Now, let me restate. I will give ye the Family of Lorne wisdom sure enough. But, answer the riddle and I will teach ye how to live life.” He paused and assumed a serious posture. “Listen carefully.” He then shared the following. “Not all endings are beginnings and not all beginnings are endings; however, every ending ends and all beginnings are begotten.” He waited as he watched me ponder the quote. He made sure I heard and understood and then he repeated it. With a matter-of-fact expression he asked, “Is this statement true or false?” As if on cue, the sun appeared from behind the clouds as soon as he finished speaking. He pointed skyward. “Now that is a good sign.”

I looked at the sky without taking much notice and then at Mr. Lorne. “True or false?” I asked incredulously. “That’s it?”

He nodded, clasped his hands, and tapped his toes. He was more than humored by my reaction.

If only to give the impression I was a man of intellect and while noting the man’s cagey nature, wry grin, and shifty eyes, I thought for a moment. I sensed he was up to something, as if the question were a test, a trick even. He sat upon the wall and bobbled with nervous energy no differently than a child waiting for a treat. He giggled to himself and then stared at me as I deliberated. I could not give him an answer soon enough.

I have to be honest. For some unknown reason, I was stressed. I was flummoxed not by the question, but the unexpected unfolding of the entire scenario. I felt as if I had to prove myself. In fact, I wanted to prove myself. For this reason, I had to buy some time. “Mr. Lorne, would ye repeat the quote and say it slowly?”

“Sure, lad. Not all endings are beginnings and not all beginnings are endings; however, every ending ends and all beginnings are begotten.” He leaned forward. “Now,” he said, “is it true or is it false? Answer in a jiffy and we will enjoy ye fine Maggies.”

Ignoring his comment, I wrestled with the riddle while the sun slid behind the cloud.

He laughed. “Not a sign,” he said as he pointed to the sky. “That’s not a terrible omen, just the sun hiding for a wee bit.”

I smiled thinly.

As if to ease my mind, he offered these words. “Lad, the joy of wisdom rests within its simplicity. Do not make what is not.”

After considerable thought, I was no closer to an answer. In an attempt to gain some advantage, I challenged Mr. Lorne. “How many men have ye asked this question?”

“Let me see.” He searched his memory and looked at his palm as if his life line was involved with the answer. “Three-thousand three hundred and thirty-two,” he said with a straight face.

I could not believe it. Although he was no more than ten years my senior, by my fast figuring, he had asked this question about once a day for the last decade.

“How many ‘ave answered correctly?” I asked.

“Lad, by ye procrastination, I ‘ave to conclude ye are either unsure of ye self or ye are abnormally curious.” He nodded and added, “I think I know which is true.” He was amused. He sensed that I was jousting as a delay tactic and he liked to joust for the fun of it. “I will tell ye this. No one has ever asked me for the number of times I’ve

posed this riddle and no one has ever asked how many answered correctly. Ye are a credit to ye self and humanity, young man.” He giggled. My, how he liked to giggle.

With this high praise, he increased my burden. However, his next comment unnerved me.

“I will tell you true. Only one man has answered me riddle correctly.” He stressed this point when he declared loudly and slowly, “One in three-thousand, three-hundred and thirty-two.”

My jaw dropped. He had asked thousands of others a true or false question, nothing more. The amount of people answering correctly should have been similar to the average number of heads and tails by the flip of a coin. I expected the number of correct responses to hug just north or south of fifty percent. This revelation did not help me in the least. I began to doubt myself. In order to avoid answering the riddle, I thought of offering Mr. Lorne a light lunch in exchange for his company, certainly more than a fair trade on a lonely journey. I would have shared a meal for an hour of friendly conversation.

However, this situation and my considerable analysis of his quote had taken on greater significance. As if a self-serving bias—a matter of me proving my intellect—my answer, whatever that answer would be, became a matter of pride. I found myself burrowed into an inquiry which would, somehow and in some way, define me for the rest of my life. Unbelievably, a chance meeting in the Scottish Highlands with a man who had a unique mission suddenly became a distinct mission for me.

I thought of the one man who answered the question correctly. What did he do? How did he think? Did he reason simply? Did he burn through complications like a candle flame to thread? Those who answered incorrectly must have belabored the beginning, muddled the middle, and annihilated the end with random thoughts which were but distractions. Did they inject emotions which had nothing to do with the query? I wanted to avoid their mistakes.

I applied rudimentary logic to the second half of the quote. Obviously, all ends must have endings and all beginnings are begotten. This was self-evident and I accepted each premise as true. Thus, having handily resolved this portion of the challenge, I tackled the first half of the quote. Not all endings are beginnings and not all beginnings are endings. If some endings do not end because they become new beginnings, the balance of all endings would not have new beginnings and they must end. Moreover, if some beginnings become new beginnings and, therefore, beginnings without end, the balance of all beginnings without new beginnings must end.

I noticed my emphasis upon endings for the first half of the quote. For the not all endings are beginnings portion, I concluded some endings end. For the not all beginnings are endings portion, I concluded some beginnings end. I found this curious. My focus was not on beginnings for either section. Why? Was the quote structured with an emphasis on endings? Did my focus on endings reflect upon me poorly? Were endings somehow greater than beginnings? Were beginnings not more significant? Don't beginnings give life to strong or weak endings which may or may not include more beginnings and even more endings? I became confused. I found myself with more questions than answers.

When I weighed the entire riddle again, I did my level best to simplify what seemed to be a complicated challenge. I noticed my unease and, to make matters worse, Mr. Lorne began to whistle. This annoyed me. Why did he whistle? Did he intend to distract me on purpose? Was this another test? When would he end this distraction?

My musing branched into other streams of perceived logic. I fought against this mental surge. Unfortunately, my cognitive efforts added to my growing angst. I was annoyed with this development as well. I became a bit exasperated. Not only did I want to be the second person to answer the riddle correctly, I wanted to know the Family of Lorne wisdom and to understand how to live life—my life. And, as if these intentions were not good enough, I wanted to validate that I was already wise and the Family of Lorne wisdom was something I already possessed.

I sat upon the stone wall and pressed the tips of my boots down and into the soil. My knees rose and lowered quickly like an accordion stuck on a single off-key note, up and down, up and down—a reflection of nothing more than unease sourced in the unfortunate need to be right. My hands bounced upon my thighs. I chewed a blade of grass like a babe suckles his thumb, but I was no calmer. I was a bundle of nervous energy. I was no longer engaged in a light-hearted trade between two strangers. The tension became too much and to my surprise, I did the unexpected. I made a counteroffer. “Mr. Lorne, let's forget this riddle. I am happy to trade ye some bread and a Maggie in exchange for some friendly conversation. Would that suit ye well enough?”

He rolled from a laying position and rested on his elbow. He took a hold of his hat which he had used to cover his face after the return of the sun. He sat upright and looked at me with a combination of surprise and scorn. “All right then,” he said. He shrugged his shoulders. “I have never ‘ad a man quit. Ye shall be the first. But,

seeing how ye made the counter, I am obliged to accept.” He smiled and extended his hand to seal the agreement.

I was befuddled. What did he just say? What had I just done? Quitter? I was not quitting; of this I was certain. I had just walked a long way with the intention to work my grandfather’s plat. Me? A quitter? I merely dismissed the need to perform mental acrobats to arrive at an answer I might not trust in the end. My mind came to a halt. There it was, that dreaded end. The end had to have a beginning, did it not? The end did not mean the end, correct?

Mr. Lorne added to my turmoil and he probably did it on purpose. “Come now, lad, here is the silver lining, as it were. If ye quit, I will ‘ave a new beginning to this jig.” He stuck out his hand again. “Let’s shake on ye counteroffer. I am ready for me Maggie and I thank ye kindly.”

New beginning? Was this a clue? Or was this another trick? I ignored Mr. Lorne’s hand and thought some more.

An end is an end even if it becomes a new beginning, of this I was certain. The end, that is, the first end, must end. A beginning is begotten for the purpose of future endings even if those future endings sprout into even more beginnings. This is what must have excited Mr. Lorne. He must have been enthused at the idea I was ending this game, as the end would create a new beginning. His first quitter would be a new beginning in a perpetual journey of ends which, according to him, many would begin anew. My circuitous reasoning was maddening. My mind teetered; my heart faltered. I was going nuts.

“And your decision, lad? I am more than a wee bit ‘ungry.” Mr. Lorne patted his belly.

I waved my hand in his direction and added a hint of a smile. I had eased my way back into a battle of wits. I had become, by my own willfulness, a worthy opponent. Yet, suddenly, I felt a sinking feeling in my gut. What was I thinking? I stumbled upon the obvious. I could not prove a negative. I had overlooked a fundamental tenet of logic. I referred to the quote and reconsidered the “Not all endings” portion which was a negative. “Not all beginnings” was a negative as well.

Mr. Lorne saw a shift in my demeanor. He relished another twist to the plot. “What seems to bug ye now, lad?” With a twinkle in his eye he said, “Ye want to quit again?” Then he cackled. The sound sent a shiver down my spine. “Beginnings begotten, endings end,” he said and cackled again.

I reviewed the quote a third time. Are all beginnings begotten? Yes. I was sure of this. Do all endings end? Yes. I was sure of this as

well. I was certain not all endings were beginnings and not all beginnings were endings. Could I then prove a negative? Yes. I was confident of this fact. However, having successfully ended my analysis to the first part to the point of proving two negatives, the second part was now in doubt.

I sighed deeply and whispered slowly, "Does every ending end? Are all beginnings begotten?" What was my problem with these two questions?

Mr. Lorne noticed the heightened frustration. "A new beginning, aye?" He pointed at me. "Do ye want a hint. I will help if ye wish?"

"Did any of the more than three thousand ask for a hint?" I asked with an edge to my voice.

"No, lad. But," he smiled, "if ye ask for a hint, this will be a new beginning for me." He cackled and clapped.

For some reason he seemed to cackle every time I was at an end of my patience. I turned away from him.

If there are no beginnings, there can be no endings. Was the reverse true? If there are no endings, would there be no beginnings? Was there ever a beginning? Was a beginning, or lack thereof, the crux of this riddle? I thought myself foolish for asking this question. "Of course, there was a beginning," I whispered lightly. "There had to have been a beginning." As if on the verge of salient esoteric and metaphysical answers, there seemed to be no end to my conjecture, as if continuous ends became new beginnings. I questioned whether or not I would arrive at a meaningful or correct answer. The frustration became too much and, finally, I had had enough. "Mr. Lorne?" I shouted.

"Yes, me lad?"

"I have an answer."

"Aye. You may have an answer, but do ye have the answer?"

"Yes."

"All righty then," he said with a smile. "Just know this. Because ye have given this question more consideration than anyone else, which," he giggled, "is a new beginning for me, I will give ye the best of the Family of Lorne wisdom whether you are correct or not."

"Really?" I thought for a moment. "Did you share the best Family of Lorne wisdom with the one man who answered correctly?"

"No," he said rather emphatically. "I never shared it with him." He appeared indignant by the question.

"Well, why not?" I blurted. "Did he not answer correctly?"

“Lad, to answer the question correctly is to possess the best and all of the Family of Lorne wisdom from the very beginning. I had no reason to share what the man already possessed.”

“Oh, I see.” I felt flush by a wave of embarrassment. The more I learned from and of Mr. Lorne the more bewildered I became. I did not know what was up or down, or, for that matter, the start or finish—the beginning or end. Tired of the confusion, I wanted to be done. I wanted to depart. I had a long journey and a farm to work. I was behind schedule. I offered Mr. Lorne the same proposition and, as a result, I, unknowingly, tempted fate. “Mr. Lorne, I will give ye the answer. And, yes, rest assured, if I am wrong, I do not want to know the best of the Lorne wisdom.” I sighed heavily.

“Fine! And a bold decision ye ‘ave made,” he said. “But know this, as you may recall, I was prepared to give ye your life.”

Surprisingly, I had spent so much time on the riddle, I forgot about this offer. “Me life?”

“Yes, lad.” He spoke these two words calmly.

I began to distrust the man. I did not care about his wisdom or knowing how to supposedly live life. It was all rubbish and my tone reflected this belief. “I don’t want to know how to live life, Mr. Lorne.”

“If you say so, lad,” he said softly as he looked away.

I stared him down. “A trick this has been. You played me for a bloody fool, Mr. Lorne, nothing but a crafty scheme to get an easy lunch which I would have gladly given without condition.”

He turned quickly and caught my attention like a fisherman seizes a catch immediately after casting his line. He spoke deliberately. “Lad, take it easy. Take it easy. Hear me on this score. Ye gave my query more thought than anyone. This says something about you. My only ‘ope was to offer ye what few people possess.” Somewhat forlorn, he said, “Ye must forgive me for the confusion. But this was no trick, I assure ye. Given the extent of your deliberation, I thought ye would appreciate the magnitude of me offer.” He paused briefly and said with an air of finality, as if this was the end for me and a new beginning for him, “Ye keep your bread and Maggie pears and I will be on me way.” With those final words, Mr. Lorne placed his hat upon his head, jumped the wall, and walked away at a modest pace.

I stood for a few seconds. The silence hit me hard and the wind blew from behind as if to push me toward the odd, old man. “Wait!” I shouted. “Mr. Lorne, wait!”

He turned reluctantly. “Yes?”

For the third time, I apologized. “Forgive me. I was quick to judge your intentions and I judged wrongly. But tell me, how do I not have me life?”

Mr. Lorne looked to the sky. He lowered his gaze to the ground. He knocked a rock about with his foot. He stepped closer to me and looked into my eyes again. He spoke softly as if to convey a sobering truth. “Lad,” he said, “ye never ‘ad your life from the beginning.” He looked as sad as I began to feel, as if he knew he had just relayed to me the most tragic truth of my life. “As ye agreed with me earlier, and ye said it ye self, no one teaches others how to live. Ye have never been taught how to live life.”

I braced my arm against the stone wall and leaned backward. Mr. Lorne had used the word *beginning* throughout our conversation. Each time he did so, this one word served a significant purpose. I, on the other hand, had focused on the word *ending*. Did I evaluate his riddle with the wrong perspective? Were endings negative in tone? Were beginnings positive?

I thought through the entire riddle that was now a part of my memory. What did this seemingly straightforward wording have to do with me not having possession of my own life? I had a sense Mr. Lorne was not human, but an angel sent to impart a timely and eternal truth. A queer little man, his unannounced and unexpected presence had to serve some sublime purpose. “Mr. Lorne, how did I not ‘ave me life from the beginning?”

“Ah! Now there is a fine question and a first for me—a new beginning, lad. And I thank ye for it.”

He did not giggle. He was subdued and this alarmed me. Mr. Lorne quieted far longer than I expected, as if he weighed something significant for the first time. “Lad,” he began, “ye have a keen mind and a good heart. I will tell ye why ye do not ‘ave ye life. However, I ‘ave one condition. Give me ye answer to the riddle.”

I stood stiffly, threw my arms upward, and shouted, “False!” I danced wildly and pointed at him. “False! False! False! My answer to your bloody riddle is false to be sure.” I must have sounded as foolish as I appeared. I stomped my feet and beat my hands against my thighs. “False! I tell you! False!” I was glad to be rid of that bloody riddle.

For some strange reason the riddle and my answer and the Family of Lorne wisdom had become secondary to a much larger question—my own question. I thought of my grandfather. He always shared that if ye are failing then ye are playing. I was playing. More importantly, I knew the answer as to why I did not have my life was

larger than, well, life itself, as if this one answer represented a pinnacle truth.

Mr. Lorne thanked me and smiled slightly. As if he had received satisfaction for the second time, he nodded knowingly. “Now,” he said, “the reason ye ‘ave not had ye own life from the beginning is simple to explain.”

I moved from the wall and stood before him.

“To ‘ave ye life from the beginning requires a most uncommon choice. Ye ‘ave never made this choice. Most men don’t even know of this choice.” He chose his words carefully. “That choice ‘as to do with death.”

“What?” I asked. “Death?”

I walked away and stared at the distant mountains. I turned and looked at him. Mr. Lorne’s words gripped me and gripped hard. Opposites attract, I thought. Never had I thought of death as critical to the possession of one’s life. Sure, I must admit, I thought of death. Who doesn’t? Death happens—at least at some point along one’s journey—and hopefully later rather than sooner. However, people do not give death the same weight as life and rightly so. At least this is what I believed, just as I surmised people believed generally.

Who doesn’t think primarily of life and the will to live? Had I always dignified the will to live for all it deserved? Well, not exactly. But life, the act of living, is a prominent theme for most anyone, naturally so. A man yearns to live unto death, does he not, with the emphasis upon living? To my way of thinking, death was passive. Death, therefore, as if by default, is an aside, as if irrelevant. I was certain that ninety-nine percent of people would agree.

However, I recalled my answer to Mr. Lorne’s riddle. The number of those who answered incorrectly shocked me. I thought of the one man who answered correctly. Did this one man understand the significance of death as a beginning? Did he, this one of more than three thousand, understand life is not lived until death is reconciled as a superior force, as if death is the governing influence of life or beginning of life?

Death. This was a topic with immense implications. Did my life have a beginning? If so, when? Would it have an ending? When? Would my life have to end in order to begin? Was death a catalyst, but only when my acceptance of death became primary to living life—my life? These questions did not make sense. My questions were uncommon, counterintuitive. I had a suspicion I did not know about life or how to live life and did not possess life because I did not know death. Ironically, I did not know the end in order to know the beginning

or that the beginning was the end and that end was a true beginning—that death was life.

As if he already knew I would take the bait, Mr. Lorne had resumed his reclined position on the wall. He looked at me from underneath his hat. He knew I was flustered again. He said something he had mentioned earlier. “Lad, do not make what is not.”

I nodded toward Mr. Lorne with a respect he now earned and deserved and resumed my deliberation. I trudged through a weighty theme which could not be denied. Must I recognize my life as beginning in death in order to have possession of it? Does possession of my life occur only when death is appreciated as greater than life?

I felt lightheaded. As if I were on the precipice of a beginning equal to a rare epiphany, the loftiness of this soul-sparking insight touched me deeply. There was that word—beginning. The beginning of life, the possession of life, does not occur until death motivates man to live. Death is not an ending, but a beginning. Only within the context of an informed beginning occurring within the context of death would life be securely owned. “Oh my!” I exclaimed.

Mr. Lorne giggled knowingly. He knew that I knew.

I had intuited that his riddle, which I deemed to be false, was tied directly to the polarities of life and death—not as beginnings and endings—but as a willingness to accept death as greater than life, or at least equal to life. Only with a willingness to die may one truly live a worthy life. “Mr. Lorne!” I shouted.

He popped up like a giddy leprechaun. “Aye, lad?”

“I am willing to die!” My declaration was simple and profound. My words represented a new beginning.

Mr. Lorne leapt off the wall and cackled. He kicked his heels. He raced around like a bloody, raving lunatic. He jumped behind the wall, placed his head upon the mossy stone, and configured his face into sundry contortions. He cackled even more. The sight was no longer sickly and I was amused.

“Well?” I asked. I refused to accept his wild antics as an appropriate response no matter how reassuring those antics were.

He stopped dancing and said, “You are a wise man.”

“Mr. Lorne,” I pleaded, “no tomfoolery. We are speaking of life and death. Do ye think I understand? Do ye think I am in possession of me life?”

“I can assure you this,” he said, “if ye wish to hear the story of a man who acquired possession of his life quite unexpectedly and was wiser for it, you will know for sure.”

I looked at the big, bright spot hidden behind grey clouds. The hour was late. I was late for my journey. Mr. Lorne knew what I was weighing.

“Ye have time, lad.” He spoke confidently.

I was at a new beginning that might never end. I did not need Mr. Lorne’s reassurance on that account. I sat upon the ground and waited. I wanted proof of his death is life and life is death philosophy as the reason one may possess and live life. I wanted to hear his story.

Mr. Lorne smiled and said, “Now, before I begin, hand me a wee bit of bread and a Maggie from ye satchel.”

“So, my answer was correct? The answer to your riddle was false?”

“Lad, ye will know soon enough if ye response was the right one.”

I handed him the entire loaf of bread and two Maggies. “Mr. Lorne, did you share this story with the man who answered correctly?”

He looked solemnly at me as if I were his prized pupil. “No, lad. This is a first and I thank ye for the new beginning.”

“You’re welcome.”

Mr. Lorne bit into his Maggie. He rubbed his chin, leaned against the wall, and crossed his legs. As if preparing to recite the most important story ever told, he cleared his throat. “Now, I must tell you something very important. What I am about to share is unlike anything you have ever heard. For the most part you will understand the plot, but there may be times when you will want to clarify the content or context of the story. When this occurs, I encourage you to stop me.”

“Mr. Lorne, is this story as tough as your riddle about beginnings and endings?”

“Well, that is the point, lad. Yes, in many ways it is much more difficult. Given that we are speaking of life and death and truly living life once and for all, the subject cannot be easy. The reverse is true. The story and content must be inherently difficult. You will confront concepts that are as foreign as distant lands and you do not know the languages. This combination will cause confusion. And, mind you, nothing is more troublesome than confusion. So, promise me here and now that you will seek to clear away any confusion.”

“I promise, Mr. Lorne.” I thought about what he suggested and then asked, “Mr. Lorne, are you not making this too burdensome?”

“Ah, spoken like an innocent lamb. I don’t think so. I will introduce you to a man who confronted what he never would have imagined and he was not prepared. In fact, the physical journey he encountered compelled him to take a mental, emotional, and spiritual

journey that was far worse. Lad, try to imagine dealing with the most trying conditions without knowing the answers. Not easy, lad. You hear me?"

"I do. I do, indeed."

"Rest assured, facing death while attempting to distill the essence of life is not without challenges, especially for those who are weak and unwilling. This is why I consider Sebastian Chiffon to be the most extraordinary of heroes. Even when he was weak and reluctant, he made the most remarkable discoveries under the toughest circumstances."

"Sounds intriguing."

"Well, if you are ready, I will tell the legend of Sebastian Chiffon."

"Yes, I am."

"Very good. I shall start at the beginning."

Part Two

Character

'Tis not the character a man performs that matters,
but the character deep within and chiseled hard
and fine until he never buckles or doubts.

I

For the better part of a month, Sebastian sold his inventory in ten cities dotted across the countryside and along the coast between three major ports. Like so many stories written within even broader works of literature, his journey began when he left his home and clothing factory in Willington. He had already visited Saint Andrews, Kirkcaldy, Melrose, Edinburg, Arbroath, and other villages large and small. At that particular point in time, he was on his way to Burlington and this would be his last stop where he would pick up a large order of supplies before returning home. The trip had been long, too long. But the end was near. Except for a few boxes of hats, scarves, and other accessories, his faithful donkey, Beast, pulled a nearly empty wagon. The only the constant sound was the grinding of dirt under thick wooden wheels. Otherwise, Sebastian rumbled along in silence. His biannual trek was almost over.

The excitement Sebastian once enjoyed before the start of these trips waned more and more with every journey. Now he battled regret much earlier. On this trek, regret filled his heart before he reached his first destination. He no longer appreciated the opportunity to sell his products as the final act to a lengthy process of threads and fabric sewn together with each becoming the finest clothing made of the best quality. He was, in general, tired of yet another routine not of his own choosing. He did not choose, for example, to withstand the monotony of miles alone in mostly dreary weather. He did not prefer to dicker over costs and haggle about delivery dates. He disliked the unpleasant personalities he encountered at every stop. There was nothing satisfying about these trips, that is, except for the end.

Though he had achieved unparalleled success, he longed for the cessation of an even longer journey—his life as a clothier. His life sojourn, in essence, like the many tasks he completed daily, the trip to the store, the walk to the factory, interactions with customers, employees, spouse, and children, was nothing more than a means to fill his days with something to do before the end of it all. This is why Sebastian concluded that, if he had been the least bit courageous in his former years, his life and this current trip, as with all mundane tasks he despised, would never have been. Not surprisingly then, given his caustic attitude, he sought the end of things. The end is what he desired most. It was always the end. Like suffering from indigestion, the flu, or an unjust prison sentence, the end mattered above all. It should be no great revelation that, in most respects, Sebastian was a miserable

soul. What was the source of his misery? A lost hope, a dream never begotten. He wanted to be an architect. He wanted a different life.

If all went as planned, he would be home the following day. Like a dose of medicine, he was relieved by this one thought. So, he ignored his fatigue, at least he tried. For this particular fatigue, much like the fluidity of honey in winter, slowed his spirit. He was tired, tired of and from the trip, tired in mind and heart. He was tired of life. If he were honest, he would admit that the extent of his fatigue was sourced within the ennui of his existence. Alas, he searched for what was elusive, the ridding of an ever-present fatigue. Ironically, he sought the end of the symptoms alone. He did not search for the cure.

Whether for good or for not, as if to combat fatigue by way of distraction, Sebastian filled his mind quite vexingly. He did not think in the renewing sense. He did not solve problems. He did not create possibilities. Rather, much like reading a book over and over without complete comprehension, with the pages worn and torn and without reaching the conclusion, he ruminated over challenges that persisted without resolution. With all due candor, at least according to objective and hopeful souls, the optimists of the world, Sebastian could not be known as a thinking man without a genuine search for solutions. He stopped looking for solutions long ago. He only saw difficulties and certain impediments. The challenge of this particular day was a consideration of a lifetime—the exceeding toil man expended just to survive and a lack of satisfaction, joy even, with a given toil.

Sure, Sebastian acknowledged any labor as far better than idle hands and the slow erosion of body, mind, and heart, but this was not the thought which currently saddled him. He did not quarrel with the premise that undesirable work as a means to feed oneself or family was worthy. Cleaning privies or mucking stalls and pig sties, if such work were all that could be had, was respectable and necessary for both laborer and customer. He admitted the obvious. Some men took pleasure in any manner of work if they were being useful. The argument was self-evident. As long as the mind and heart were engaged and hands and feet were moving—as long as one could provide for himself and his family—he should be grateful.

However, Sebastian, believed this argument applied to those without either aspirations or regrets. Was he prideful for holding such beliefs? Perhaps. But to his way of thinking, a willingness to do any task in order to survive was a weak posture for those better suited for grand pursuits. This is why he believed underachievers were satisfied with mediocrity. He attempted to prove his conclusion and asked himself if people with loftier goals should have the same humble and

sound work ethic as a grateful mucker of stalls—a man pleased to do anything for hard-earned wages. Sebastian was certain of the answer. Every man should be grateful. He wondered if all men were so disposed. As he turned another worn page to pursue this idea, he answered in the negative. Would it be better if they were grateful? This question got to the spirit of his quandary.

Such were Sebastian's wandering and winding forays of an internal conversation he would not conclude with any degree of merit now or in the future. Sebastian would never reconcile that his problem was not complicated in the least. He was unaware of this fact. Perhaps he ruminated too much. Perhaps he did not narrow the argument to its constituent parts if only because he inserted nuances that were largely misplaced in a conversation in need of clarity. Regardless, this nagging conversation—four decades in the making—needed a conclusion. Alas, he did not have another two score to do so. Like that worn and torn book, he would not arrive at an understanding of this question or of himself.

In one sense, he saw the end of his quandary somewhere within the easy manner of living enjoyed by men and women of leisure, the landed gentry and noble class, those with the asset base to employ others to manage the mundane so they could use their time pursuing promises of lasting benefit for humanity or bask in sundry pleasures without a care in the world. To be clear, Sebastian did not intend to pursue pleasure. He rather enjoyed exercising the faculties of mind and body with work and aspirations worthy of his time and effort. He saw frivolity combined with wealth as the fiercest enemy of man, even worse than an idle mind and love of money. Sadly, though, he would readily confess, at least to himself, he was not doing what he wanted most. He was not using his mind and body as he wished. He was not serving a profession which filled his heart with joy and this made him sure of one thing. He had long tired of his toil to the point of ungratefulness.

Even worse, if he had the opportunity, he would not rectify what could and would have been. He no longer saw such a possibility as credible. The reasons were obvious to him and, for the pain they caused, precluded the need to ruminate upon unknowns. Moreover, he deemed himself long past his prime, a very telling observation given his youthful age relative to his potential years, which was a sure sign he had a sour attitude. Would a wise man share that no man is too old for a new beginning? Most certainly. But Sebastian was not wise.

Then there was a certain impediment to which Sebastian deferred time and again. He believed he did not have a substantial asset

base with which to fund a lost hope. This belief was no different than the wealthy defaulting to the idea that what they had was never enough and any loss of any small sum would be too great. With his own stable enterprise and a healthy number of coins stored in his coffers, Sebastian did not consider himself an ideal candidate to alter his path. He would concede what was inarguable as much as a practical reality. He enjoyed relative success and, significantly, at the late hour of his life, he was not willing to risk what he had for a greater aspiration.

Too old for a new beginning and without money to finance a different endeavor, worn pages each, he was tired of the story. Then there was the thought which gnawed at him even worse than others, the general notion he would never prevail over a lost possibility regardless of the excuses offered. He would not rid himself of a regret which festered even if a remedy were not required. He knew the reason. He lacked courage. He believed the one and only possible solution to his current plight was a choice he should have made early in his youth. This is why he scoffed at what he could not deny. If only for his failure to be bold forty years earlier, he was angry. Thus, another biannual trip marked the passage of time and his regret grew unabated.

So much for the hope of gaining wisdom from vast experience and receiving satisfaction from a full life. To his way of thinking, he was the opposite and such a disposition prevented him from escaping the obvious and the unwanted. But for his failure to make a pivotal, dated choice, he drove his donkey and wagon to a place he preferred not to visit, all the while dwelling on constant refrains with no other end than to bemoan faded dreams.

He would have been much better if his heart had heart ached in the same way a lover yearns for the promise for eternal bliss. Quite the contrary, his ache captured his mind and heart like a prisoner housed in a jail cell. Given his defeatist attitude, he questioned if he would ever stave off the pain enough to enjoy mediocrity. If Sebastian remained the pessimistic sort who wallowed in his misery or pandered piteously if only to himself, if he meandered morosely about a misspent youth, which is to say, if he alone saw his past as a failure and his future as bleak, he would find neither joy nor satisfaction. The opposite had to be as valid. If he were a man in the making still, even in his elder status, he would pounce upon any possibility and somehow right a wrangle as vexatious to the soul as one's unknown destination beyond death. He, in a word, would live and do so abundantly. But the question he did not know to ask was how to live his life. Consequently, like most people, he would not likely arrive at an answer.

This was the manner in which Sebastian spent his day driving his wagon toward Burlington. He was hounded by perilous thoughts and defeated desires just as much as he hounded those thoughts into unwinnable arguments. With his elbows upon his knees and his torso shifting to one side and his head rolling to the other with one rotation of the wagon wheels, and his torso and head trading directions without the slightest hint of a pause when the wheels rounded again, he asked himself if he was an optimist or pessimist. He knew this was a foolish question. That he asked the question was answer enough. He frowned and the less than positive expression upon his face underscored the point. As if to prove that misery loves company, as if to prove he was not alone, he asserted that his answer to this ominous query applied for most of humanity. Out of the millions of souls upon the earth, he concluded most were decidedly negative. Regardless of their circumstances or outcomes, few were eternally optimistic.

Sebastian was hopeless, pure and simple, of this he had no doubt. He knew signs of optimism rested in one's perspective, actions, and words, with the latter two as the greatest indicator of a soul's darkness or lightness of being. Words are either thrusts of the sword or a healing salve. Spoken words, sincere portrayals of either good or evil, are the primary means of judging a man and his subsequent acts. Sebastian had already judged himself by mental rants filled with words sown in a heart rich with contempt and the harvest reaped daily was scorn to self. He knew of his tendency to speak with such hostility. Still, if only for his prideful nature, he was thankful for his forbearance to limit his words to an inward expression alone. He was reserved, after all, reserved to a fault. He channeled his hostility within a vault and rarely was the key withdrawn to allow such hostility egress. He hid his pain. Reticent for a reason, Sebastian did not dare show the world he was a miserable soul.

He wondered if others believed he was a man without peace. Did friends know how much he loathed his current circumstances and profession? The discerning few might answer in the affirmative. The rest, however, consumed with their own negative thoughts and mundane tasks—a tedious toil tending toward an ungrateful end—did not give a damn. He knew as much. Sebastian, if forced to admit the same, would confess he did not give a damn about them either. He was the negative sort who willingly incapacitated a hopeful future with a crippled past. Void of hope, he did not believe he would arrive at a satisfying future. He was joyless. He waited for the end of it all and no more.

An albatross hung around his neck and he was the cause. This harsh attitude, disagreeable at best—an intolerable notion forty years ago when innocence escorted him and his hopes toward a bright beginning—persisted into the present. Such was the state of his mind and heart as he made his way toward a street bustling with patrons of pessimism, those who operated under the perceived veil of optimism, petty people enthralled with petty events which brought them only a shallow and fleeting happiness, a ruse and, perhaps, the ruse of all ruses which told the masses that life was meaningful and complete at least for those fleeting moments.

“Lot of liars, ye are,” he whispered to himself. “Nasty lot of liars, ye are.” Sebastian found himself among the dreary and weary once again. He could not distinguish himself from the crowd and, if only for his quiet nature, he would never reveal the fact that he led the charge up the proverbial hill of pessimism. He was the king of that hill and those who were ignorant of this fact did not know how much he succeeded in being miserable, that he perfected the art of the mumble and grumble. Others would not guess based upon his appearance alone that he was burdened with this most ignominious distinction. For, like none other, he was clothed in the finest, which included a mask of contentment upon his face. Since he made the best clothes in the land, he wore the best of the best. How was anyone to know his true thoughts and emotions? Such is the power of impressions and the cunning of deceit.

Sebastian made his way down the main road and into Burlington with more than a hint of speed, a sure sign he would leave as quickly. Others guided their carriages casually. Horses trotted here and there. People busied themselves with all sorts of matters. Children, without any interest in business, darted across and along an avenue thriving with commerce. Various sounds of the city ascended as if members of a symphony tuned their instruments for a grand performance of a major score that would never be played. A droning cacophony rose without fading until late night hours spilled into the early morning when orphaned sounds revealed the homeless searching for temporary beds and drunkards lingering without any other purpose than to linger.

Ladies wore dresses and hats of the latest fashions and gathered to gossip. Men of industry mingled among themselves and imparted news of the day, another ritual exercised to underscore a perceived status and to secure some underlying gain. Like horses seeking an edge in a race, most advanced their own self-worth and selfish agendas. The street was a stage upon which a collective ritual

to a collective spirit was performed by each and every man and woman, a means by which individuals deceived and were deceived.

While Sebastian noted the scene with typical ridicule, he also contended with visions which encouraged the kind of big thinking he once held dear. He noted the busyness of Burlington. The city was lively and this inspired him for a fleeting moment before he reminded himself that he was not a part of the scene. Anyone arriving from the country or those who lived a slower pace would conclude that progress could not be stopped. Millions of souls around the globe and within their own cities or traveling to other distant locales directly or indirectly advanced the course of history on a daily basis. This theme aggravated Sebastian as much as the topic which had consumed his mind and troubled his heart most of the day.

He felt an enormous industrial phenomenon whenever he surveyed the wider context and significance of active venues. He regretted not being a part of places where new ideas inevitably flew from city to city and country to country and changes eventually took root in new cultures. Naturally, these changes served as a motivation for even newer and better ideas which then travelled hither and thither and quickly, a never-ending cycle of new beginnings, raw change, constant change, a constant evolution and revolution of radical change. Curiously, if only because he despised his profession, he did not view his advancements within the clothing industry as remotely beneficial to the world.

This elusive cycle of change, which was a defining and alluring ideal in Sebastian's childhood, was the main reason he sought to become an architect. He wanted to create. He wanted to build bridges on his journeys throughout foreign lands. Once a young and promising visionary, he had hoped to construct conduits over canyons and waterways, impasses over which progress would travel until both progress and bridges covered the world. He had hoped to hasten possibility with his own ideas, to bridge limitless paths into and over a world without end. "This was not to be," he whispered as he arrived at his destination. "This was never meant to be."

He read the sign outside the establishment. He shook his head. "How appropriate," he said. A growl from deep within his throat surfaced. "Just about sums up me life."

I stopped Mr. Lorne, and perhaps too quickly. His expression told me so. "Mr. Lorne, I can already tell by his attitude that this Sebastian character does not live life as he ought."

Mr. Lorne frowned. "That is all well and good, lad. But may I remind you to ask me questions when ye are confused. You will see soon enough that those with either positive or negative attitudes do not have possession of their lives."

"Fair enough, Sir."

II

Sebastian withdrew from his reverie. With the business at hand and a schedule to keep, he anguished no more about foregone prospects. He had other burdens to handle. He climbed down and tied the reins to a post. He stopped and looked a second time above the large windows displaying fabric, lace, thread, and assorted apparel. *A Stitch in Time*, operated by Jonathan McDougal, a wholesaler of imported cloth from Italy, Greece, and other exotic countries, was the final store Sebastian did not want to visit.

The sad irony is that those distant lands came to him in the form of unfinished products which he accepted no differently than a petty thief is handed meals through a small opening to a prison cell. Sebastian sewed to survive and was not unlike a common criminal who stole a loaf of bread simply to subsist yet another day. The criminal is eventually caught, as are sons and daughters of tradesmen who, for generations, operated and passed on the family business to the eldest son. Sebastian was the only son. His place of imprisonment alone was different. Though unseen, the bars existed. The prisoner was no less confined.

With a final glance down the street, Sebastian entered the establishment. As soon as he closed the heavy, wooden door, as if *A Stitch in Time* were a sanctuary, a heavy hush encased the interior. Bolts of fabric aligned in neat rows absorbed stray sounds. The stillness of the shop created an atmosphere of heightened significance and a multitude of colors enthused the eyes much like stained glass windows evoke the spiritual. Unique to any fabric store, equal to cinnamon cloves adding that special scent which somehow makes homes that much more joyful every Christmas season, the freshness of new linen filled the air. Patrons thought of newness and felt new and the employees set the tone by whispering. Only the unrefined would speak

loudly. Sewing was serious business and A Stitch in Time encouraged this perception.

Sebastian made his way down the center of the establishment and nodded to Miss Thompson who, with a tape measure about her thick neck, a sizeable abnormality supported by a tree-stump of a body, cut fabric at a table lined with evenly marked measurements on each side. Miss Thompson was the brawn of the outfit. Though her work was light, she was never without a constant layer of perspiration on her brow. She breathed heavily, thankfully so, for this was the only reason her lungs and heart carried blood with oxygen to her oversized arms and legs.

A vital cog in McDougal's entire apparatus, Miss Thompson handled all common tasks without the slightest hint of joy. She was the source of two constant but barely perceptible sounds within the four walls of the shop. She lifted the material into the air and snapped it gently, the first sound, and ran the razor-sharp sheers down an imaginary line, the second sound. She had no need to mark the cloth to make accurate cuts. She was good at cutting straight lines. Thirty years of doing this menial task made her a celebrity within a certain circle—a very small circle.

Mrs. Ana McDougal, the owner's wife, stood to the left of the front door and near a large window. A moving mannequin forever showing thread, beads, and ribbon to customers, she served as the chief promoter of the McDougal enterprise. Ana smiled to all who entered, mostly refined ladies, and she extended Sebastian the same courtesy each time he arrived. Her role was essential for sales and increased profits. She convinced the uncertain to purchase and praised those who made wise selections to acquire even more. Filled with a healthy contentment, patrons trusted her. She exuded a knowing of her clients' needs to exchange their excess currency for other items—and every item was an essential need.

Mrs. McDougal was not greedy. She did not use conniving or high-pressure sales tactics. To her credit, she was genuinely earnest. She believed all women deserved to look as she did and most of her customers wanted the same. Mrs. McDougal's appearance was the barometer of the latest fashions. The ribbon in her hair was the ribbon everyone should have. Her dress may have been of the finest cotton; however, the buttons piqued her customers' curiosity. Mrs. McDougal was her husband's greatest asset. She was slender and elegant, far more than most ladies. Her skin was a porcelain ivory and smooth. To all, she was beautiful. The unspoken query was whether she sold accessories or the accessories sold her. Sebastian knew the answer.

Sebastian walked between and around bolts of cloth. In the back and standing behind the counter, Mr. Jonathon McDougal, like his wife, was dressed impeccably. He stood primed to make a profit. He had to be finely clothed for this reason alone. As the principal force behind the operation, his clothing was a costume and he wore it authentically. He relished his role as much as he observed every aspect of his business. He injected himself whenever and wherever appropriate to gain any advantage.

When Sebastian approached, Mr. McDougal, as he reviewed his books against the inventory in stock, made it appear as if had been scared by a ghost. He looked up with alarm. He threw his hands into the air. He was dramatic and disingenuous to a fault. "Mr. Chiffon!" he exclaimed in a loud whisper. "I did not hear you come in. The door is quiet, you know. I must place a bell upon it. I must. I must, for sure. I should not be surprised by the likes of *you* at the back counter before knowing *you* have arrived. Forgive me. Oh my, I am embarrassed by my lack of attentiveness."

Sebastian was not fooled. He nodded slowly and eyed the owner with suspicion.

Mr. McDougal did not cease. He prattled on and on in a most effeminate way. The contrast between husband and wife made the business work. Mrs. McDougal was a saint who sold her way to an advantage. Mr. McDougal was the cajoling, finagling rat who stole his way to success. With beady eyes, pointed nose, a narrow chin any lady would desire, and a head lacking most of its hair, he coaxed customers in a most unappealing manner, as if he offered cheese but withheld a corner or two, the shaving of coins to the public's greater disadvantage. "What a pleasant surprise! I have been expecting you. How is your family? Your trip was fine, I hope. Tell me about yourself. The latest news? How are sales? My, it is good to have you here." McDougal did not want answers to his questions. He wanted only to feign the sincerest attempt to be genuine.

As Mr. McDougal pranced in place behind the counter, his fingertips touched the surface lightly and bent downward and then pushed up and his hands catapulted in epileptic jerks. This hopping motion sent one hand after the other into the air after the utterance of every fifth syllable.

Sebastian saw Mr. McDougal as a yapping toy poodle and restrained the urge to reduce the surplus dog population.

McDougal continued, "Oh, but listen to me ramble on incessantly with so many questions. I must stop now. I must stop and afford you a proper greeting. Otherwise, your mere presence will get

the better of me.” He paused and offered his patented, phony smile and leaned his head to the side as he extended his hand. “Welcome to A Stitch in Time, Mr. Chiffon!”

Quite reluctantly, Sebastian acted as the gentleman he wanted to be and had always been, but he did not smile. “It is my pleasure, Mr. McDougal.”

Mr. McDougal shook his arm as vigorously as any limp noodle engages a fork rising to the mouth.

Sebastian held his arm still.

Mr. McDougal did not end his charade. To Sebastian’s discomfort, McDougal stepped back from the counter as if to confirm the man standing on the other side. “I must say, it is. Yes, it is,” he concluded. “Mr. Sebastian Chiffon, the most celebrated clothier in the country.” He reflected a brief moment and added, “No, I dare say, perhaps the world. You are here. You are here. Yes, I must say, you are at my shop and I am very, very honored and humbled.” He bowed as if Sebastian were the king himself.

Sebastian doubted whether Mr. McDougal had ever been humbled in his life. More to the point, Sebastian did not want praise, especially the faux variety. He rejected McDougal’s claims as rubbish and ignored the man outright. Annoyed with such gamesmanship, Sebastian went straight to his purpose and hoped for a quick exit. “I am here to pick up my order, Mr. McDougal, if it is ready. Also, I wish to examine your silk.”

McDougal was not at all surprised by Sebastian’s subtle dismissal of his praise. He recalled prior visits and obvious signs he had been too zealous for what was a standard business encounter. However, like a waterfall which cannot stop, McDougal pressed forward with the uncomfortable flattering. He could not resist. “Oh, but you are the modest one. Yes, always modest. Your modesty reflects your renown stature.” He reached under the counter and retrieved the silk samples. Flattery, after all, gave way to business. “By the way, I have Brocade silk in stock.”

Sebastian accepted the silk and began his examination.

McDougal added, “Please let me know if you need assistance. And, by the way.” He held Sebastian’s attention for an instant longer. “Your order is ready. Why would it not be ready. You are Sebastian Chiffon, are you not? We must be ready for you.” His hands hopped. His hands always hopped.

Though Sebastian did not share his colleague’s general enthusiasm, for Sebastian considered McDougal to be contrived, he tendered the store owner the courtesy he deserved. Sebastian nodded

out of respect, but did not say a word. He maintained his distance. He did not like Jonathon McDougal. McDougal was one of those miserable people who pretended to be the opposite. Sebastian was a miserable man and, as far as he was concerned, he knew as much and would admit it. Such an admission made him superior to Mr. McDougal. With this worthless advantage, Sebastian enjoyed brief and unexpected silence.

Minutes later a patron entered the establishment. Mrs. Wallace made her way past the rows of fabric like an out-of-place whirlwind in a deep forest where the slightest breeze would be rare. From afar, she spoke loudly. "Mr. McDougal! I say, Mr. McDougal!" She approached the counter clothed in a dress without likeness and far too refined for an everyday outing. She hailed the proprietor again. "Mr. McDougal!" She did not know what it meant to whisper. "Oh, there you are, Mr. McDougal!"

Mrs. Wallace was not an average customer and, quite unfortunately, she knew it. Her wealth was an asset, her only asset. She was not pretty. She was not fine-figured. She was not intelligent. Besides her showy manner and money made cheaper by just having it, she willed herself to be the focus of every situation. Those who knew Mrs. Wallace would describe her as pathetic. Sebastian did not know the woman and he described her as such instantly. As if she knew the unpleasant, that she had more foibles than funds, she flaunted the latter to avoid the former. Her voice was shrill. Her hand gestures were flashy in a twitchy sort of way. A flick here and a flick there, twitch, twitch, twitch, ensured her empty words were delivered and received with emphasis, whether or not those words were heard in the first place.

"McDougal!" she cried out. "McDougal!" Errant jabs flew.

"Yes, my good lady," McDougal replied.

To hear Mr. McDougal and Mrs. Wallace speak was to watch four hopping and flying hands. Sebastian did not know if he should duck or run. Mrs. Wallace cleared her throat more for effect than to offer a friendly greeting. She wanted to be noticed; she would be noticed; she was noticed. Who did not notice Mrs. Wallace? She paused briefly to allow McDougal to take in the view. He looked up and admired the dress and hat he had finished just last week. He could not help but admire Mrs. Wallace if only for his craftsmanship. His loyalty to this one customer was expected. Mrs. Wallace was his most important retail customer. She accounted for nearly ten percent of his annual retail sales. She deserved his attention. He noticed her for good reason. The rat knew his place and profit reigned supreme.

Mrs. Wallace raised a pattern into the air and waved it dramatically. "Mr. McDougal, I commission you to make this dress for my niece's birthday. Ophelia shall be sixteen and introduced to society at the end of next month." She sighed and turned to all who might be able to see and hear her deliver this pronouncement. Mrs. Wallace had an obligation to unmask the pressures of high society which common folk would not readily appreciate, of this she was certain, and she unmasked her revelation without fail. Her words were received by an audience of two.

Sebastian did not listen. He cared little for people of pomp and circumstance. Bothered by the same ilk at his own shop, he tuned them out. Today was no different; he turned away. As far as he was concerned, the wealthy lived in small worlds of their own making. He found such heightened self-importance reprehensible.

Annoyed by Sebastian's lack of attention, Mrs. Wallace stared at him condescendingly. Sebastian felt the unwanted pull and turned his body even more to the right. She, of course, pretended not to be the least offended and promptly gave her full attention to herself and, by happenstance, to Mr. McDougal.

"Yes, come now, McDougal. This is the dress I want for my Ophelia!" She made her every expression with equal emphasis.

"Yes, Mrs. Wallace," McDougal replied in a soft voice, not a whisper.

"And be sure to use the new Italian lace."

"Yes, Mrs. Wallace."

McDougal was obliging, exceedingly so. And he did not prattle unnecessarily with this customer. Mrs. Wallace was the alpha and he knew the pecking order. He could not afford to be anything contrary to his submissive role. Mrs. Wallace represented a lot of cheese. It was for this reason that she dominated him in every transaction.

Sebastian was amused.

Mr. McDougal looked at Mrs. Wallace and asked a question knowing he possessed the answer. "And, uh, Mrs. Wallace, we have Ophelia's measurements?" His voice rose artificially. His hands hopped three times.

"I should think so!" She placed her hands upon her hips before they launched skyward and orbited the counter. "Was she not here last week for a final fitting?"

"Yes, Mrs. Wallace," he replied with a hop of a hand.

Sebastian smirked to himself. He always considered McDougal a decent promoter. Suddenly, Sebastian thought otherwise.

McDougal was not a decent promoter; he was excellent. He fed his clients praise with ease, praise that was received as easily, especially with this customer.

“Mr. McDougal,” Mrs. Wallace added. “Spare no effort. The dress must be superior. My Ophelia is all the rage among suitors. She must appear as the princess she is and will be in this dress.” Her arms darted with excitement. “I heard recently she has caught the eye of a nobleman.”

“Yes, Mrs. Wallace.”

With this final comment, she looked briefly toward Sebastian. He had not once rested his eyes upon her. He did not acknowledge her in any proper manner. He did not speak a word of kindness to her and she considered this an affront to civility. Thus, her suspicions were validated. Sebastian, who was beneath her station on account of wealth, did not deserve her time or attention under any civil or social code. She announced boldly and rather insincerely for all to hear, “I wish you a good day, Mr. McDougal.” With the sole intent to remind others of her relevance, she exclaimed, “I must leave for an engagement at The Broadmoor.”

“Yes, Mrs. Wallace, and a good day to you as well.”

Slowly, very slowly, she exited with the same sense of supremacy she entered. The front door closed not with a hush, but a sigh.

Relieved, Mr. McDougal placed the pattern aside and dropped his head before returning to his inventory. The pressure he endured each time Mrs. Wallace came to his store was not insignificant. If he had an equal as King Rat, Mrs. Wallace was the Queen. She thought of herself as highly as he did of himself and she sought every advantage. Though she did not need to shave coins to accomplish her goals, she was as calculating. She was his equal and more and the parallel was not at all complimentary to either of them.

Sebastian did not intend to complicate McDougal’s state, but he was perturbed and not without cause. “You have new Italian lace?”

Jarred by the query, McDougal exclaimed, “Oh, my apologies. I can assure you it was a simple oversight. A regrettable, but simple oversight.” He made this comment without his customary smile. Such was the impact of his last customer.

Mr. McDougal left the counter in a hurry and returned as quickly with a sample of the new lace. Sebastian received it with expected curiosity. He had been successful, in part, by his awareness of changing trends and new product lines. He made it a point to learn of any new fads. Successful shop owners were expected to know of

evolving fashions. Sebastian did not like surprises and McDougal knew this fact.

“Exquisite,” Sebastian commented. “What is my cost?”

“Two percent above your standard wholesale rate.”

“How much do you have in stock?”

McDougal checked his inventory sheet. “I have one chain and two falls.”

It was at that moment Sebastian made the conscious decision to complicate matters for McDougal. It would take at least two months for McDougal to replenish this product. “I shall have all of it,” he said with resolve.

The proprietor looked at the pattern to his right and braced himself. His fingertips hopped no longer and rested lightly upon counter. He looked down again and then toward the front door. Full of consternation, he asked, “Mr. Chiffon, would you be satisfied with half that amount?” As if he suffered from some instant pain, his voice rose in pitch. He placed his weight onto the counter and pressed his hands flat.

Sebastian did not blink. He looked toward the front door quite deliberately and then at Mr. McDougal. He spoke assuredly. “I shall have one chain and two falls or none of it.”

McDougal sighed deeply. “Yes, Sir. As you wish.”

McDougal had been reminded of a cold fact, a money-driven reality, a bottom line which affected the ledger. Sebastian Chiffon bought wholesale in one year what Mrs. Wallace would take five years to purchase retail. McDougal could ill afford to deprive Sebastian of his attempt to prevail over snobbery at its worst. McDougal would suffer, but he would extract some enjoyment. He would inform Mrs. Wallace and place blame accordingly. He would explain that the man standing at the counter the day she visited had purchased the entire roll of the new Italian lace. McDougal was a rat at heart and would not shoulder the burden in the least while extending his most insincere regrets.

Sebastian pushed the samples of silk toward McDougal, save one. “Please add eight chains of Taffeta silk to my order.”

“Ah!” McDougal exclaimed. “That is most excellent.” He smiled. Profit reigned supreme yet again. “Very good, Mr. Chiffon. A wise selection. A very wise selection. The Taffeta is one of my favorites. My, you have a way with fashion. If only all clothiers had your sensibilities and taste.” His hands hopped again and most gleefully. McDougal reverted to flattery as easily as inhaling his next breath.

Sebastian became increasingly intolerant. He spurned the compliment and replied sardonically, “Actually, Mr. McDougal, the silk sells itself.” Only after he spoke the last word of his rebuke did Sebastian look at Mr. McDougal directly.

A fissure in Sebastian’s public persona began to show. His last remark was unbecoming—the taking out of the dagger with a slice through the air. For this transgression, Sebastian was uncomfortable and even embarrassed that he had been the least offensive to McDougal. But he had to admit, he enjoyed the daring verve. He felt the strength required to place McDougal on notice. This was the first time he defended himself and he wanted it to be the last. He had avoided conflict for a half century and he refused to sharpen this social skill. Sebastian preferred to defer when conflict any surfaced. His ability to attack, a skill necessary for survival, was a skill that would remain as dull as he was bored with life. Defeated time and again from countless and meaningless battles, he was reserved to a fault and he used this virtue as a means of defense. But now he feared the long trip had taken a toll and the blow he delivered to McDougal would leave a scar. He regretted his lack of restraint.

However, Mr. McDougal deflected any potential or actual injury. He proved as much by offering more flattery. “No, Sir. No, Sir. You have a discriminating eye, a sure sign of excellent taste and experience.” He shifted his thin and lengthy frame in his inimical, rattish manner to underscore the point. His hopping hands proved his ego remained unscathed.

Sebastian shook his head slowly. He wondered if the constant parade of insincere compliments would ever end. He turned away from the counter. He would not draw the dagger again. He was not a fighting man and he had never been.

Elated with the order, Mr. McDougal slinked to his ledger as if hoarding crumbs. He added numbers. He figured cost and margin and calculated his profit. He was certain Sebastian had placed his largest order in thirty years. With a greedy smile, he beckoned Miss Thompson. He showed her scribbled notes. She trudged dutifully to the back.

Meanwhile, Sebastian busied himself with money. He placed a large stack of currency upon the counter.

Mr. McDougal noted the amount tendered and protested. Both hands hopped at once. “Mr. Chiffon, but you have credit here. I am certain there is no need for payment at this point in time.” Hop and hop. McDougal was emphatic.

Sebastian remained undeterred. “I do not accept terms from anyone. I prefer not to delay what is due in the present.” He pushed the bills toward McDougal and spoke sternly. “I expect your standard discount for payment in full.”

McDougal had been outmaneuvered again and gave Sebastian his due. “Oh my! Not only are you the finest clothier, you are a shrewd businessman. Yes, you are. Shrewd indeed. We should all be so shrewd.”

Sebastian weathered the compliment and issued a reply. “One becomes what is expected of him, does he not?” He looked out the front window and watched the liveliness of the street. “Regrets,” he whispered to himself. Sebastian believed in regrets. He believed a life lived without regrets was a life not lived. He had regrets which pained him deeply. McDougal added to the pain of past regrets and he did it effectively.

McDougal asked Sebastian a question a second time. The first attempt had fallen upon deaf ears. “Mr. Chiffon, your son, I presume his apprenticeship is going well?”

Sebastian looked at McDougal and replied soberly with one syllable. “Yes.” Bothered by the unexpected query, his shoulders fell at the thought of yet another regret he wished had remained dormant. He loathed the idea he directed his son into a trade they both tolerated. Sebastian despised himself for destroying his son’s hopes, just as his father had been done to him.

McDougal did not stop. “Well, I should think so. Your son has the finest teacher.” Oblivious to the war raging inside Sebastian’s chest, McDougal acted his part well. He was the rat lacking the capacity to read body language, a sure sign he did not have the capacity to empathize.

Sebastian could tolerate McDougal no longer. He had had enough of the rat and, without a word, walked to the door.

Caught by surprise, Mr. McDougal followed quickly. He raised his arm and called to his wife in a loud and hurried whisper, “Mrs. McDougal?” He pointed to the front of the store.

Mrs. McDougal gave her apologies to her customer and complied with her husband’s request.

Exercising restraint, Sebastian stopped, resumed his polite tone, and bid the couple farewell. “Mr. McDougal, as always, I am grateful.”

“The pleasure is mine, Sebastian.” Lavish in his praise still, Mr. McDougal made his farewell speech. “I consider you a friend, colleague, and mentor. You are a credit to the apparel industry.” He

tilted his face to the side and allowed the evening sun to lay a glow upon his head.

Mrs. McDougal, eager to upsell her husband's remarks, chimed in at the right moment. "A pleasure to see you again, Mr. Chiffon. Please give your wife my regards." She handed Sebastian a gift. "For Marie." She smiled knowingly. The ribbon was the same color wrapped around her bun.

Sebastian bowed slightly and accepted her kind words and gift. "Very thoughtful. Thank you, Mrs. McDougal."

Mr. McDougal concluded their business. "My sons are loading the inventory onto your wagon. Let me know how I may be of further assistance."

McDougal was satisfied. Sebastian was not. Disgusted with himself and the experience he had just endured, he opened the door and stepped into a horde of people moving in powerful currents. By all appearances, they did not have a care in the world. They were as oblivious of each other as much as McDougal had been to Sebastian. The world was full of McDougals. He witnessed a mass of rats slinking here and there and the sight appalled him.

III

Sebastian's disposition had soured more than usual. Escape was the only option. As the first cousin of excuse, escape was always his solution. Today was no different. Sebastian had but one goal. He would leave without delay. He would rest for the night at the inn outside of Burlington. He would end his journey the following day. This was his plan.

He made his way through the crowd like a needle rides through fabric. In and out and up and down, he passed a man, then a child, and stepped around another man before pausing before a lady making her way slowly and ever so mindful not to suffer the slightest brush that would harm her appearance. Within this hurried scene, Sebastian stitched his steps one after another. He pressed into a hustle and bustle which pushed against him with even greater force.

He moved with agility until an obstruction blocked his path. A beggar limped forward and stopped directly in front of him. Dirty, unshaven, and poorly dressed, the man took off his cap and made his pitch. Sebastian, one of hundreds of potential targets the beggar would meet during the day, or until he amassed three farthings, became the

man's focus. "Carry your bag for a farthing, Sir?" he asked with the use of his nasal cavities more than his vocal cords.

Sebastian stared in disbelief. A frail man, the beggar's clothes drooped from his thin appendages like drenched leaves hanging on sagging limbs after a downpour. His eyes were narrowly bound to a long, thin nose. His hair had not been washed in weeks. He stooped and this posture helped him look away and down in shame each time he asked for charity. He was a sorry sight and Sebastian felt no pity for the man. "Do you see a bag?" he asked sternly.

The beggar did not know what to say. Though he had posed this question many times, he did not bother to note whether his target was burdened with a load. "Uh, beggin' ye pardon, Sir." The beggar had barely issued his reply before he fished an old handkerchief out of his pocket. "Shine ye shoes for a farthing, Sir?"

Sebastian could not and would not exercise his typical restraint. McDougal had cracked him; the beggar might break him. He eyed the man squarely and asked with forceful ridicule, "Was this your hope as a young boy? Was this your one high aspiration for your life?"

Worn smooth by a rough undertow of desperation for decades, the beggar caved to Sebastian's scorn. He had no choice. He had no reply to this unexpected query, a question he had never been asked. The old man, who wanted nothing but kindness in the form of a handout, received condemnation. He did not know what to do or say and, so, he did the obvious. He made haste with a perpetual misery he would never out limp. "Wishin' ye a good day, Sir." The beggar pocketed the handkerchief and spied the crowd for his next benefactor.

Amazed at the insolence of the uneducated, Sebastian stood still in sea of bodies flowing past his fixed spot. Further angered to leave the city as quickly as possible, he forced his way through the crowd and arrived at his wagon.

McDougal's sons, Tommy and Harry, loaded the Taffeta silk, new Italian lace, and the balance of his order. Sebastian checked the inventory with his receipt. He pulled on ropes and tugged the partially withdrawn tarp. He examined a new pattern and returned it to the seat at the front of the wagon.

Harry stepped forward and handed Sebastian the final inventory. He signed the original and kept the copy.

"Mr. Chiffon, I wish you a pleasant trip."

"Thank you, Harry."

Tommy waited on the other side. His face and stance indicated a certain preoccupation which somehow involved Sebastian.

Sebastian came around and inquired. "Tommy?"

“Yes, Mr. Chiffon. With you permission, may I have a word with ye?”

Sebastian sighed lightly. He would not tolerate another delay. “And?”

“Well, Sir, I have a business proposition of sorts.” Tommy stalled.

“Yes. Well, on with it, lad.”

“Yes, Sir. Mr. Chiffon, my father shared the idea of apprenticing under you. Would ye be agreeable to such an arrangement?”

Sebastian did not expect this request. McDougal had not spoken of this arrangement. He stood without saying a word. Tommy was not cut from the same cloth as his father. Tommy was reserved and polite. Sebastian considered the source of the request, not the source of the source. The lad was a young man about to make his way in the world. He was healthy, strong, and stable. He had good looks, a winning smile, and a manner of relating that most young men lacked.

Tommy, who was familiar with Sebastian Chiffon’s stature, suddenly caught a touch of the nerves. Not only did he respect Sebastian, he found himself enduring silence to the most important question he had ever asked. To wait for an answer which would affect the rest of his life was more than he could bear. Tommy sensed, of all things, that Sebastian had to be sold on this idea. “Sir, ye are the best and I assure you, I will offer me best.” Tommy became as silent as his eyes were hopeful.

Sebastian said nothing. What could he say? No sane boy would or should covet an aspiration to enter the apparel industry. Yet, Sebastian felt an obligation to respond. He had to say something. So, he asked the obvious question. “Tommy, is this what ye wish to do with ye life?”

“Yes, Sir. I love the apparel trade. The smell, touch, the designs, the process and finished products. I could do nothin’ else.” He smiled broadly. Tommy’s enthusiasm infected everyone but his present audience.

Inoculated from such youthful hopes, Sebastian listened. He thought of his son’s misery. He thought of his own history of despair. He considered dissuading Tommy. This was his reaction. But why would he offer Tommy an escape from so horrid a future, an escape he had not granted his own son? Did Sebastian seek absolution? Was such an act a form of self-imposed penance for condemning his only son to a lifetime of bondage? Or did Sebastian project upon Tommy some lost hope? Was Tommy a bridge from regret to a never to be fulfilled

dream? Just as Sebastian did not know why Tommy would make so foolish a choice, he failed to appreciate why he tried to alter that choice. If only because Sebastian refused, he was not entirely sure he believed the lad.

Exercising a degree of restraint, Sebastian nodded and spoke solemnly. His next words hinted of an unhealthy skepticism. "Tommy, we shall discuss this arrangement on my next trip."

This was the only answer Tommy needed. Sebastian's reply was as good as agreement. Tommy knew he would be an apprentice to the eminent Sebastian Chiffon. The would-be apprentice smiled heartily and shook his icon's hand. "Thank ye, Sir. Thank ye, kindly. Ye shall not be disappointed."

Sebastian could do nothing more than offer a strained smile. Quite unexpectedly, his business with the McDougals concluded with this one disappointing request. He could not have imagined a more regrettable ending to his visit.

With the trip was nearly over, he yearned for his room at the inn. He would rest his beleaguered mind, troubled heart, and tired body. At most, he had a twelve-hour trip to Wellington the next day. With this frame of reference, he allowed himself to be somewhat encouraged. He grabbed the reins and walked along Beast. He guided the animal and slowly turned the wagon.

Both master and donkey spliced their way toward the middle of a street that was a constant river of commerce day and night. The current was strong. Though the water was congested, the crowd cleared a path. Beast was the tip of the canoe heading upstream against women and men walking to hundreds of destinations. People separated as the wagon merged with traffic. Some reached out and touched Beast or glided their hands along the side of the wagon no differently than ripples lapped and slapped the sides of a water-borne vessel. Men nodded. Ladies offered polite excuses. Disingenuous but civil discourse, spoken and unspoken, drifted freely between parties. Most granted egress to others while, at the same time, they presumed permission to advance. Such was the silent ritual of business within active cities. Movement occurred by varied motivations and people were motivated to move.

Occasionally, an anomaly occurs and movements collide. A piece of drift wood floats and twists in the current. Sometimes the wood passes with a simple tap against the canoe. Often it makes no contact at all. Then again, the wood may hit the front of the canoe, latch on with a hook protruding from one of its minor branches and impede progress before separating. Even the most detailed plans do not account

for such occurrences. One never knows what will happen until it comes to pass. It is then one either reacts or not.

Sebastian broke through the flow of flesh and blood outside A Stitch in Time. He looked to his right and down the street and then to the left. All was calm. Without traffic forward of the wagon, he surged ahead.

To the left, however, a gang of boys raced along with one intention, to go nowhere fast. The children were about the business of playing and they were good at their trade. With the utmost carelessness, for they were as carefree as that piece of driftwood, they slipped with and, at times, faster than the current. They were ripples among countless ripples rolling toward the shoreline. The children had no firm grasp of natural laws, and even if they did, such laws were ignored. They advanced until their energy was dissipated by larger and more powerful objects or waves. Only then would they either stop or react and then begin anew.

The leader of the gang, a ten-year-old lad who was tall for his age, was unfortunate enough to lead the charge through the crowd. He dodged in and around others with remarkable fluidity. He bolted forward and turned as tightly as a cork twisted from a wine bottle. The laws of physics did not apply to him, at least not then. He was preoccupied with and competing against his friends in a heated race. They were as earnest in this venture as any they had ever undertaken. Innocence and enthusiasm are, at times, a volatile combination. In this state, the boy ran absentmindedly. He was oblivious to everything. He was happy. He was consumed by a fleeting happiness.

Sebastian did not see what was coming. Thus, he was unprepared. Blindsided by the blind, the boy slammed into a column of flesh filled with mortar mixed with regrets and the harshness of life and an attitude of contempt. Sebastian was a hardened man and the collision of that piece of driftwood against an already agitated soul impeded progress, Sebastian's progress, and that caused him to react in a most offensive manner.

"What is the meaning of this?" Sebastian yelled.

The crowd flowed outwardly in an instant no differently than concentric rings created by a pebble thrown into still waters. The circle in the center, the one which often receives the most attention, was a boy who did not dare move. He feared the worst. The crowd did as well. A heavy lull fell over the gathering. As if caught in the eye of the storm, people waited for the second battering. They knew nature's wrath would descend. They held their now united breath.

Sebastian stood prominently.

The boy sensed the man was someone important. He intuitively sought some advantage. With sincere deference he blurted, “Pardon me, Sir! It was my fault and I beg ye forgiveness.”

Sebastian glared at the attacker.

The boy assessed Sebastian’s facial expression. Given the boy’s sincere plea, the man’s visage had not changed in the least.

Sebastian was not impressed. Neither was he moved by this purest petition for forgiveness. “Pardon me?” Sebastian asked. He dropped his arms and brushed his pants and any wrinkles which might discredit his appearance. “Such disrespect!” he exclaimed.

The boy, adrift in unchartered waters, had never met such a force. The other children backed away and outlined the farthest ring. They were grateful not to be where their friend landed.

Sebastian attempted to compose himself. The mounting pressure from his day, which included the beggar, young Tommy’s request, and Mr. McDougal’s typical antics, had taken a toll. Then there was the ongoing conversation he had with himself lingering in the background. That the crowd continued to stare only inflamed his ire. As if forced to justify his initial response, an internal force rose within him. “Have you no eyes?” Sebastian shouted.

The boy came to one knee and stood slowly. He fixed his gaze upon the man he had offended.

“Is this how you occupy your time?” Sebastian asked. Annoyed, Sebastian was more reckless than usual. His reservoir of that one prized virtue—his uncommon restraint—was nearly empty. He did not notice that the crowd swelled into a larger audience and he did not care that he, alone, was the force behind the escalation of a situation readily defused but for a lack of patience and compassion.

Unfortunately, the boy did not know how to respond. Though he had apologized once, in his current state of emotions, he did not think to apologize again or, better yet, to run away. No. He chose the worst possible option. He answered Sebastian’s question with a question. “Occupy?”

Sebastian encountered a second and third foe, ignorance and insolence, both of which devalued the one trait which may have saved the boy from further scrutiny, the innocence of youth. Sebastian looked at the boy with contempt.

“Yes, *occupy*, ignorant raff!” He brushed his coat with one downward sweep of his arms and hands.

The boy was even more nonplussed. “No, Sir. My name is Jimmy Williams.”

Sebastian came undone. He had had enough of humanity. He was an island in an ocean of depravity. Faced with ignorance, insolence, and depravity, little did poor Jimmy Williams know he had taken Sebastian Chiffon beyond the point of no return.

Jimmy sensed something was wrong, something simple and obvious, like putting his shoes on the wrong feet and racing to catch the stagecoach while lacking the time or inclination to fix the problem. Before him was a man who boiled inside. Volcanic activity burped and belched underneath a surface made less stable with every minor inconvenience. Sebastian was on the verge of erupting. If the volcano blew, heated magma would flow into that once bustling river and boil and bubble into a furious hiss. Poor Jimmy would never know the cause and, worse still, be without an easy escape.

Sebastian was incredulous. He had no sooner concluded the boy did not know the definition of the word *occupy* when he learned the boy did not know the words *ignorant* or *raff*. The longer he stood, the more he thought and the more he shook in uncontrolled rage. Massive forces surged inside. Increasing pressure filled crevices and pressed upward and out. Sebastian's arms and legs tremored. He could not contain subterranean forces seeking an exit.

Adults and children witnessed a strange phenomenon.

Sebastian raised one arm slowly and narrowed his eyes upon his target. He shot a look through little Jimmy Williams and spewed forth a final warning. This admonishment was for all to heed. No one was relieved of its intent. "Off with you!" he yelled. "Off with the lot of you!" He swung his raised arm around as if outlining the entire circumference of the earth, edges McDougal would never find and shave to some advantage. Sebastian was not finished. "Go and *occupy* your days with mischief and accomplish nothing!"

The children stared without moving. They did not budge. Did they hear him? Were they giving his unsolicited wisdom ample consideration? As if frozen by fear, they remained.

Sebastian was stunned. He could not believe it. The children had not taken flight. Sebastian pointed skyward and spewed forth one more gush with absolute finality. "Off!"

Jimmy Williams scurried and turned and dashed into the crowd. His gang retreated without second thoughts.

Sebastian ignored the ladies who were aghast at his outburst. In an attempt to regain any sense of dignity, he lifted his leg and placed it upon the wagon wheel and wiped his scuffed boots. He made sure all observers saw the damage Jimmy Williams had caused. With a huff and a shrug, he grabbed the reins and, once again, moved against the

current. The rats mingled briefly as if waiting for some final morsel and then drifted their separate ways.

Sebastian had, for the briefest moment, stemmed the tide of commerce before the currents resumed their natural flow into tomorrow, next week, and the coming year. The following day, no one would recall the incident. With every passing sorrow, there is usually a nugget of wisdom to glean from the experience. However, Sebastian was not the least bit wiser. Was he embittered a tad more? Perhaps. But bitterness would not resurface for some time. Where the street exited the city, Sebastian stopped, climbed onto the seat and rolled his way to the inn on the edge of town. In the morning, he would journey home. He would return to Willington. The regrettable encounter with Jimmy Williams would be forgotten.

IV

Marcail Cameron did not have an insignificant beginning to his life. His parents, Gregory and Edina Cameron, were scholars. His father, a teacher of the first order, taught literature. Gregory enlightened children about man, motives, and milestones of triumph and tragedy. After receiving a new job offer, he and his wife travelled to a distant town with a larger school. On the second night of their journey, the wheel axle broke. Other than a crescent moon and a faint sparkling of stars in the heavens, no light shone. They were stranded in rough terrain and far from civilization. No inns. No homestead. No barn for refuge.

Edina was in the back of the conveyance with their worldly possessions when loose objects tumbled and bound things broke free. The wagon collapsed and she gripped the side. She leaned back and then forward and finally wrapped her arms about her waist. She moaned in agony. A sharp pain enveloped her belly. Gregory came quickly. She insisted that she be lowered to the ground. He took planks of wood from the sides of the wagon and erected a ramp. Edina slid down and waddled to a grassy bed and rested among the heather. The Camerons, alone and without help, faced a far greater challenge. Edina was nine months with child. The jolt of the crash had induced hard labor.

Hours later, their son, Marcail, was born in the wild under a dark expanse by a lake near a dense forest. If the tale is true, a string of blinking eyes along the woodline watched with trepidation as the baby drew his first breath. Wildlife did not dare approach or attack for good reason. Immediately upon entering the world, Marcail, with a full

beard, walked a few feet toward the forest and knelt. He touched the ground, searched for tracks, and sniffed the air for any scent of game. When he stared at the wood, the residents of the forest widened their gazes. Moonlight glanced off their glassy eyes which only brightened the edge of the black perimeter, the only shield that kept them hidden from any hunter. When the fiercest bear fled for safety, all wildlife followed. The woodline went dark. The newborn babe never made a sound.

Conjecture persists into the present. If there was a spell cast upon the child before his birth, people suppose the cause was a father's profession and a mother's love of books—a spell wrapped in words with the mystique of plots revealing both glory and sorrow. So well read were Marcaïl's parents, many suppose they channeled the character, conflict, and conclusion of their son's life. Whether Gregory and Edina realized it or not, they were the authors who created the setting of their son's birth and advanced other characters who further scripted the story of his life.

Had the wagon collapsed in a different location, outside a lawyer's office, the child would have become a judge. Near the local parish, a priest. A farm, then a farmer. Marcaïl was blessed, as it were, to be and love what his parents prized most, fine literature with compelling plots. The plot of Marcaïl's life was solidified by subplots of intrigue drawn from great works and the elements surrounding his birth. The scene was the wild; the character, a woodsman; the conflict, living alone in the wild without a soulmate; the climax, finding true love.

As expected, Marcaïl spent most of his childhood in the wild. When of age, he moved to the wood permanently and became a woodsman. He served as a guide to nobles on hunting and fishing trips. He trained common folk on various topics such as herbs, mushrooms, tracking, trapping, star and land navigation, how to dress and cure meat, and more. He focused on survival skills. He taught children how to identify predators, poisonous plants, and what to do when lost without food and water. If times were tough and his classes and trips did not provide for his needs, only then would he hunt and trade pelts and barter big game for essentials. Otherwise, he did not hunt at all.

Marcaïl's adult life unfolded as expected. He was without true love. Ladies did not live in the wild. However, as in works of literature, love finds a way.

On a rather typical day Marcaïl was in Edinburgh teaching locals about poisonous snakes and spiders and which plants could be eaten. A sign propped against his crude tent promoted his lecture. The

grammar, spelling, and penmanship were excellent, far too refined for a mere commoner and superior to most noblemen educated at the best institutions.

Marcaïl's sign caught the attention of a proper lady, a refined woman of substantial means. She stopped her leisurely stroll between shops and read the message. Intrigued, she stood outside the tent and listened. She heard a calming and confident voice which disclosed a man's love for nature and humanity. She tilted her head and brought her dainty hand to her powdered chin to hide her smile. She was certain the sign represented what the penmanship underscored and the voice conveyed charm, erudition, and humility. She was moved by a desire seeded in her youth. Her imagination soared until she could resist no longer. Desire collided with fate. She reached for the tent flap and pulled eagerly, but slyly. She peeked. She watched a man without equal in vocabulary and expression.

Marcaïl Cameron was an artful orator with vast knowledge and a singular focus. Distracted for the briefest moment, he glanced to the back of the tent and caught the imperceptible. He saw a divine apparition.

The collision occurred. She was trapped; he was caged. He could not escape; she would not retreat. She would not deny a world of possibility and floated from the entrance of the tent to the back of the class. He stared for what seemed like minutes. His lecture lapsed. The voice, that voice, his voice quieted. The students turned in unison.

Someone whispered, "I think Woodsman Cameron has been bitten by the deadliest creature."

Marcaïl did not hear the comment or laughter. He walked in a trance toward the creature. She stood with grace. His eyes were fixed. Her eyes danced. He was unsteady. She was staked to the ground. His mind spun. Her heart stilled. His heart raced. Her mind kept pace with a constant thought—no man could be so handsome.

Marcaïl had blonde hair with waves and length and a touch of curls. His face was proportional. His chin strong, jaw square, nose long and formal. His eyes pierced in a most unoffensive manner. His shoulders were broad, chest firm, waist thin. His arms were solid and manly enough to carry her across any threshold. She imagined his legs were as substantial as tree trunks. His intellect could not be bested and his heart had to be golden.

Marcaïl was blinded by the damsel's distinguishing features, her reddish blonde locks, porcelain face, angelic smile, and blue eyes partially hidden behind a white veil hanging from a stylish hat. Her figure was slender and warm as hinted by the flushness of her skin.

Encased in a dress not tightly worn, no one could see her pounding heart. She appeared as though she were poised to a fault.

Groomed for soft gestures and gentle conversation, she elevated others and relegated herself by choice. She believed in the last shall be first principle without the desire to be first. If she happened to be in front, she elevated even more and rushed to the back of the line. As infrequently occurs across the span of time and in certain cultures within random villages, a child raised in high society will see the shame of abundance and distinguish what the noble class truly lacks. She was that child. She was a rarity. She longed for richness of love and respect, even at the risk of losing security and status. At that precious instant, in that tent, and in that man, she saw treasure beyond measure.

Marcail sensed true humility in a world in need of this virtue.

She was a beacon; he followed the light. He stepped closer; she did not budge. He tried to speak. She imagined the future. He could not recall who he was, where he was, or what he was doing a minute prior. She was about to faint. She moved her parasol in a wide arc, closed it sharply, and used it as a cane. This gesture was not for show; she needed support.

He snapped back to reality and looked at his class. Eager faces urged him to act before he was made the fool before a lady who was his superior in social status. "Pardon me. Do ye wish to attend the instruction?" he asked. "We are learning about poisonous flower bites and snakes that grow in the wild."

The students laughed.

She giggled.

Marcail did not know why.

The young lady replied softly, "I thank you for the invitation and, well, that is I would like to listen. However, I would like to arrange for you to conduct a series of classes in my burgh." She paused to give her proposal a business air while fearing she might have been too forward. "Are you agreeable? Or should I ask when or if you might be available?"

Marcail cleared his throat. He placed his hands on his hips. He looked at his students briefly and said, "Quite so to both questions. Now, which burgh would this be?"

"Willington, Sir."

As if a boy deciding which trinket to choose at a carnival booth, he sifted through thoughts. Most often a boy has but a single ticket to redeem the best. Marcail had the best before him and no ticket. He was not faced with a choice between a raccoon's eye or a lucky shark's tooth. He had but one selection and she was the one. His words

had to scale and to scale he had to be true to both himself and her. “As it happens, I will be traveling to Perth this coming month. Shall I visit you beforehand and finalize the details? I would be willing to hold the classes upon my return trip.” He did not buckle. He made his proposal with strength. He was relieved without revealing his joy.

She remained dignified. Not once did her excitement undermine propriety. “To this, I am in complete agreement, Mr.?”

“Cameron. Marcail Cameron. And you are?”

“Ms. Samuels. But, please, call me Juliette.”

Marcail escorted Juliette to a stool and returned to the front of the class. He never gave a better lecture. She never heard a word. The rest, as is often quoted, became history. Lovers of literature would say, *Once upon a time*, and the story would evolve to either a happily ever after or a tragic ending. For Marcail and Juliette, their story unfolded quite unexpectedly, but no less naturally. Their son Victor was the beloved and true expression of an improbable union. Victor was yet another beginning.

V

Victor peered through the small windows of the carriage and saw a sight he could not believe. An extended lane lay before horses trotting between trees evenly spaced on each side. Branches reached up and over and formed an arched passageway. The shade was as lush as the grass. The ambiance was surreal. The clicking of wheels and clacking of hooves against the cobblestone path gave the impression the carriage itself was a steel ball among many travelling down the barrel of a shotgun. Victor could barely see the target. At the end of the stunning promenade, a mansion stood prominently at the top of a circular drive. He was so overwhelmed that he refused to accept this castle as his final destination. He was adamant to the point of telling the driver they had arrived at the wrong place.

Victor grabbed the frame of the window and leaned out and looked up and into the wind. His blonde hair flew back. He squinted at his audience and screamed over the thunderous wheels in his most respectful manner. “Kind Sir, this is not the place! I do not belong here!”

The driver, a portly and crusty man racked by age and a poor attitude, detested his job as much as he despised the wealthy class and children from any social standing. He sneered at the boy’s temerity.

“Are ye Master Victor Cameron?” He neither expected nor wanted a reply.

“I am indeed, Sir. And I’m certain we are heading the wrong direction.”

The driver sighed massively and chortled lightly. Dismayed and amused, he could either remain silent or issue a harsh rebuke. Either would end the conversation, of this he was certain. “A real character, this one,” he said to himself. He made his choice and yelled to emphasize both his power and answer. “Then ye belong, Master Cameron! Ye belongnnnnng!” He drew the last word out by design. He was the sort of man to snap at a child and, as easily, with a quick turn of his head, smile sweetly to the child’s charge.

Victor was not satisfied at all. The imposing castle instilled more fear than the driver. More to the point, his alarm increased the closer the carriage came to the final destination. “But, Sir, I live in...”

A third challenge was too much. The driver turned and looked down and to the left at the open window where Victor strained his neck to speak and hear. The twist of the driver’s upper torso constrained his chest and forced an already protruded gut into an overly distended state. His eyes bulged. His face reddened. The whitish mole on the left side of his nose turned whiter. He was a fat and ugly man and his temperament fared no better under the circumstances. He barked tersely and gave a final and firm response. “I know where ye live, lad. I just came from there, aye?”

“Yes, Sir, but...”

The driver pulled the reins as more of a remonstrance than to slow the horses. The carriage rocked. He had jostled children in the past to prove his point and this boy was no different. “Master Cameron?” he asked with more than a degree of distress.

Victor bounced within the four corners of the window frame and yelled, “Yes, Sir!”

“Ye belong! And that’s the last word!” As evidenced by the thickening of the artery in his neck and a deepening rose to his complexion, he twisted his fat frame a tad more. He gave his last warning. “And if ye argue any more, I will charge ye grandparents double and level the blame upon yewww.” He sneered with satisfaction. He was in control and knew as much. He chose to play with the child and instill the fear of God. “Do ye know who ye grandparents are, lad?”

“No, Sir. I have never met them.”

“Well, let me tell ye something, I’ve met Mr. and Mrs. Blythe and Adalyn Samuels and they are not to be trifled with at all, and that

includes by the likes of yewww.” The driver had power in his small world and he used it whenever he could, a rare event indeed. That rare event was when he had a child in his coach without adults to serve as a governor to his contemptuous rage. “You best listen to me words, lad! You best listen, indeed. Ye will learn soon enough.”

Victor slipped back into the wagon knowing beyond any doubt there was no possible way he belonged at this austere venue and he certainly lacked the desire.

Seconds later, the horses and carriage erupted out of the treed chamber and spread across the circular target. The deafening sound disappeared. The driver took note of their arrival and readied himself. He shifted his body, adjusted his attire, and sat straight. With a leveling of his hat, he assumed the appearance of a professional with a matching attitude. “Whoa!” he said with a soft tone which contradicted his demeanor toward Victor. Slowly, the carriage came to a graceful stop.

As if on cue, an entourage spilled forth from the front doors of the stately home with the force of a waterfall. Leading the way were two distinguished figures, Victor’s grandparents. They were followed by a staff of ten. The assemblage approached in a diplomatic formation with his grandmother to the left, grandfather to the right, and the servants in a semi-circle behind them. From above and behind, one would have viewed a smiling face, with the carriage as the hat and the team of horses as the brim.

The driver, with his acrid, but hidden, attitude, scaled down from his perch and smiled falsely. He was none other than the persistent and unwanted fly at most celebrations. Rather unceremoniously, for in the end he was no professional, he opened the carriage door and unloaded a single bag which he plopped on the promenade and nodded to the passenger to exit.

Victor eyed the driver and thought of his warning about Blythe and Adalyn Samuels. Still uncertain of his destination and fearful of faltering in the least, he placed his feet cautiously upon the steps and lowered himself to shaking ground. To suggest that he was unnerved would have been an understatement. He could not possibly belong. Of this he was certain.

While his mother had told him that her parents were wealthy, Victor had no concept of wealth. He did not know abundance, much less what it looked like. He was a country lad from a family with little means beyond basic needs and as content as the well-to-do were miserable in their plenitude. He had never travelled beyond Forkwood and the surrounding area. Victor knew simplicity. More pressing,

though, he did not know his grandparents and they had never met their only grandchild.

His grandmother stood radiantly. By her countenance, any stranger would have surmised she had never been more joyful. She beamed a glow directly at a child who stole her heart. Victor, eleven years of age, innocent to a fault, and lost in a sea of fresh faces, stood awkwardly in an awkward moment.

The impressive setting, captured within the boy's mind in a heartbeat, proved invaluable. He began to appreciate affluence. His grandmother wore a tightly fitting white dress with her hands clasped gracefully in front of her chest. A pendant attached to a gold chain rested below her neckline. His grandfather wore a suit unmatched in quality. A thick gold chain suspended from his waist plunged into obscurity within his pocket. The servants wore matching uniforms, black and grey, with the ladies in white bonnets. Even more impressive, no one from the entourage moved. They maintained a sense of decorum as if they had been trained to display the utmost formality and civility. From this portrayal, Victor saw and experienced what began to define not only wealth, but a history of wealth.

Victor's immersion into what was surreal ended abruptly when his grandmother took six, small toe-touching steps and exploded with joy. She cloaked Victor within her arms and brought him to her bosom. "Victor!" she proclaimed with tears upon her face, "at last!" For what seemed like minutes, they swerved gently—a pair of wind-up dolls—a grandmother embracing her grandchild whose arms were pinned and pointing toward the ground. The servants cheered modestly.

When she ceased smothering the boy, his grandfather, who had remained stationary, gestured for the boy to come near. Everyone quieted. He who ruled was about to speak. "Victor?" he said as more of a statement than a question, "I am your grandfather." His voice was deep, his words absolute. He secured an arm around the child's shoulder and drew him closer. As a man of economy, he would accomplish two purposes in a single blow. He would give the lad a side-hug and preclude a public display of affection—a severe breach of his personal protocol—and convey the important message that the child belonged. "Welcome home, son."

The servants cheered more than modestly. All were ecstatic. The family, in many respects, had been reunited. Grandmother came alongside Victor and the three turned to face the servants. Victor was now the nose of the smiling face. Unbeknownst to him, he was the breath of life; he was life-giving. He was to those present exactly who he had been before he arrived—a hopeful future, the fulfillment of a

dream, the one missing piece to the reunion of a family. He was the reason they inhaled and exhaled. He was the reverse of the prodigal son once removed. He was the son of a daughter who left home empty-handed, but rich in love and never to return. Victor was the product of that heart of love. He brought life to a family of lost souls longing for resolution to competing pasts and unwanted memories. One of those pasts prevailed and became the present with a future no wise man could forecast. Regardless of the past or future, the here and now bore down upon a boy who was somewhere he had never been and he was unprepared.

As the formation advanced toward the mansion, Victor's grandmother and grandfather flanked him and the retinue of servants formed two rows, one behind each employer, and angled outwardly thirty-three degrees. Viewed from above and behind, one would have viewed the image of an angel ascending to an ethereal venue. The occasion was choreographed for a dignitary visiting a foreign country. Victor was the dignitary and he had arrived at a foreign destination. He must have appeared as a refugee to those watching. His clothes, his hair, his frazzled look told his story. All the while, Victor did not know if he was entering heaven or hell.

How does a boy with a less than modest country upbringing adjust to burnished silver spoons, pressed clothes for every occasion, servants for anything, and a personal valet for everything? How does he acclimate himself to a castle-like structure with bushes and trees trimmed with precision and giant urns with exotic flowers upon every porch?

The mansion's exterior was grand, the interior even grander with high ceilings, walls decked with portraits, shiny wood finishes, and a décor as refined as any royal estate. The foyer impressed the lad. A coat of arms suspended high upon the wall gave the impression of a royal fortress. An array of firearms circled the ceiling and pointed inward—a show of strength any foreigner was forced to acknowledge upon entering. The main hallway splintered in three directions with the hall extending forward and up a flight of stairs scaling to a second story and the living quarters. Victor never saw, much less climbed, a flight of stairs. The balustrade, supported by shapely balusters, sloped to a tight curl at both ends. Victor held the handrail and climbed tentatively while looking below every other step.

Victor's lack of belief that he belonged turned to outright disbelief. He was more uncertain of his role in this new world. His grandmother sensed his reluctance and took his hand into hers. They

ascended the stairs together. One servant followed. They turned right at the upper landing and entered the first room on the left.

“This is your bedroom, my child,” his grandmother said.

Victor’s mouth opened as slowly as his eyes widened. His bedroom was larger than his parent’s entire home. The bed, made of oak, had a mattress as thick and soft as a cloud. The sheets were slick and cool. The goose-filled comforter, the best of Italian imports, was warm, white, and billowy. A tall bureau had eight large drawers with smaller ones for socks and a long flat drawer for jewelry and keepsakes. He did not know of the word keepsake. He did not have keepsakes. He had what he needed and no more.

The curtains, regal gold and maroon in color, were made of the best fabric. Long, white, silky ropes with tassels cascaded down the sides. Across from the bed stood a maple desk with paper, an ink well, and an assortment of quills. The walls were lined with shelves filled with more books than Victor could read in a lifetime. Even the floor impressed him with wide boards made of Scottish pine and waxed to such a shine one could swear a thin layer of ice coated the floor. To Victor’s amazement, the floor did not creak and the ice did not crack. He listened for imperceptible sounds of air invading through cracked walls and ill-fitting windows. There were none. In his parents’ humble abode, noises were like siblings he did not have. When the weather was still, they were missed; when they were present, he was annoyed.

His grandmother gave Victor a tour of the bedroom. Reflective of her wisdom, she intended to be intimately involved; yet, she hoped to be removed all the same. She enjoyed the idea of watching her grandson experience new and amazing things. Even more important, she wanted to be with him at each beginning. However, she hoped to be far enough removed to appreciate the act of giving without receiving selfishly. Anyone with such sincerity usually achieves both goals.

If it were even possible, Victor doubted more. He spread his arms wide and circled into a backward swan dive and landed onto his bed. “Grandmother!” While he expressed surprise, his heart held some confusion. “This is amazing, I think.” He sat upon the edge of the mattress and marveled at the luxurious setting.

“You think?” she asked with a smile and a hint of concern. She sat next to him. “Perhaps you should not think, then.”

“Well, know this for sure.” He spoke with authority. “Your floors don’t creak and your windows and walls don’t leak.” He sat for a second and added. “You have a mighty nice home.”

His grandmother laughed so hard she believed she compromised her station. She coughed into her satin kerchief, and

regained her composure. She took his hand and brought him to his feet. She turned and nodded to Miss Smith who spun around rather formally and directed a young man to enter the room.

“This is Mr. Snyder,” his grandmother began. “Mr. Snyder shall be your personal valet for the next month.”

“Val what?” Victor asked with horrified surprise. He understood the implication of the term by the mere presence of the other boy wearing a uniform. His utterance of the word valet, or at least the first syllable, flew through the air undiplomatically. Victor rejected the notion he needed help from anyone, much less a boy only a few years older.

His grandmother, all too prepared for this reaction, dismissed the valet’s importance. “He shall assist with your clothes, room, meals, and any other needs, nothing more.”

She was a grandmother first and a lady of the house second. She sensed his repulsion and considered discharging Mr. Snyder outright. However, she knew her priorities before she met her grandson. She was sensitive, therefore, not to be too expectant. She did not want to break the boy and mold a toy. To her chagrin, Victor was a product of the country and a home of meager means. To draw him capriciously into formalities enjoyed as routine for the established class without adequate forethought was not only unwise, but a sure way to prevent future visits. This she would not tolerate.

“May I recommend this,” she proposed calmly. She retrieved a new set of clothes hanging over the edge of the bed and handed them to the servant. “Allow Mr. Snyder to ensure these clothes fit and you approve, nothing more.” The phrase, *nothing more*, was added as an antidote—a means of fending off what neither party should find objectionable, especially if the receiving party held a prejudice which might defeat a larger and more important objective of the giving party.

Victor was pensive without any other purpose than outright rebellion. His grandmother was pensive as well. She wanted some degree of conformity to her establishment. If Victor agreed to this request and all went well, she would successfully impress upon him her innate maternal wisdom. She would be viewed as the Lady of the House. More importantly, Victor would not be disadvantaged in the least.

“Mr. Snyder is quite smart about fashion and he is a boy at heart,” she said as she pointed at Victor, “the same as you.” Her diplomatic skills shined more brilliantly than the icy floor.

She encouraged the premise that Mr. Snyder would be more than a servant—a confidante possibly. The entire staff was over the age

of forty and could not fill this role. Mr. Snyder, who had been employed only recently and with no prior experience, endured rigorous training. He knew where to stand and how to stand, when to move and how to move, what to say and when to speak, and this was the way it would be. However, he was expected to exchange confidences with Victor and form a trust and bond which would endear both servant and grandson to family and home, just as it should be, just as it had been for Victor's mother when she was a child.

Victor would not have rebuffed his grandmother's request summarily. Such was not his nature. Moreover, he had gravitated to her the moment she nearly asphyxiated him in her bosom. He came to respect both her playfulness and serious manner. He had a sense that he knew her essence.

However, Victor remained guarded. His mother had recounted childhood experiences. Those memories had become tales of wonder and alarm. Her youth was in many ways idyllic; yet, she said it had been equally austere as well. As such, her words served as a cautionary warning to him. This is why Victor found himself at such a difficult juncture. He encountered what was, quite possibly, the austerity his mother had mentioned. He saw austerity in a personal valet—the tool by which his grandparents would exercise indirect and unwanted intrusion. A personal valet implied control and change. Change would lead to even more control, a daunting thought to a boy who, nearly at will, raced out of a humble two-room shack nestled within a much grander home without walls or a roof, where he lost himself for hours chasing, hunting, fishing, swimming, and napping until the stars winked and told him when it was time to return home.

What Victor did not know, not that he would have been expected to appreciate this perspective, is that his grandparents were sensitive not to impose their abundance to the point of harm. They saw Victor as a genuine article, an authentic original. He was neither presumptuous nor petulant like most children. That they wanted their grandson to be dressed equal to their attire was a simple request, no more and no less. As soon as they met Victor, what little they knew about him was confirmed and this confirmation validated their one simple goal. They would accept Victor exactly as his mother intended, robed with willfulness, independence, and a relentless curiosity. To accept their daughter's son was to accept their daughter. This was their unspoken and unyielding intention.

For the time being, as it concerned the clothes and valet, Victor and his grandmother were at an impasse. They were two opposing pawns in a chess match. She stood silently. He did not know his next

move. If he advanced further than the only other option available—for he only saw two—she would capture him en passant. If he took the other option, she would capture him nonetheless. As pawns were concerned, he faced checkmate. In reality, she was the queen and would defeat him no matter what move he made.

Such were the thoughts of a boy who found himself in a tangle not of his choosing. Such is the tendency of children to conflate issues and, thereby make their circumstances more severe than they actually were, that is, until they found simple solutions. Simple solutions were better than heightened degrees of selfishness by either party. Simple solutions resolved a child's doubts more readily and completely. His grandmother knew as much. She acted from experience. As the queen, she reigned and she did so effectively.

With a shrug of his shoulders, Victor conceded the match and walked toward the closet. Mr. Snyder stepped forward hurriedly and opened the doors. He stepped aside and bowed. Victor stopped and looked at the servant. Were it not for the sight within the closet, he would have embarrassed both himself and Mr. Snyder with an offensive, but innocent comment.

Before him and to the left and right was a room filled with clothing, with coats for all occasions, and various pants, shirts, ties, sweaters, and robes. Cedar bins filled with folded shorts and socks lined the walls. Belts belayed from a large wooden rack. Hooks supported hats. To the side, a divider offered privacy. At the end of the closet stood a full-length mirror.

Victor did not know what to think or how to interpret this lavish display. "Grandmother," he said half mockingly, "I am not a prince!"

She smiled proudly. "Yes, you are, my dear. You most certainly are." She glowed, but immediately changed her tone. "Now change your clothes and be quick about it," she said as she laughed to herself. She commanded as any monarch and quite enjoyed her role. She asserted her authority warmly and relished at her good fortune.

Mr. Snyder closed the doors behind them and handed Victor the new outfit.

Victor stared. He stared without any idea how he should proceed. "Am I to undress in front ye?"

Mr. Snyder grinned and pointed to the divider. "Behind there, Sir."

"Sir?"

"Yes, Sir."

"I'm no bloody Sir, to be sure."

“Yes, Sir.” Mr. Snyder bowed again.

Victor had enough of this game before enough became a battle of wills. “Sir?” he asked humorously. “What is ye name, Sir?”

“As my lady said, I am Mr. Snyder, Sir.”

“Aye, I heard that. But what is ye first name, Sir?”

“That would be Chris, Sir.” Mr. Snyder said with a grin. He liked Victor instantly. He liked his wittiness. Mr. Snyder never expected to encounter, much less enjoy, such a trait given the seriousness of his new role.

Victor offered a proposal. “I’ll tell ye what, Sir. If ye call me by my name when no one is around, I won’t call ye ‘Sir’ when everyone is around. Is this fair to ye way of thinking, Chris?” To prove his sincerity, Victor omitted the last *Sir*.

Mr. Snyder thought for a second. He had been trapped by a guile hunter. He knew if Victor called him Sir in front of his employers, he would be in a bind, even if he were not at fault.

“Sir,” Mr. Snyder replied and then corrected himself, “that is, Victor, ye have me word on that count.”

“Good.”

Victor extended his arm and surprised Mr. Snyder yet again. Chris took his charge’s hand into his own and shook eagerly. The friendship began with a solemn oath and hearty smiles.

Mr. Snyder pointed to the divider. “Step behind the screen and hand me your dirty clothes... Victor.”

Wearing a smirk upon his face, Victor disappeared and undressed. When he reappeared, he was not displeased.

Mr. Snyder smiled casually. “Victor, ye look fine, just fine.”

“Many thanks, Chris.” He stepped in front of the mirror. “I feel fine, that is, sorta fine.”

Mr. Snyder opened the closet doors and Victor walked out no differently in substance, but his appearance was forever changed. Though he was the same boy, his grandmother was delighted.

She led him downstairs, along the hallway, through the dining room, and into the kitchen and pantry. The experience was humbling. The kitchen represented order and cleanliness with sinks, countertops, and cabinets for every reason. There were three cast iron stoves which equaled the kitchen staff. The pantry, which was as large as five of the bedroom closets, was lined with shelves and bins. The ceiling was fixed with hooks from which strings hanged and were loaded with multiple things. Victor stepped inside and circled slowly and beheld numerous scents from assorted delicacies touched with an array of

earth tones and bright yellows, reds, and greens. He saw a barrel of red, juicy apples and looked at his grandmother with an inquisitive eye.

She nodded. "Of course, child."

He seized one, which his grandmother stole and handed to the servant, who promptly washed, peeled, sliced, and served it on a plate on a nearby counter. Victor did not know whether he was impressed or oppressed. If he couldn't snag an apple and chuck the core on the run, if he had to sit prim and proper for each snack, his mind and heart would become as bound as his neck felt in his new collared shirt.

The coming days brought new routines and a sobering truth. New ideas excited the child, but they did not arrive without a cost. A world of bounty came with boundaries and a slew of subtle and not so subtle rules and a perceived and real loss of freedom. The loss may have been unintended, for his grandparents did not control him unnecessarily. But little things agitated Victor no differently than gnats hovering for no other reason than to hover. The shirt made his neck itch. Eating snacks in a restricted manner made him squirm. Simple acts he took for granted had dwindled by stages until they disappeared without a trace and what was complicated surfaced unexpectedly. He neither liked nor wanted complications.

Victor noticed these changes each time he looked out the window. What was real and simple was beyond the glass. He watched the trees wave back and forth as if they taunted the boy. He was inside. The trees were not. Nature laughed and beckoned him in jest. He was not free to leave at will. Even when he played in the yard, he believed he was tethered by permissions which had to be approved. Alas, the woods were within reach, but not for Victor.

VI

Victor was trapped, not to the point of suffocation, but the effect was nearly the same. Until he arrived at his grandparents' estate, he had never gone a day without being in the woods. Nature was his source of inspiration. He needed nature as much as he needed oxygen, water, and food. He was deficient of the wild—deprived even. Confined by and in domesticity, he lost the essence of himself. His father once shared a profound maxim which came to the fore—a man who either does not find or loses his true sense is not a man. Victor believed he had reached this point at his young age. A series of mishaps and misunderstandings of two worlds collided and left him flummoxed. He twisted his thoughts and emotions into confusion which could only be resolved by

nature. After a week within his new venue, with three more scheduled, he needed an adventure. Wary by degrees, he sought a release.

Victor's guardians rightly discerned the need for their grandson's escape. In some respects, they saw him not unlike any wild creature. They could contain him no longer. Yet, Victor had to seek their blessing if he were to venture beyond the estate and into the North Wood.

He approached his grandmother after dinner and presented his proposal. She, as always, was the presence of warmth and maternal wisdom seasoned by charm and grace. The daughter of an earl, she was schooled in the finer arts of persuasion. Though Victor's grandfather was raised in as noble a lineage, he was the silent majority and this attribute made the boy uncomfortable—the kind of unease a child gets standing before a marble statue with unblinking eyes and taut lips and a chest which does not lift and lower in a natural breathing kind of way.

Seeing a statue for the first time can be startling. A child will clasp his father's hand tighter. If held in his father's arms, the child may turn away and bury his face into the curve of his father's neck, often too scared to sneak a peek in the other direction. Silence. The statue speaks nothing but deafening silence which, in no time, subdues the child by a stony glare. A statue's stare and silence often stay and even defeat a boy's resolve.

The silence of a statue-like grandfather spooked Victor. Worse still, the old man hosted wrinkles chiseled by hard experiences and his eyes, entrenched well beyond his forehead, appeared to follow the boy even when the man was not looking at him. Victor experienced one silent episode and one was enough. He chose not to interact with his grandfather directly unless absolutely necessary. Though he regretted this decision, for the boy knew his grandfather was a victim of his childish prejudice, Victor felt safer avoiding him whenever possible. In an abundance of caution, he figured his grandmother would reveal the flaws of his request to hike on the morrow and, if agreeable, she would advocate on his behalf to her stone-faced husband. To Victor's surprise, his grandmother rather liked statues. She could talk with works of hard granite as easily as those made of flesh and blood.

Victor had another advantage. His grandmother was his ally. He sensed as much when they met. As the quintessential matriarch, she was everyone's grandmother. She had a unique quality and looked the part as well. She was warm and beautiful, forever in dresses, her hair always in place, her face colored perfectly and perfumed ever so faintly, a diplomatic ploy to draw one closer to her potent personality which the gardener claimed as the reason the flowers bloomed

prematurely every spring. However, she treated her grandson with greater care than she did her own husband or the King of England. Victor felt this bond without full appreciation.

“Grandmother?” he asked.

“Yes, my dear.”

She stopped each time he addressed her. Such was her nature and upbringing. Her parents had ensured that the utmost civility governed her interactions. Conversing was an art and she was a superior conversationalist. Moreover, her only grandchild had an enormous effect upon her. He enamored her heart. He was perfect and she wanted to know perfection. Slayed by eyes as blue as the sky, his personality was a marvel to behold. She saw her daughter in him and this was a miracle of miracles. She would never tire of seeing, hearing, touching, and ever coming to know the fruit of Juliette’s life.

Victor was a blessing any grandmother with a history balanced with pain and pleasure would treasure. Not surprisingly, Victor’s requests assured him of her complete attention. Whether this particular request was approved or denied remained to be seen. She could reject the proposal out of her own selfish concerns to keep him home. She, contrariwise, might approve of his plans based upon those same selfish reasons. She would not deny her longing to grant his every wish.

Victor made his proposal as if it were all rather simple. “I’d like to hike the North Wood in the morning, grandmother. The gardener said it’s quite a place.”

“The North Wood? Alone, Victor?” She was a bit surprised.

“Yes’m.”

He gave a simple answer for good reason. His idea was trivial to his way of thinking, but he saw a hike as a major concern for her. He did not want to offer too much information. He allowed her to ask questions and satisfy her own curiosity.

“Well, Victor, let’s get to the basics.” She brushed her hands down her waist and adjusted the upper slope of her dress. The nuances of the unspoken were at play. She displayed authority. Victor saw her flex power as naturally as she breathed. She postured herself and pursued her own hidden agenda. He felt her reservations. “When will you leave, Victor?”

“It would be best if I started at four in the morning.”

“’Tis early.” She digested this information. “And your return?” She drew her shoulders away and arched her lower back.

Victor was not distracted in the least. There were two sides to the lady, maybe more. He appealed to her sense of reason and called upon her compassion. “I plan to be back in the early afternoon.”

She placed her hands upon her hips. “And where will you go?” She wanted to know his whereabouts without creating an imposition or the appearance she distrusted his motives. She was certain of his sincere intentions.

“North and east,” he replied simply.

She smiled. He did the same. She respected his quick and sure responses.

He did not equivocate. Victor knew what he wanted and he was direct without being direct to a fault. He earned her respect that much more.

“And what will you drink?” she asked.

She leaned into her maternal concerns of health and he was prepared.

“I will get water from springs and creeks.” He decided to give her more insight. “Father taught me to live off the land and how to filter water so it is clean.”

“Well, I think these are wise teachings, however,” she folded her arms as a matter of instinct and not as a sign of supremacy, “I would very much prefer you take a jug.” She shared a personal fear. “In the event you fall and are unable to walk, having water with you would be beneficial. Aye?”

Victor liked the idea. “Yes’m.”

“And what shall you eat?”

He balked at this query. He averted his gaze and turned his torso to the right and away. This was the first time she felt unease. She did not sense deceit; however, his lack of a response did not help his cause.

“Well, child?” she asked with a hint of sternness.

The question was disconcerting. He did not know how to navigate this crosscurrent. He spoke plainly without answering her query directly. “I will have provisions, I assure ye.” He smiled without reassurance. Knowing he did not satisfy the spirit of her question, he attempted to assuage her concerns. “You needn’t worry, grandmother.”

She knew as much and acquiesced to his earnestness. Yet, she bent forward, softened her voice, and slowed her diction to a humble cadence. “Yes, of course. Such is to be expected, which is why we will ensure your good health and my peace of mind.” She transitioned to a much quicker cadence and probed the matter with a series of questions. “Will ye get these provisions from the cook before ye leave and what will those provisions include, my dear? Will ye visit Anderson’s General Store and what would ye purchase?” At the suggestion of the

store, she deduced the likely problem. “Is it money? Do ye need money?”

Victor was struck by her informal use of the old country way of speaking. As if she removed herself from her formal state, she steered into a manner of talking like spices added to soup. This hastened pace of speaking invited the use of *ye* instead of the more formal *you*. She involved her hands, arms, and body—parsley, paprika, and pepper. She was much more animated. Victor savored the flavor.

She was not ruffled. Victor was, however. No matter how much she reassured him, Victor began to unravel. He shuffled in place. She noticed this change and then asked herself the obvious question. Is he running from shame? Does poverty follow him even while he is here, in his new home? Does he not see and know he is safe and secure and plenty is his friend? She grieved for a moment.

Victor would not lie to his grandmother and he would not have been successful doing so. He was too innocent. Moreover, he was not skilled at avoiding issues. He believed this one topic—his provisions—would shock his grandmother and reduce the hike to a dream. His answer might derail the conversation and the entire expedition.

As if a listing ship, Victor righted himself and resurrected simple answers. He stood tall and spoke forthrightly. If his hike were lost to honest talk, fine. He would rather have such a result than to have the trip cancelled for tap dancing around an insignificant point. “Grandmother, as I said,” he hesitated before finishing his thought. “As I said earlier, me father taught me to live off the land.” He fell silent for a few seconds. “I will eat berries, and mushrooms, and such.”

The *and such* dangled in the air and would not fade like most words evaporate into nothingness. *And such* was much more potent, like the response to a marriage proposal, the news of a death, something serious. She latched on to the phrase and, in particular, she noted the way Victor refused to finish his thought. She realized money was not the issue. Poverty was not a dishonor. She thought of the obvious. The child did not know poverty, for he had never known the opposite. Now she was more than intrigued. She questioned how she could have misread the conversation to a false conclusion. This was her immediate curiosity. She laughed lightly to herself and delighted in the boy’s sharpness. She had met her match. She would know the meaning of the *and such*.

“And such?” she asked.

“Yes, grandmother,” he replied. “And, well, such as, as, well...” Another pause punctuated the conversation. “Well, ye know...”

“No, child! I don’t know!”

Victor jumped.

She drew her smile tightly and looked down at him sternly.

He braced himself and offered the full extent of his diet. "Well, such as crickets, grasshoppers, and worms, and such."

He spoke these items quickly, but not as quickly as her reaction was birthed. She did not realize her grandson would eat such things. She was mortified. *And such* included a menu she did not and would not accept. "What?" she cried. "Heavens no!" She cringed in disgust. "No!"

Victor's concerns were validated. His grandmother recoiled. She shrunk her shoulders down and toward her stomach. She brought her arms inward. She bent at the hips and leaned her torso forward slightly. She was repulsed. She convulsed. She gagged and responded with another defiant, "No!" She could not and would not think of crickets hopping and worms wiggling in her grandson's belly. She reversed her bodily contortions. She stood upright. She brought her arms out. She threw her shoulders back. She expressed her disgust. "Ye did not just say ye would eat," she spoke her next words deliberately as she thrust her hand down to the counter, "*such* things!"

Mr. Thurman, the head cook, who was a good as family, laughed out loud. "Now there be a country lad at heart, mum. True and true, 'e can live off the land as sure as I be a cook."

She gripped the counter and jutted her chin toward the ceiling. "Keep the heid!" she told herself.

"That's a right, mum," the cook said laughing still. "Ye stay calm and a don't get upset now."

Victor blanched initially but regained his natural color. His grimace had formed before he uttered the first item of the *and such*. He expected convulsions which came in due course. His grimace became a grin and then a smile. This was the first time he ever saw his grandmother riled. Eating crickets and worms was quite a contrast to her refined tastes and dignified bearing.

She stood in silence for the longest minute. When she was ready, as ready as she would be, she looked at Victor intently. Her expression spoke abject refusal, but her words revealed otherwise.

The cook paused to witness the exchange.

"Victor," she began, "ye shall do as ye wish. But rest assured, we shall pack food for you and my reason is the same as the water." She spoke slowly and laughed at the thought. "Should ye fall and the wee little crickets are far from ye, *food* ye shall have. Now, do ye understand?"

The boy grinned at her emphasis on the word food. He loved her explanation and her playful delivery. She was a true angel. He should not have expected anything less from this remarkable lady. She was everything in a grandmother he ever wanted. He stepped toward her and wrapped his arms around her torso and held her tight. She shook with feelings of revulsion and love—a peculiar combination. The levity spilled into uncontrolled laughter and swept Victor into a tidal wave of merriment.

The cook joined the fun and sealed the agreement. “I will make fresh biscuits and use the currant jam *and such*, me lady, and pack a wee bit of fruit *and such*. I will add a few strips of dried meat *and such*, if ye like.”

The laughter overflowed into tears of joy. She nodded her approval and wiped her face. “This is just too much,” she said, “just too much fun with you around.” She shared an expression which revealed her joy. She offered Victor a warm look and said, “I adore you.” With a satisfying sigh, she ironed out unresolved wrinkles to his plan and settled on an agreement which Victor accepted unconditionally. They only had to seek approval from the statue.

VII

With the preliminaries out of the way, Victor followed his grandmother toward a set of doors. A servant opened one side and they slipped quietly into the den. Victor’s throat tightened; his mouth dried. He would not be the primary speaker, but he felt the pressure nonetheless. Asking a statue for anything unnerved him and the situation worsened given the nature of the lair. It was a cave. He had entered a dark cave housing the statue of a bear.

Just as any boy would react upon entering an unfamiliar cave, Victor assessed the scene with considerable caution. The mahogany-walled room was the gloomiest of the house. The curtains were closed. A thick and heavy table sat in the center of a dark, brown carpet. Two end tables with tall candelabras with candles of varying lengths and made shorter by the hour sat on either side of a couch. The flames sent mixed messages; some warned, others welcomed. Two rigid, wingback chairs stood ready to support frightened frames, for no one could relax in such a setting. The lone occupant wearing a black robe sat in his personal chair. He looked like a bear staring at volumes of files stacked upon his lap as if they were chunks of meat to be devoured before hibernation. Even more piles of files filled with numbers lay upon the

floor. The bear consumed numbers as easily as a main entrée after a full day of hunting.

Victor had cause for alarm. The air was still. The cave was quiet, too quiet for him. He was out of his element. He was uncomfortable and his new clothes were more of a hindrance than a help. They were the correct size and of the best quality and not ill-fitting; however, he felt as confined in his attire as he was within four walls adorned with fine art, gilded mirrors, and floors covered with the finest oriental rugs. His grandfather's study had a stuffy and stiff atmosphere which is exactly how Victor felt. Instantly, Victor's pants were more restrictive about his waist. His shirt was even more binding about his neck and underarms. If he had been able to wear his old clothes, he would have felt unencumbered physically and comfortable enough on an emotional level to escape through the window or dash out the door. Alas, he still needed permission to hike the North Wood and return to his roots, to nature, a world without artificial boundaries. Victor's only escape would be achieved through diplomacy. His grandmother would deliver her remarks and, hopefully, obtain approval.

Only when his grandfather looked away from his papers and gave his respectful attention to his wife did Victor's grandmother begin her monologue. "My dear," she said, "we have a proposal and I ask for your deference to the premise, conditions, and conclusion. Each deserve ample consideration and approval."

Victor marveled at the diplomatic polish his grandmother displayed.

His grandfather nodded once.

Victor expected more of a reaction. A single nod was not at all reassuring. Two nods would have been better. Two and a grin would have ensured success. One nod meant the man was busy and the intrusion was untimely. Had he the courage, Victor would have tugged her arm and whispered the need to delay the request. Alas, he was too scared to either move or utter a word.

The distinguished gentleman listened with earnestness. Victor saw him count and recount the pros and cons to the pending excursion. With eye contact upon the speaker, the man glanced at his grandson occasionally. He read body language as well as he discerned the subtext to words and arguments. He was intuitive and exacting—a thinking man. Victor was certain his grandfather was wise beyond measure.

When Victor's grandmother finished her speech, his grandfather sat more upright and then relaxed and settled even deeper into his chair. He looked away and reflected. He withdrew to some

reservoir he tapped when confronted issues of weight. He balanced every consideration. He thought of aspects his capable wife may have overlooked. Perhaps he retrieved insurance policies to guarantee his grandson had the finest weather and crunchiest crickets.

The extent of his deliberation—which was comprehensive and prolonged—alarmed Victor. He could not imagine what his grandfather was deliberating. Victor was not bothered by his grandfather’s quiet nature. To be sure, Victor respected quiet men. His own father was quiet. However, his mother’s father, by comparison, was too quiet and for too long. To a young boy’s way of figuring, the uncanny ability to effectively draw upon and exercise unending silence spoke to the man’s strength and stability.

Then and there, Victor’s grandfather was not a statue made of marble or a statue of a bear within a cave of solid rock. No. He was a mighty mountain made of granite. He did not waver. He could watch interest grow from multiple investments for years and not say a word. Interest was paramount to compound interest, which was paramount to wealth, and he had the patience to see wealth materialize from a pittance. To make matters worse, interest and investments were concepts as foreign to Victor as nobility. If the subject had nothing to do with nature, Victor tired with disinterest and compounded disinterest. However, the subject at hand was about wildlife and his life, both of which he knew a thing or two. He endured the delay.

His grandfather returned from somewhere deep. He reconnected to the world and, more specifically, with his wife. He nodded once. This was the extent of his approval. Yet, Victor did not know what had happened. He was oblivious. What did the one nod mean? He looked to his grandmother for a clue.

When his grandmother reached for him, she grinned and said, “Let’s go, child.”

He looked at his grandfather and then at his grandmother a second time. To Victor’s surprise, the bear did not even growl. The old man never said a word. Victor stood in awe. He thanked his grandfather meekly and turned to leave not really knowing if the bear actually approved of his trip or not. The boy’s awe turned to a respectful fear when a resounding, “However!” boomed throughout the room and bounced off the hardwood walls. Victor had just stepped off the oriental rug. He whipped around and stood terrified. His grandmother turned slowly and knowingly. Victor was alarmed; she was not. She knew the man and saw the twinkle in his eye.

“However,” he said with less intensity, “mark my words, young man. Were it not for a meeting in the morning, I would be hiking

with you.” He made a proposal. Extending proposals and countering proposals was his natural world. “When you venture into the wood next, which should not be many days after this jaunt, I expect an invitation with plenty of notice.” The man smiled and flashed his white teeth. He extended his arms wide.

Victor’s grandmother tapped him on the shoulder and encouraged him to do what he wished in the first place. He bolted forward and settled into his grandfather’s arms. “Certainly, grandfather. I would love your company.”

His grandfather looked him in the eye and resumed his serious posture. “However, I will not, will not,” his tone and the repetition were pointed, “eat crickets.”

Victor laughed.

“And you cannot, cannot, label me as less than a man for not eating crickets!”

The frivolity was a striking contrast to the serious atmosphere Victor encountered upon entering the room. The boy lifted each foot lightly and clapped playfully. “Yes, grandfather, agreed.”

The man held him firmly without softening his arms or back. He did not tickle his grandson in the ribs. He did not wrap his arms about him and swing him up and around. He did not wrestle his grandson to the floor. He hugged him and released the hug as rigidly as any hug had been delivered.

“Do you know what men in Willington would say if they discovered I did not eat crickets with my grandson?”

“Oh, grandfather, we cannot have that.”

“Certainly not! I would be disgraced.” He closed his mouth and offered a frown as fake as any. He was a terrible actor.

When Victor sensed the physical contact and verbal jousting were over, he stood tall and thanked his grandfather and assured him that he would share the details of his hike the following evening.

With a knowing nod to the child and a warm wink to his wife, the man retrieved his business papers and resumed his studies as if his preparations for hibernation had not been interrupted.

Victor respected the man even more. Respect often gives way to deeper emotions. Victor felt a love for his grandfather. He felt a love tied to empathy. He intuited more about his grandfather than he could express in words. Children have this gift. They intuit for a season until the gift diminishes by varying degrees. They intuit unknowingly and bring the unknowing to light and they do this well. Victor sensed that his grandfather battled a long-held and unresolved internal struggle. Though they shared a familial bond, the boy knew he and his

grandfather were united by similar life experiences, hard ones hammered into the mind and heart beyond forgiveness. Victor wanted to explore this struggle, this love, this bond, and anything hidden, anything that would otherwise remain unstated unless nudged gently out into the open. He could help the man just as the man could help him.

However, intuition alone was not enough. This part of nature—human nature—was less familiar to the boy. He did not know how to proceed. He could not reconcile his own pain much less scale mines of misery within another man's soul. Victor did not know his own healing would be realized through the guidance of others in the near and distant future. For that matter, he did not know he would bring peace to the inconsolable regardless of their age or circumstances.

Victor wanted to spend time with his grandfather, to bring this statue from a rigid hug to a warm and unabandoned embrace, to rip apart the mask of formality and menacing mystique. If only he could scale the wall serving as a divider between what was limiting and what was overflowing, and join both into a healthy and natural balance. He, however, was reluctant to ask his grandfather about private memories or painful wounds. Such boldness was unthinkable for him to exercise so early in their relationship. To do so would have been presumptuous and disrespectful.

Approaching his grandfather about personal matters scared Victor, akin to a first step toward McGilvery's infamous cave, a place of purported evil and death. Few men spelunked its chamber and those who did never returned. No sane child would attempt the feat. On the left side of the path to McGilvery's cave were three signs posted one after another and no more than three feet apart, three, a holy number, a saving number. "DO NOT ENTER!" were the words which warned the fearful to stay away. Three more signs posted to the right, "EVIL LIVES HERE!" assured certain doom.

If the warning signs were not enough to discourage the intrepid, McGilvery was a terrifying site. The entrance, covered in vines like prison bars, kept innocence out and evil within and below in a bottomless abyss. When the wind crossed at an angle, the gaping, toothless opening moaned and howled. A tongue, made of a thick, spongy moss and slimy algae, lolled from the opening and disappeared down McGilvery's throat. A small creek produced saliva which streamed slowly across the tongue and pooled along the edges before spilling over and down in gulps to a depth no one knew. When McGilvery inhaled, the wind pushed inwardly and the vines swung rhythmically to a mystic chant bellowing from within the chasm. The

exhale sent a gut-wrenching stench forward and out. Any fool who dared to tempt fate was blasted by a flesh-rotting foulness from a hell-bound being.

Victor chided himself. He was not comparing his grandfather to McGilvery's cave. He compared his fear of approaching either. This was the cause of his turmoil. He did not need intuition to know he was not fair to either the man or himself. He was unfair about many things. He was unfair to compare his grandfather to a statue. A statue does not offer a grandson a rigid hug or laugh about eating crickets. Victor was ashamed of such unfair characterizations. Remorse rained down in sheets. The shame poured in a flash storm and the cleansing was not unexpected. He sought absolution and resolution.

Victor slowed his step. He stopped at the door. He turned and looked at a man engrossed in business at a late evening hour. His grandfather was alone and lonely. Victor looked at his grandmother. She saw his eyes. She knew his heart. He wanted a sign from her, a tilt of the head or a closing of the eyes for an instant, some gesture leading to full expression of an invitation. He needed a push. The push became a pull. She lifted her arm and her hand followed. His hand came up; his arm advanced. He felt the leading. Then came the nod. He took the first step alone and felt empowered. He looked back and sought her comforting reassurance and then continued. Though his heart raced, his mind was clear. His gait firmed. He ignored any reservation and drew nigh.

“Excuse me, grandfather?”

The man pulled himself away from his work. “Still here, my boy?”

“Yes, Sir. I was wondering, well, when ye have time, if ye would tell me about your father.” Victor reached a crevasse. He wanted to cross, but hesitated.

Silence pressed down upon both man and boy. Each was alone and they were alone together. Healing was at hand, at least partial healing.

Victor continued. “He died in war, did ‘e not?”

His grandfather set his papers aside and pointed to a wingback chair. Victor settled himself. The man returned to that reservoir again. When he tapped into it, he leaned back and lowered his head. He deliberated again.

His wife smiled lightly. This was a moment she did not expect so early in the visit, if at all. She slipped out the door and left her men to their own mending ways.

“So, your mother told you about my father, eh?”

“Yes, Sir. She said your father was brave and died a hero.”

“Aye, he was and he did.” He patted his thighs and reflected about a forgotten sadness. “I did not know him. This is what hurts most. I was young when he was killed, five, maybe six. Jacob was his name. He died in Canada when he fought for England during the War of 1812. He was killed by the Americans.”

“He was English, then?”

His grandfather laughed. “No lad, he was what we call an Ulster Scot. His ancestors moved to Ireland during the Plantation of Ulster. I will not give you a history lesson on that account. He was Scottish and lived in Ireland until he moved to Fife as a young man. He was a loyalist to the English Crown and King George the Third.”

“Sounds confusing.”

“It would be for any lad your age.” He decided to give a simple explanation about governments. “Men need to survive. Governments help men survive. Yet, sometimes governments cause harm. When the people carry a burden and government does not help, men rise up and seek change. You will sense these changes in society as you get older. The need for change is ever present. When governments bring harm, good must win in the end or we would live as enslaved men to be sure.”

“The fighting in Canada was for such a reason?”

“Well, not exactly. The war had more to do with territory claimed by governments than the rights of people. But the cause was no less important, mind you.”

“Like a man fights for his home?”

“Yes, one and the same.”

“Your father, then, my great grandfather, did he volunteer?”

“Aye, he did. As I was told, he visited a tavern while his wife, your great grandmother, was buying provisions. The tavern was a place for learning the latest news. My father received word of a need for men and decided to join. He spoke to my mother and, to her dismay, he committed to fight for crown and country. Let’s see, I would have been three at the time.”

“He was in the Army?”

“Assuredly not! No, he entered the Royal Navy. He sought the counsel of trusted friends and, by some connection, contacted Captain Robert Barclay. Barclay, you should know, was born in Fife. Well, my father wrote to Barclay and received a reply. Your grandfather served under him in Canada at the Battle of Lake Erie. It was there that my father fought and was shot. His life ended tragically on Barclay’s ship and at his feet.

“In later years, I spoke with some of the men who fought with my father. They told me of his actions.” He set the scene. “Barclay was low on supplies and food and his superiors sent him but a few reinforcements. The Americans, under the command of a man named Perry, attacked Barclay’s ships. Barclay suffered heavy casualties.” Victor’s grandfather clasped his hands together and looked at his grandson. “Now, this is the account of my father’s bravery. An American sailor took aim at Barclay and my father saw as much. He rushed in and covered Barclay with his own body just before the bullet landed. Barclay was spared. My father, however, died saying one word over and over. ‘Aileen, Aileen, Aileen.’ A few seconds later Barclay was shot in the right arm. In no time his entire squadron was captured.”

Victor sat quietly. He waited. His grandfather did not tell the whole story. There was more. Victor knew it. He was afraid to impose and ask the man to share even darker chapters and even more tragic endings.

Mr. Samuels sat in a haze. He was torn. He was unsure whether he should offer full disclosure or save the balance of the story for a day when his grandson was mature enough to understand. He sighed heavily. He did not second guess his gut instinct, especially given his grandson’s own misery. He knew the boy was not ready. He questioned whether he himself was ready. “Well, there you have it. Your great grandfather died a hero. He was recognized for valor posthumously.” He finished his tidy summation and pointed to the near wall. “That citation recounts his bravery and it is all I have of him. And it shall be yours one day. You shall have his legacy.”

The heartrending conclusion would come another day or, more than likely, not at all. Victor was humbled. He did not say a word. He hugged his grandfather and said goodnight.

He left the bear’s den with thoughts of his mother. It was only last year when she told him of her father’s loss and a subsequent and even greater loss years later. This second loss broke her father’s heart and ruined his childhood. This was the unspeakable event his grandfather did not share. Victor could not imagine living without his father. To lose both parents would be unimaginable.

He thought of his great grandfather’s last words, “Aileen. Aileen. Aileen.” Aileen was Victor’s great grandmother. Victor knew her story, he knew her tragic ending.

Aileen suffered terribly from the loss of her husband. She had begged Jacob not to leave, not to fight. She loved him more than life itself and feared the worst. Yet, Jacob was true to his principles to honor king and fellow countrymen. He explained to her of England's superior Navy and how he would be relatively safe upon a ship. He assured Aileen of his return.

The news of his death did not reach her for six months. To her sorrow, Jacob was buried at sea. Her true love was gone forever and she was lost without him. No amount of mourning brought her relief. A year later and out of neglect, she lost the leasehold to the farm. She did not tend the crops or care for the livestock. Homeless with her son, she sought help from her brother, Camdyn, who gave them shelter. But time and family did not ease her suffering. She disappeared for days and then reappeared. Her explanation was as simple as much as it was troubling. "I was looking for Jacob," she would explain.

At the beginning of the third anniversary of Jacob's death, Aileen disappeared for an extended period of time and left Blythe behind. Family and friends searched high and low and gave her up as dead. One windy night, Camdyn heard weak tapping on the door. Aileen was in a heap upon the ground. She was malnourished, gaunt, and white as a daylily. He fed her and put her to bed for the night. The next morning, she was gone. Camdyn was enraged. Blythe was crushed. She was nowhere to be found.

When Blythe finished his breakfast, he roamed the pastures in despair. He was aimless and hopeless in a cruel world. Worn tough by countless searches in the past, he searched for his mother without a watchful eye. A lack of promise, though, gave way when, through his tears, he saw something and then someone. The sun blinded his vision. He saw double. It was his mother. He was certain of this. She was running toward him. Inspired, he ran down the hill. He laughed. He cried. He was happy. He yelled, "I love you, mum!" His arms flew in every direction. His thigh bones jammed into his hip sockets with each thunderous bound. His balance was precarious. He flowed with the wind. He crossed the pasture. He would help her. He would bring her out of despair. "Mum!" he yelled. "Mum!"

He came to the creek and stopped. He searched for stones upon which to step and then looked up to confirm the distance and direction. She was close, too close to fool the boy any longer.

She did not run to him. She waited. She waited, but not for him. The wind glided down the far hill and rocked her gently. Her feet were but a foot off the ground. She waited for someone else to lessen the load about her neck. From a distance, a joyous son blinded by tears

would not have noticed. She hanged from a tree. She found the end of her misery. She had escaped.

Blythe forgot himself. He dropped to his knees. He did not feel the cold water. He did not feel the rocks. He felt nothing but a wicked grief. That very grief carried his sobs and tears downstream along with any fleeting capacity to forgive. He never forgave her. He loved her and needed her and never forgave her.

Victor buried his face into a pile of pillows. He thought of his grandfather's childhood. He thought of him being rootless and bouncing from one relative to the next until his Aunt Olivia gave him a permanent place to rest and heal and grow. Olivia, who married into a noble family, adopted Blythe. This was his grandfather's history. This is what Victor's mother shared when she said, "Listen to me my son. Know of my love for you. Know your father loves you. Know of my love for your father." She smiled and cried at the same time, "This is what matters most."

Victor hurt. He thought of the unfairness of life. Life made no sense. He could not reconcile the carnage man endures. He wondered if his grandfather was quiet because of this tremendous loss or if he was naturally reticent. Regardless, Victor was determined to share life's burdens with him and to know him. He wished to share that he felt his grandfather's pain.

Victor cast aside the excitement of his hike. The pangs of sorrowful endings and never realized beginnings occupied him. He tried to make sense of such contrasts. He wondered if he lost himself in the wild for the same reasons his grandfather drowned himself with business affairs. He fell asleep without an answer.

VIII

Awakened by an internal clock, Victor changed his clothes and made his way to the kitchen. His grandmother had assured him that the servants would have his provisions ready. Mr. Thurman worked with culinary zeal. He cut and sorted vegetables and fruit for the day's meals. Victor's food and water were waiting on the counter.

"Good morning, Mr. Thurman," Victor said.

"And to you as well, lad."

To Victor's surprise, his grandmother entered from the dining room. "You're up early," he said with a smile.

"Aye, and did you sleep, child?" She pinched his chin with her thumb and index finger and ran her other hand through his hair. "I wanted to see you off."

She handed him a pouch with provisions and draped a water jug over his shoulder. Victor shrugged. He tested the weight and adjusted the balance. He tied the pouch about his waist.

He left the kitchen with an offer from Mr. Thurman. "Have a safe journey. And if ye bring back a rabbit, I will make ye and your grandparents the best rabbit stew."

"Mr. Thurman!" his employer said with a smile. She imagined the *and such* in her home and was not pleased. "The butcher will do just fine."

She wrapped her arm around her grandson's shoulder and walked to the front foyer. The doorman opened one of two doors—the house was filled with double doors. They stepped into a sedate world under a sky sleeked with shining stars selflessly dripping what little light they possessed to those in need. The portico featured two white, magnificent columns. The towering giants overlooked a span of steps leading to a dew-soaked lawn.

Victor stood in wonder at the black curtain hanging not a stone's throw from where he stood. Freedom lay beyond that inviting darkness. Everything forward of the curtain was a trap he fell into seven days earlier when the initial sight of his grandparents' lavish home warned his subconscious of an unnatural place—a majestic estate dancing upon sunbaked sands of a vast and dry desert—a mirage, a figment of the mind. Trapped no longer, he would leave the unreal and return to the wild.

He kissed his grandmother sweetly and said goodbye. He launched his hike with a joyful leap off the landing. He filled his lungs with fresh air. He was free.

His grandmother spoke with a tremoring voice. "We have a nice dinner planned for tonight and a special guest. Please be on time." As the morning darkness swallowed him whole, Victor did not hear his grandmother's last words. She imagined the worst and hoped for the best. Victor had been gone less than a minute and she missed him more than she ever expected.

He made his way through quiet streets and into the heart of Willington. The town square was vacant. Shops lined each side of the business district. Each establishment stood alone yet united and hopeful of a new day of patrons and profits. Signs served as greetings

with words Victor could not pronounce. Most stores were family affairs with the surnames displayed prominently. He read them aloud. "Douglas, Anderson, Mulcahy, Gordon, Chiffon, Campbell." He soon tired of this exercise and anything that required mental effort. He walked north where shops were few and homes aplenty. The bakery stood separately and was active. He saw figures moving inside. "Poor souls," he whispered, "trapped."

Victor heard a slow, heavy, rolling sound on the left side of the road. A farmer brought fresh dairy from the country. Victor waved. The farmer tipped his hat. They passed each other as one entered and the other exited Willington. Victor crossed another boundary. He left the trappings of civilization and everything changed. His spirits rose ever more. Early birds bid him a good day. The sun would soon lean over the horizon and reconnoiter pending destinations and bathe the world in warmth. Nature would unfold and bloom and Victor would be a part of what was new and exciting. With another burgeoning day, he felt invigorated.

Fog-filled valleys blanketed animals and plants. Nearby limbs appeared to reach out and down with the intent to snare the unsuspecting. Within two hours, the fog would lift. Those same limbs would assume innocent poses and offer to carry taxing cargoes for the elderly and weak. Evil and generosity, as interchangeable as night and day, served as a continuous lesson. "Tis not fair," his father told him. "The night does not deserve to be scorned and the day is not all glowing and good." Victor understood.

He travelled country roads for the stretch of an hour and eventually veered into the forest. Victor found a ridge running easterly. The rough terrain hosted rocks which zig-zagged to a ledge. He zigged and zagged with the flow of granite and limestone and came to an opening overlooking a quiet valley. He settled himself on a boulder and relaxed. Though his mind stilled, his heart stirred. He was moved. He prepared to greet the sun.

This was his mother's favorite time of the day. She believed each morning was a moment of firsts. First breath, first thought, first hug, first effort to serve as a benefactor for others. She taught him to love and to love purely. She would say to him, "Your mind, heart, lungs, and legs, your arms, back, eyes, and ears, all of you, Victor. You were made to love." She spoke this truth to him time and again. He longed to love as she loved. After he woke and before he retired each night, he went to his mother and said, "I love you." Today was no different. Victor sent his love in a faint whisper. "I love you, mother." He hoped she received his greeting.

He expressed this exact sentiment to her six months ago when she left in the early morning to work at a nearby food bank. He remembered their last hug as if it were yesterday.

Juliette served as a volunteer for Father Downing. He was once the senior priest of Saint Patrick's Catholic Church in Willington. Father Downing had since founded and operated an orphanage and food bank in Paisley, a hamlet south of Forkwood. She came by this responsibility by divine intervention.

One evening as Juliette made her way home, she met Father Downing returning from a funeral. They had not seen each other in ten years. Upon this chance meeting, they were cordial at first and nothing more. The reason was evident. Both of them fell back in time and confirmed memories which exposed old and unhealed wounds.

After dinner one evening, Juliette, a young lady in love, shared with her parents of her plans to accept the marriage proposal of a commoner from Forkwood. Blythe and Adalyn Samuels were shocked at the idea. They flatly rejected such a possibility. When Juliette asked them to consider her thoughts and feelings, they became further incensed to the point of belligerence. Her father overreacted and confined her to the family compound. Juliette refused his grim demand and threatened to elope if they did not discuss her hopes. She pleaded with them to consider her plans and concede to reason.

Elopement would shatter the Samuels' social standing. Her parents would not tolerate a scandal, much less discuss marriage to a mere commoner. Even though the hour was late, her father forced a meeting with Father Downing. If and when Juliette ever married, she would do so by strict adherence to the dictates of the church. Father Downing was leverage. He would ensure Juliette heeled to the ways of the local parish. Such was the expectation of her mother and father. However, Juliette had a mind and heart of her own.

Quite expectedly, Father Downing sided with her parents. Juliette was not surprised. As her priest, he argued theologically. Yet, to his discredit, he defaulted to a position of weakness. He stressed humanity's base instincts and the primal urge of the flesh. Man, he posited, must ignore his sinful nature and adhere to the dictates of the holy church, the one institution responsible for directing man's relationship with God. He spoke firmly and sweepingly, but his words lacked the conviction of a young girl's heart.

Father Downing chastised Juliette in the name of scripture and the tenets of the faith. His religious analysis was lean. He fired a sermon scorched with fear and alluded to eternal damnation. As he decreed, she belonged to the church and, therefore, to God. No other faith could offer this conduit for salvation. He warned her not to jeopardize the eternal state of her soul. To elope was to sin and shun spiritual edicts which meant she would shun God Himself. She would assure herself of a one-way ticket to hell. Father Downing, as if to scare her into submission, issued a warning—Marcail Cameron was unchurched, the son of Satan and, thus, the enemy.

Juliette rebuffed Downing's spiritual admonishments. She referred to his flawed logic as pedestrian and hysterical attempts to quell the masses. She guaranteed him of something he already knew. She was not one of the ignorant and gullible. She did not follow the herd. Downing had met his match. Juliette was without equal. When she gutted Downing's twisted spiritual reasoning, he choked and groped for legitimacy. He looked to her parents for approval and they responded wholeheartedly without hesitation.

To his discredit, Downing had supported Juliette's parents without listening to her reasons for marriage. He cheapened his authority and the currency of his discourse when he added an emotional element to his case. He said young women should not rush into fantasies of blissful love.

Juliette was prepared. She accused him of stampeding to her parents' position with a fantastic argument he knew was as baseless as it was self-serving.

Downing knew Juliette guarded against foolish decisions. Downing and her parents witnessed as much over the years. She was not an ordinary child. She was an exceptional young woman.

Relentlessly, the trio attempted to beat her into compliance like a pestle and mortar grind the defenseless. They attacked. Angered, they demanded. Defiant, they attempted to rule.

Yet, Juliette maintained her unbreakable resolve. She knew that they knew she would not harm herself as many do in the name of love. This was the one saving grace to her fight. She was strong and wise. Even though they knew her nature, to their shame, they pushed too hard. The pestle broke and the mortar cracked.

Juliette had received the best education money could acquire. She was bright. She dominated her parents and Father Downing on an intellectual plane while they fumbled emotionally. She spoke softly, respectfully, and made one final appeal. While she appreciated their concerns, she asked them to accept her devotion to and for Marcail.

They stiffened their resolve. They would not acquiesce in the least. They harbored ulterior motives. Each had selfish agendas which she exposed forthrightly. They were shocked by her revelations; however, they could not deny her words. With boldness and clarity, she disclosed her arguments with force. She directed each of them to the heart of their own particular deceit.

She blasted her father's expectation that she should and would follow him into the family business. His primary concerns were based upon dynasty and profits and not his daughter foremost. She said his profits would burn in hell before she disavowed her true love. She rejected her mother's noble status and any hope that Juliette would marry into royalty. Juliette underscored that no past suitor was worthy to clean Marcail's hunting boots.

Juliette turned to Father Downing and paused. She chose her words carefully. Though she was wise for her age, she needed equal the courage for her next revelation. She lay bare the simple truth. Marcail was church-ed in nature—where God had walked with Adam—and God found favor with both men. With tears streaking her face, she leaned forward in her chair and smiled ever so gently, a smile befitting her soft touch even in the thick of battle. To the man who baptized and confirmed her into the Catholic faith, she struck a chord Father Downing never expected. Juliette called him the Father of Deceit. She revealed his damnation to a place worse than hell, to her father's dark pockets where gold and silver coins clinked to his delight. For this reason alone, Juliette affirmed, Downing would never embrace truth.

Juliette vowed to honor her plans. She would marry Marcail Cameron. She rebuked her adversaries. She told her father he would love his banking empire over flesh and blood. She told her mother she would covet her noble pedigree over her daughter's dreams. She saved Father Downing for last. She stared into his now sheepish eyes and told him that, as the shepherd of God's flock, he would love her father's wealth over the meek and righteous. Then, as if a professor who had completed a tempered and cogent lecture, she stood gracefully and walked to the door. She turned and looked at them a final time. She hoped wisdom would prevail and love would triumph.

They watched her leave and hesitated in a groping sort of way, as if they were in a desperate search for the right words which would somehow justify their behavior. They hoped their perceived power and inviolable church doctrine would not prove impotent.

Juliette saw three miserable, lost souls and knew her hope had faded. She shared the obvious, a truth they would not doubt. She would love her husband as the greatest reflection of her love for God. After

all, she did not have a competing interest to her heart's desire. Her motives were pure and innocent.

Her attackers eyed each other. Her declaration was audacious and it stung. They could do nothing. They could say nothing to overcome so passionate a pronouncement. Dumbfounded, with their mouths agape, each was a reflection of three deadly sins. Her father was avarice; her mother, arrogance; Downing, covetousness. Juliette was the humble messenger.

Though no such admission would cross their lips, Father Downing and her parents could not deny Juliette's honest assessments. Their personal lies and even more lies had motivated them in their attempt to convince a woman in love to deny a divine calling. They failed. In the end and in order to defend their positions and shield their shame, they agreed upon a collaborative rejoinder. Juliette was young and naïve. She would be overwhelmed by the harshness of life and the nature of man. When confronted with selfishness and evil, she would make a hasty return to both home and church. They were certain she would be back within the fold in less than a week and beg for their forgiveness. How wrong they were. They never saw her again.

When Father Downing and Juliette crossed paths ten years later, they stood in silence. She was poised; he was humbled. Juliette's eyes and smile extended a loving invitation. Silence gave way to goodwill. The warmth they once shared rekindled quickly. Downing felt a certain grace she had tendered unconditionally. He was not surprised. She was a testament to God's love. He was unworthy and crumbled under the burdensome cross he had carried far too long. He did the unexpected. He begged for her forgiveness. Juliette held no grudge against the man. She could not. She took him into her arms and offered love and only love. Nothing else was needed. She whispered into his ear, "I forgave you the instant I left the church that fateful night."

His hair white, wrinkles abundant, Father Downing cried under the heft of a near decade of grief. He shared his struggles of conscience and heart. He revealed his firm belief that God used her to disclose his deceitfulness. Six months after she had made her appeal and sought their approval to marry Marvail, he left the church and founded an orphanage and food bank near Paisley. He shared how she had blessed him. He assured Juliette he did not leave the Catholic Church in shame; rather, he raced to the heart of God. He admitted that

a young woman wiser than her parents and priest paved the path to his earthly salvation.

Juliette was touched by his testimony. Though the lateness of the day forced their departure, she was pleased. Father Downing was relieved. He returned to the orphanage with a lighter load.

Weeks later, Juliette travelled to Paisley with her husband and son. She had two goals. She would introduce Marcail and Victor to Father Downing and expand her outreach to the poor. The visit was more than she had hoped. Downing admired Marcail. He accepted Victor as his grandson. Marcail offered to take him fishing. Love won the day. Love conquered a priest's once unrelenting and now forgotten sorrow. Downing left the past in the past and the four forged a future filled with benevolence. Never did they discuss a mother and father who had yet to reconcile their wrongs or grieve a tremendous loss. Juliette's parents did not accept the marriage, son-in-law, or the blessings of a grandson.

By the time the Cameron family left Paisley, Juliette agreed to manage the food bank. Marcail said he would supply fresh game. Within months they brought increased abundance and efficiency to the operation. The mission was simple. Every Friday, the food bank sold surplus stock to those who had the means to make choice purchases. The profits from those sales were used to buy basic staples which the poor needed desperately. On Saturday, Father Downing distributed free provisions to the poor.

Downing was delighted. He watched Juliette and how she cared for the less fortunate. He did not doubt her desire to shed her family's wealth. He did not doubt her hope to bless others.

Juliette operated the food bank every Friday. Funds from all sales were used to purchase staples from the local market in the late afternoon or, if time and safety did not permit, the following morning. Father Downing ran the operation on Saturday and prepared for Sunday morning worship. He engineered a flow which fed belly and soul. Donations on Sunday morning were used to replenish supplies for the orphanage and food bank and the week began anew.

The one challenge to the enterprise concerned the safekeeping of the funds. Whenever Marcail was available, he provided needed security and helped Juliette and Father Downing acquire needed provisions. If Marcail could not make the trip and supplies could not be acquired without undue risk, Downing hid the funds on the premises. Only when the food bank was robbed did they devise another plan.

The scheme was ingenious. Downing left a sign on the door disclosing that no funds were left on the property—a truthful statement. He followed a secret practice. The children from the orphanage and local community gathered outside the food bank every Friday evening, at which time he and Juliette would distribute sugar cookies or other treats donated by the local baker. This ruse allowed for the perfect diversion.

Father Downing did not leave the money in the building. He did not carry the funds home. Juliette did not leave for Forkwood saddled with a large sum. When the children received their treats, they flew away in different directions like a flock of starlings darting to distant destinations. One of those starlings had the funds wrapped securely around its waist. The child was not at risk. Since the children received treats whether or not Marcail came to the food bank, anyone spying and plotting with sinister intent was unable to determine what happened to the missing and ever moving treasure. The children were not suspected as part of the diversion.

The plan's effectiveness was validated a year later. Masked robbers stopped both Father Downing and Juliette as they went their separate ways one Friday evening. Each robber confirmed his victim was without a tidy sum. Downing, who had suspected they were being watched since the first theft, believed the designated carrier was safe. Months passed without incident until Father Downing made a tragic mistake.

One particular Friday the food bank had been far busier than usual. Supplies were abundant and the number of customers far greater than expected. The weather was ominous. Snow fell. Winds rushed down Main Street. Shutters clattered. Windows carried an icy film. The floor of the food bank was wet from snow and muddy boots. Mothers and fathers picked the shelves bare. Some children sniffled and shuffled behind their parents; others dodged and played with friends in the aisles. The scene was chaotic, loud, and distracting as families prepared for a long, harsh weekend. Downing was overwhelmed. He was cold. His fingers were stiff. Juliette stayed the course at the counter and balanced the diminishing inventory against the ledger as people left with arms full and hearts grateful.

The increase in coins at the close of the day was unusual and unexpected. Since Marcail was delayed by a hunting expedition, Juliette did not purchase additional supplies in the afternoon. Thus, Downing followed the usual plan. He packaged the money belt and wrapped it around a child's waist. However, the number of coins was excessive. The total surpassed the amount of cloth used to hold and

cushion the coins effectively. Bedeviling details went unnoticed or were ignored as inconvenient given the circumstances. Uncharacteristically distracted, Father Downing did not bother to either forecast or prevent his error in judgment. He did not add more padding around the coins. He did not use a larger cloth.

After affixing the pouch at the appointed time and to the designated child, the ritual commenced. Children gathered outside. Amidst falling snow, they received their treats and the flock disbursed. Timothy Sadler, the loaded starling, was excited to receive two cookies. He skipped joyfully toward the orphanage.

The road was crowded as usual. People milled about or made their way home. Timothy followed the rest of the flock. He laughed with Lucy Blake and marveled at his luck. Lucy did not share his enthusiasm. She was jealous and reached for the second cookie. Timothy took flight and turned in circles. It was at that very instant the money belt jiggled and a tinny tune emanated from the boy.

The two men who had assailed Father Downing and Juliette in the past stood nearby. By chance, they heard the coins. They were rewarded for their patience. They discovered how the priest ferried the funds to safety.

Wearing brown coats and brown pants, the criminals blended into the row of brown buildings. They nodded to each other and enacted a spur-of-the-moment heist. The bigger of the two walked towards Timothy and blocked his way. His accomplice hurried forward and waved his arms as if shoosing chickens into the coop. He shouted for the children to clear the way for an oncoming carriage that never came. Trustingly, boys and girls raced happily for the gate and their nearby home. Like a hawk swooping upon its prey, the men clawed Timothy about his shoulders and carried him to a closed alley. The boy believed the men had saved him from advancing horses. He thanked them profusely.

Juliette locked the door to the food bank and made her way home. As she passed the alley, Timothy screamed. The men had cornered the boy. The alley did not allow for an escape. Though Juliette could see no one, for the alley was dark, the child saw her. He yelled for her and she came running. At the sound of her steps, the men turned. They were unprepared for a witness. They were as alarmed as Juliette.

She pleaded for the boy's safety and release. The men laughed nervously. The smaller of the two, possessed with a sharper intellect than his partner, used the gift of gab to buy time. He sneered and mocked her altruism. By then, he came to a decision he could not deny. He shared the sobering news. Since she could identify them as

kidnappers and robbers, they would blind both her and the child. They would live, but without their sight. Neither she nor the boy would ever identify them as culprits in any court of law.

The scene disintegrated into chaos. Juliette, consumed with righteous rage, cried out to the heavens. She ordered Timothy to run. The big man stepped forward and seized her. He cupped her mouth and held her tight. The smaller man whipped her body with the money belt. The blows landed heavily.

Lost in terror, Timothy did not flee. He dropped his cookies and shrank to the ground and squirreled himself into the corner. He buried his face within his arms and wished for what would not be.

Juliette kicked and smacked the men. The larger man released his hold and dropped her into the snow like a sack of spoiled wheat. The smaller man landed more blows more efficiently. Battered, Juliette squirmed in a field of white spotted in red. The villains kicked her in the head. One foot landed after another. The pounding of the money belt to her gut ceased her already weakening and infrequent screams. She fought the good fight against insurmountable odds before the big man drove his foot downward a final time. Juliette's face canted to the side. With her eyes open, her sight fogged slowly and she lay motionless. Blood poured from the side of her mouth; the snow melted under the crimson flow. She breathed with decreasing capacity. She never regained consciousness and died hours later, alone.

Timothy was never seen again.

The night came quickly. Large snowflakes tapped dried leaves somehow clinging heroically when heroism was not needed. Marcail sat uneasily in the Cameron homestead. He courted an ominous air. Juliette had never been late. He added more oil to the lantern and adjusted the flame. He gathered his knife, rifle, and supplies. He hoped for the best, but prepared for the worst.

Victor had waited impatiently. That particular day was his birthday. The family had prepared a celebration after dinner.

An hour later, when father and son reached the food bank, all was quiet. They noticed nothing out of the ordinary. The door was locked, windows secured. As the town crept closer to sleep, Marcail hurried to Father Downing's home and rapped upon the door with authority.

Downing responded immediately. Wearing a night dress and holding a Bible, he listened to Marcail's concern and braced himself against the door frame. He refused to believe the news. He rejected the possibility Juliette had succumbed to some danger or foul play.

Snow-muffled steps of someone running toward them added to the tension. George, the oldest boy at the orphanage, slid onto the scene. He spoke hastily. "Father Downing!" He caught his breath. "Miss Fitzsimmons conducted the eight o'clock bed count. Timothy Sadler is missing!"

Downing turned white. He disclosed that Timothy had carried the money belt.

Marcail ran to the constable's office and pulled the rope attached to a bell. Metal striking metal rang sharply through the cold air. This sound was rarely heard and men spilled out of doors quickly and gathered round. Women wrapped in blankets huddled in groups in front of their homes and waited. Children peered through the upper panes of snow-covered windows. They spied from above and down in an attempt to glean anything. They learned little more than that something was amiss.

Marcail spoke to the men solemnly. Their mission was to track the path of the children from the food bank to the orphanage. They would collect clues before conducting a wider search. The wider search never happened.

An elderly man entered the alley and stumbled upon Juliette's body. Like a lone wolf baying at the moon, he howled mournfully. Marcail was not long in coming. When he arrived, ten men held torches and lanterns over the dead. Twenty eyes glanced at him briefly, not a second more. They lowered their gazes to a sullen scene. A haloed sheen glowed over the slain body. Father Downing, who had knelt at Juliette's feet, stood and reached and gripped a widower's shoulder. Some men placed their coats upon Juliette. Marcail saw what mattered most to him and his son. Nearly breathless, he hunted for answers. He winced and sought solace and a release of an anger as sorrowful as it was vengeful. No release was forthcoming.

Victor ran into the alley and broke through a wall of men blocking his way. He wedged between onlookers and saw a crèche-like setting. He did not see birth. He saw death in its most wretched form. He stepped slowly into a scene surrounded by four walls enclosing multiple pallbearers, a priest, the deceased, and the grieving, who, to a man, rebelled against God. No one said what each believed and knew to be true. It took a bereaved boy to disclose his distrust. Victor offered an emotional outcry which fell as fiercely and as purely as the wind-driven snow.

He moved past his father and stopped at his mother's feet. His eyes followed her lifeless form to her face which had fallen forward and down and stared at a frozen splotch of blood in a field of white.

Victor yielded. A physical and spiritual catharsis swept him toward a peace he would never entirely possess. He choked on heavy sobs and wept uncontrollably. He dropped to his knees and dragged himself along his mother's frozen frame. From her feet to her head, he cried as if no one was watching. He sat and lifted her shoulders and slid his legs underneath her body and lowered her onto his lap. He lay his chest over her back and, as if to seek a private moment, blanketed his coat over his head. He lowered his face and whispered, "I love you, mother. I love you."

His stomach swelled with each inhale and constricted on every exhale. Deep and unconstrained moans, emblematic of nature's resolution toward balance, preached a message of abject loss and irreconcilable grief. The purge had begun. Like volcanoes erupting, earthquakes shaking, or hurricanes sweeping, tension exited his shaking body. Peace would give way to renewal at some point during his lifelong journey. His soul would not be denied.

Marcaïl did not intervene. He watched his son contend with the natural and spiritual. The hunt begins with every new experience. He knew Victor's character. He was his mother's son. Like her, he was a warrior. He would be victorious.

The snow fell heavily and within minutes a thin layer shrouded mother and child. God closed the lid of the coffin and buried a sad chapter of the boy's history.

Victor sat upon the ledge and waited for the sun to kiss his cheek with a warmth that would confirm a knowing he would not doubt. His mother loved him still. He smiled. The moment of firsts began. He was ready to love the world. He was ready for a new hunt.

IX

Ava ambled among the weeds and hummed a sweet tune. She searched confidently. Here and there she stopped and picked wild flowers. She was on a mission driven by faith, a child's faith.

The sun shone upon her hair and browned her freckles more deeply. The breeze combed her wayward locks. Her bare feet, padded tough by rough country living, were caked with dirt. Her yellow dress, frayed and torn in several spots, was stained from constant work and

play. She was in her Sunday best and Thursday worst and she did not know the difference.

Lost in thought, Ava drifted toward a front porch long neglected by time and man. The rails were warped. Balusters leaned this way and that or were missing. A small roof provided cover. Directly below the soffit, a cracked stoop rested wearily and a long piece of grass grew where the crack should never have been. A disguise of sorts, the grass hid both a busted lip received during a fight and the chagrin of the winner for getting tagged by a lucky punch. Above and to either side of the ridge of the roof were two small windows, the very eyes of a man searching for the lucky foe who was worse off than he'd like to admit.

Ava rested her arms on the rail and smiled at her collection of flowers. "Good morning, Captain Crowley," she said. "This is the day, Captain Crowley. This is Gracie's day. Now let's see if I have enough." Ava pointed to each flower and counted. "One, two, six, thirty, one hundred, seventy-four." She frowned and looked around and down and found a lone flower. She plucked it and sighed. She smiled as if all was perfect. "Ten. That should do it!"

She skipped around the porch and made her way toward the other side. Ever respectful, she looked over her shoulder and waved. "See you later, Captain Crowley." With a light laugh, she ran to a poor example of a barn with two stalls. "Gracie! Oh, Gracie!" In the second stall, a resident pig, Ava's pet pig, stood with her mouth submerged in the water trough. Ava climbed the rough boards and asked, "Guess what, Gracie?"

The pig snorted.

"That's right! Today is the day!"

Their conversation was cut short by a manly voice. "Ava! Your breakfast is ready!"

"Coming, father!"

She inserted the flowers between the posts and top fence board, hopped down, and made a quick assessment. "It looks good, Gracie. I'll see you soon!"

Ava made her way to the house and leaped over the cracked stoop. "Hello again, Captain Crowley." With the slamming of the screen door, Crowley's response, if spoken at all, was not heard.

Such was Ava's realm. Far from commerce, far from a city of any size, she abided where the principles of faith, hope, and love were the currency of exchange, where a man could measure his wealth upon scales of modesty and righteousness. Her home, though humble by any standard, stood resolutely during every major storm. This tiny wooden

structure remained intact and on greater footing than any house made of stone. Love was the foundation. Love was the mortar. Love was the air flowing within and in and out of its windows and doors. This was a home in every sense of the word and it belonged to the Thornton clan. Brett, Lauren, and their daughter Ava were the source of that love.

They were a three-cord rope tied together. They were unbreakable. They had faith because they loved. They hoped because they loved. They loved for a love of loving. Want of necessities or surpluses of the same did not subdue their zeal for an ideal most folks either did not know existed or had long forgotten.

Brett Thornton not only had a creed, but he had a calling to embody that creed in a race to the finish line. His attitude won him a wife and influenced a daughter to see, hear, and be in a most extraordinary way without the limitations of strained instructions as to the thou shall and thou shall nots of an insincere world.

Far from academically controlled, Ava was awash with direct and indirect experiences vicariously derived from a man who could do no wrong. Her goal was simple. She wanted to be all her father represented.

Brett and Lauren went about their morning as devotedly as they did years ago. Ava was a measurement of their devotion. All else was secondary. Brett was a blacksmith. Lauren was a complement to a man who did nothing but yearn to care for his family. They were poor by any economic standard, but they knew no differently than the wealthy. They had what was needed and what was needed was bountiful. A wood stove heated their home in the winter. Shade trees, wind, and windows cooled to a reasonable tolerance in the summer. A large metal basin and a nearby creek, along with a single rope stretching from the corner of the back porch to a post in the yard, were used to wash and dry the laundry. A garden provided fresh food. With chickens, they had eggs and meat. A cow provided milk. Every so often, a pig was the source of pork and bacon and grease. It was only when this pig disappeared that Ava suffered a devastating blow.

To soften the impact of this tragic event, her parents shared of a journey pigs make with the hope to do good deeds. Brett, ever mindful to protect his daughter's heart, explained that all across the world, pigs, one of the smartest animals, awakened to a higher purpose. After years of feasting and laying idly in mud, pigs were drawn by an internal desire to serve those who had faithfully served them. A spiritual journey of sorts, these enlightened animals, like trips to the Holy Land, went whenever and wherever the Great Spirit guided them.

When her father hinted of Gracie's need to heed her calling, Ava was determined to find a solution. She would fashion a way for Gracie to perform good deeds close to home. She knew Gracie was no ordinary pig. So intense was Ava's desire, she prayed as if saving a soul from damnation. She did not doubt Gracie would be damned if sent away and Ava would be damned without Gracie. God would provide. Her father had told her during times of struggle that God was available and responsive to earnest petitions.

A faithful husband and father, Brett believed God was attentive to the meek and merciful. Ava saw this in him. He was big and strong and equally meek and merciful. God was his source of inspiration. Ava witnessed her father's testimony in word and deed. God provided for a man who was her anchor and hope. If God would provide for her father, then God would provide for her as well. Naturally, she reasoned, Gracie would benefit from these blessings.

After breakfast, Ava cleared dishes from a table that was too big for its space in the corner.

Lauren, who was happily burdened with a list of daily tasks that would remain unfinished by nightfall, stood before two round basins. She used one basin for washing and the other for rinsing. After she cleaned the dishes, as was her practice three times a day, she carried each basin to the back door, walked across the yard, and emptied the contents in the garden to the far right. Through every season, whether it rained, sunned, or snowed, she was faithful with simple acts. A woman of moral resolve, she believed a truncated trip and a depositing of the contents closer to the house would bring unwanted odors and varmints, and, even more to her dislike, she would find a shorter trip all too convenient and defer to an easy out for an otherwise unwanted chore. She refused the inclination.

Ava's second chore of the day was the easiest. She was not to get underfoot. She was to leave. Lauren gave the second chore more importance than clearing the table and Ava knew the reason why.

Two years prior, unbeknownst to Lauren, Ava decided to help her mother empty the basins. When Lauren secured the handles of the first basin and made her way to the back door, Ava, who was in front and below her mother and not visible at all, placed her hands under the bottom of the container. When Ava decided she was not helping sufficiently, she pushed upward. This was no slight movement. The basin tilted toward Lauren and the filthy water became an unexpected

wave. Surprised by the change in weight, Lauren tried to compensate and made the worst decision possible. She leaned toward the basin which sent the contents ahead with even greater speed. When the water crested the front rim, Lauren erred again. She leaned backward. The laws of physics prevailed. The water became a series of violently rocking waves. Lauren had been more concerned about the water spilling than maintaining general control of the basin and the imbalance became unmanageable.

Ava, who had remained out of her mother's view, was doused with water. When she screamed, Lauren, not knowing what was wrong or where her daughter was located, drilled her feet to the floor. This reaction sent the water forward again. The weight of the basin and its unwieldy movements would have been too much for anyone to control and the inevitable occurred. The container tipped and the water cascaded down and onto Ava and throughout the house.

Lauren, who was not easily angered, began to simmer. A long day had become even longer with the cleaning and airing of dirty and wet things. However, after one look at her daughter, who was soaked and adorned with a large onion peel atop her head, Lauren cooled her temper. She could not help but smile. Her smile grew into a giddiness that rocked forward and back and spilled into uncontrolled laughter. Ava pouted at first, but she, too, swelled with heartfelt joy.

The event was forever noted as a merry moment. However, Lauren established the cardinal rule. When she made her journey to the garden, Ava was to be away, far away.

That particular vignette served as the genesis for Ava's current dilemma. She reasoned that her mother's trips to the garden were a ritual not unlike millions of pigs making annual sojourns. Gracie needed a trip which ended where it started—at home. To add a practical argument to her case, Ava was convinced Gracie was special. As such, there was no justification for one more pig to clutter the connecting byways of the world.

Inspired, Ava ferried dishes to her mother faster than usual.

“Are you in a hurry, child?” Lauren asked.

“Oh, mother! I ‘ave things to do!” Ava ran to the door.

“Don’t forget your chores.”

“I’m gonna do them now, mother.”

After the screen door slammed, Ava had a broom in hand. She swept the front porch with renewed purpose. Purpose, however, gave

way to daydreams. She rested her arms upon the railing and smiled softly. "Captain Crowley, I have a plan to keep Gracie home."

Minutes later, Lauren walked to the door with a large basket in her hands. "Sweet Pea?"

Ava was unresponsive.

Lauren opened the door and tried to gain her daughter's attention a second time. "Ava?"

"Yes mother?"

"Did you hear me calling?"

"No, ma'am."

"Daydreaming. Your mind is cluttered for sure."

"Sorry, I was thinking of some important things."

"I have no doubt, child! Come along. I need help with the clothes."

They walked to the side yard and draped clothes over the line. Ava, who was getting wiser by the minute, eyed Gracie and sighed. She knew all would be well.

"Mother?"

"Yes?"

"Did you always want to get married?"

Lauren laughed lightly. "Now there's a question." She gave an answer without hesitation. "Getting married was my greatest hope ever since I was your age."

"Cause why?"

"Well, the reason is simple. I wanted a husband and children. As I grew older, I came to understand life would not be complete if I could not love and be loved as God intended."

"Then you found Pa?"

"Yes."

"Then you found me."

Lauren smiled. "You're right again."

"Do you suppose God wants everyone together in this same way?"

Oblivious to her daughter's motivation, Lauren answered, "I suppose so, sweet pea."

Ava smiled broadly. "That's what I think." She approached her mother and asked with a serious tone, "Are we done?"

"Yes, for now."

"Good. I have places to visit and plans to finish."

Eva skipped away and vanished.

Part Three

Motives

Find a motive that is selfless at its core
and you need not look anymore.
You have found purity.

X

Deep within the wood where sunlight rarely finds its mark, presuming golden rays are arrows and the forest floor is the target, branches, as if moved by a mighty gale, whipped forward and sprung back and swayed up and down until leaves, acting as rudders, drew them to balance and stillness. Something or someone moved the branches. The wind was not to blame. The forest was an impenetrable fortress thick with centuries-old trees hosting an army of foliage prepared to defeat any onslaught from on high. Moreover, steps pounded the ground. Here and there, left and right, and occasionally in reverse, an unknown force raced about and did so quite randomly.

Was the commotion caused by a wild boar tearing through bushes and vines as it evaded hunters? No. A boar could not have reached higher branches. A deer did not stir the trees. Even if hunted, they leap and dodge less abruptly and pause more frequently. A bear typically lumbers straight away and could not have been the source.

One could wager that a man was the source of the force. However, a seasoned hunter would not have tracked his quarry so rashly. He would have stepped deliberately even if he had wounded the animal. If, by chance, the hunter became the hunted, he would have sought higher ground and defensive positions, or he would have run toward civilization in search of aid from his fellow man. He would not have retreated to flat areas or worse, down sloping hills and places without easy avenues of escape. He would not have trapped himself with but one bleak defense—racing from tree to tree in a futile game of hide and seek, with the hider not hiding at all and the seeker winning without a challenge. A man, unless desperate or unwise, did not cause this unexpected disturbance.

There were but two possible reasons for the commotion. The first is acceptable if Scottish folklore withstands scrutiny. The forest may have been rocked by Ashrays, Black Angus, Fin Folk, Boobries, Brownies, Sea Gardeners, the Gruagach, or Seelie Courts, faeries friendly to humans, or, conversely, by the Ghillie Dhu, Kelpies, Nucklelavees, or Fachans, faeries with a strong dislike for mankind. The former may have been lost or simply mischievous as they ventured far from home. The latter may have planned to destroy crops of man for a violation of their faerie doctrine.

The final possibility was more probable. The instigator was the smallest and meekest of the animal kingdom and, out of necessity, like the hunted boar, deer, and bear, sought safety. Granting attribution to so frail a creature would not be unexpected. The principle of causation

proves as much. If subject A excites subject B, and B acts, then A is the cause. A wild boar is spotted in the wood and the hunter, upon this sighting, makes his pursuit. Though the hunter moves the branches, the boar is the cause. A bear bolts through a bevy of boughs, but a crying cub is the catalyst.

On this particular morning, a rabbit caused a boy to whip and whirl the forest into a frenzy. Victor was on a mission. His eyes told the story. His smile revealed excitement. His intent could not be doubted. His rapid breathing outpaced his feet. He darted left. He turned right. He ducked and lunged and jumped. He searched. He hunted for an uncatchable hare.

The autumn morning was cool and crisp in the deeper forest. The crown of the sky had long since lightened from a deep navy blue. The sun washed the horizon in soft pink and laced an ever-widening arc in a brilliant yellow. Stars had disappeared in groups. Those closest to the horizon faded first. Venus refused to hide her glory until later. A quarter of the world went to sleep while a quarter began to tackle the duties of the new day.

Flowers opened to be and to be seen. Animals twitched and jerked out of slumbers and foraged for water and food. Trees reached upward in perpetual reverence to an untouchable invisible. Random leaves relinquished their holds and drifted and glided and twirled to final resting spots. Streams flowed seaward, an act done day and night, a perpetual routine barring dry spells. Lakes waited for the fog to lift before offering the sun, moon, stars, birds, and bank-lined trees reflections of their beauty. Time marched onward to the cadence of sowing and reaping, birth and death, the hunt and the kill, and a boy's frantic race to catch a rabbit.

Victor was his father's best student. He handled a knife and rifle better than any boy his age. He could survive off the land. He, too, preferred nature to civilization. He preferred to hunt over any other activity.

Not long after the sun rose into a waiting sky, a rabbit scampered haphazardly and crossed Victor's path. The chase ensued with Victor at a distinct disadvantage. He had ventured deep into the North Wood where the sun had yet to drill holes through leaves that were still abundant. A blanket of grey covered the forest floor. He could not see as well as he would have liked. He grabbed a stick and beat low-lying vegetation, his usual method to spook a hare out of hiding. Scared from fright to flight, the hunted weaved ahead. Victor dodged and turned only to run forward and spin in another direction. He pushed limbs up and away as much as he ducked under and around

them. The rabbit was agile, far more than he. The rabbit was quick; Victor had to be smart.

He soon lost the rabbit and eased into a walk and then came to a stop. He loved the wait—the thrill of being still and quiet. He slowed his breathing and stayed his step. He dropped his arms and bent his knees slightly. Blood flow was critical—he fainted once during a prior chase. Minutes later, if all was tranquil and his scent had drifted away, the rabbit would peek and sense with a twitchy nose and, if comfortable, stutter step left and right and wait again while partially exposed before sneaking away. This was Victor's cue to attack. He acted when he felt the inevitable climax, when the tension snapped and the hare froze. This was a natural high for the hunter.

During a past hunt, Victor waited thirty minutes before a rabbit left its hiding spot. Though he had considered the possibility that the hunted had escaped through a hidden path or burrowed to safety, the hunter did not budge. His father taught him to be patient and blend into the environment. On yet another chase, the rabbit came out of hiding a few minutes later and hopped onto and then over Victor's boots and sat on the other side. Victor had a long stick with a Y at the end which he used to pin the little critter about the neck. His father called this a once in a lifetime occurrence.

Victor kept this hare as a pet and named it Winsome. On behalf of Winsome, the hunter honored his own code. He did not eat rabbits; he did not hunt them for pelts; he respected them as equals; and, as such, he gave chase as a sport to hone his tracking skills and improve his knowledge of the land, nature, and animals. He was wild at heart and longed to be wild in the woods where wild things lived.

Victor began this particular chase in a swath of deciduous trees. Branches spread in every direction and the leaves more than hinted of a change of seasons. Oaks, Alders, Cherry, Birch, and Aspens flowed over hill and dale in a continuous chain—red, yellow, orange, and maroon spotted the air. Leaves and twigs riddled the ground. The crunch of the former and snap of the latter chorused to a harmony and melody replete with chirping birds, a brook resonating a constant beat, and gentle breezes sliding past string-thin branches which turned and then tuned to a faint humming.

The rabbit had the edge which Victor conceded every time he tracked one. The brush was thick, a safe haven for the hunted, too thick for a boy to penetrate. Then there were paths between trees, often wide and unobstructed, which afforded the rabbit an easy escape in any sprint. The angles of the forest were varied and drastic and gave the hare quick ascents and descents. A turn left and down with a big bush

in the way ended the chase outright. A twist right and up and left and even farther up accomplished the same. If Victor had to negotiate an obstacle course, he could not keep pace. However, a chase into the deep wood with less brush was different. The terrain was flatter with fewer places to hide. If the hunted were caught, a rare event indeed, this was when and where it might happen.

Victor chased the hare from the land of the deciduous to the land of the coniferous. The transition was not abrupt. Both species of trees feathered together over a span no differently than a sunset softens from a bright orange to medium red to oxblood, at which point the deciduous surrendered and the pines were alone just as the sun was gone and the colors faded.

Similar to the night and its less brilliant and dominate star, the pine forest appeared far more ominous. The green needles were much darker, as were the trunks. The branches, thick and heavy, formed a seemingly impenetrable matrix and denied the sun easy ingress. The acidity of the rust-colored needles more than discouraged growth upon the forest floor where most of the terrain was bare and somber. The pine trees rocketed skyward and the bark, with its dark grey sheathing, ran up and down in narrow tracks and peeled in thin layers along the edges. The span between the tracks served as dykes which funneled sap that flowed slowly before its own viscosity and inertia turned the sap into sticky and hardened blobs serving no other purpose than as a food source for big, black ants. Large pine cones peppered the forest floor in patterns honoring the constellations. Pine needles fell and mixed and mingled as one thick, acrid mat upon the ground, a cushion which absorbed noises and quieted the heart of the forest. The low-grade acoustic effect ensured an eerie silence.

Victor enjoyed nature's various transformations. Be it from mountain to valley, summer to fall, rain to shine, the contrast offered lessons he would not fully appreciate until dusk settled over his bright life. As a young woodsman, he knew transformations of the hunt were the same. The prey went from scared to brave; the hunter from encouraged to despair; and both could revert as quickly.

The chase of the rabbit from the world of falling leaves into prickly pines foretold Victor's challenge. The rabbit's brown hair blended with the bed of needles and the openness would allow the hare to win every sprint and hide behind distant trees. Though there was less vegetation, this did not guarantee the hunted's demise. While Victor believed he had a better chance to capture the rabbit, he was no fool either.

A half hour into the chase, an unusually long stretch, Victor slowed his pace. After a week without this sort of physical strain, he was fatigued. He leaned against a tree and caught his breath. He grabbed the water jug hanging from his back and gulped without reservation. Water flowed down his chin and soaked a shirt already damp with sweat. He grabbed a biscuit filled with currant jam from the pouch and ate with distraction. A water jug and rations were an anomaly. Although, he enjoyed them, he sensed a cheapening of the hunt all the same. He no longer had parity with the hare.

The rabbit had secured temporary refuge behind a tree forward of Victor's position. However, without a screen of vegetation blocking his view, he could see left and right and know when the creature scampered away. While the rabbit could go farther from home, Victor knew differently. The hare had a family. He would return.

As often happens throughout life, timing proved problematic. Victor had been busy repositioning his jug and closing his pouch when he was surprised by the unexpected. Consequently, he was ill-prepared.

Perhaps sensing or even knowing the hunter was preoccupied, the rabbit advanced toward Victor along a row of pines. With no need to flank at all, the rabbit crept forward while remaining out of sight. As if to prove its superior natural instincts, the hare waited for a reprieve and then rushed past as the boy bent to the right and down to close his water jug.

Victor heard the soft tussle of paws against dried pine needles and saw a blurry image charge from behind the tree. He shot a quick look and despaired. He had been careless and he knew it. Parity. He no longer had parity against an opponent with an edge to the contest in the first place. The *and such* left the hunter distracted. He should have kept focus even during his respite.

“Darnation! Speak of the Devil!” he shouted. He woke the ancient forest from its nightly slumber and bolted after his prey. “Mr. Hare, I’ll give ye a slap in the ear, I will.” He smiled. Oh, how he smiled. The highs and lows of the hunt were one and the same to him. He had been outwitted and he took no shame, just as he took no glory in outwitting. Those varied transitions and transformations mattered and he respected his opponent regardless of the outcome.

The rabbit ran to the feathered zone where diplomats tirelessly negotiated treaties between coniferous and deciduous trees and then veered left and up an embankment and down the hill. The rabbit vanished. Victor would not earn bragging rights. The chase was over. The prey, as usual, prevailed.

Victor slowed to a restful walk through a mix of trees and transitioned from hunter to boy. He made his way home and was glad for it. He had a scratch on his arms and a rip in his shirt. These were badges of honor. He would share every detail with his grandfather.

The hunt, wild to the end, offered the ultimate reward—experience—and for this he claimed victory. He acquired a keener and deeper conscious and subconscious understanding of nature. The subconscious portion, steeped like an herbal tea, would be served when the moment was right and that moment was when he would be ready. His father told him as much. Marvail Cameron believed and taught a very profound principle. If a man immersed himself in the passion of his choosing, the resulting insight and joy would be inestimable. Victor knew and felt this to be true. He was one with nature and he was pleased. He imagined himself in Eden without a care in the world—a boy alone with God and He would ensure wisdom was brought to the fore at the appointed time.

Such were Victor's musings when he saw black and nimble movements to his left. He took note. Whatever the source, the moves were stealthy, but rapid. He perceived a predatory posture, an observation he had to acknowledge. He wiped drying sweat from his forehead and eyes, which he closed and reopened as he raised his hand to his brow. The sun was bright. The morning star played with shadows as a favored pastime, one of its few pleasures to a monotonous responsibility. Victor did not want to be deceived. Unless he used shadows to hide or avoid the heat of the day, Victor held them with suspicion.

Shadows were more than gradients of greys added to a palette of colors the sun used to splash nature in vibrancy and non-resonance. Shadows were tools of perspective. The sun, as the ultimate mathematician, sent light over a massive canvas filled with countless objects serving as foci for directrices forming fluidly and sequentially and as quickly as these lines faded. Every degree the sun moved, black lines shot forward and formed parabolic creations, ellipses and cardioids. The majesty of this art-in-motion, rarely seen by man or intuited as possible except by gifted souls—those divinely inspired artists and mathematicians, themselves drawn as a single line measured by time to shine their intellectual feats for a mere season of the sun's tenure—imagined the earth as a fantastic kaleidoscope. The beings of the sky and heavens witnessed these magnificent works of art, masterpieces which evolved and vanished daily, hourly, and by the minute. The rotation of the earth, dialed precisely by divine decree, gave the stars a breathless marvel to behold. The sun had an even

grander view, distant universes even better, with God alone in possession of the perfect perspective.

Victor, on the other hand, saw little and what he did see was a singular line. He had a different focus. He could not imagine other lines forming minute-by-minute. Moreover, the glare from the sun unduly affected his perspective. He knew to be cautious. If he saw bobs of black go up and down, he knew to respect such signs as a warning. He made quick and healthy assessments of himself and his surroundings. Two options were at play. Either his imagination got the best of him as radiant heat ascended from the earth and was blown by the wind, giving the impression distant shadows moved, or wild creatures with hostile motives trekked toward a target and he was the target. If he could not discern with certainty, he had to conclude the bobs were an effort to find a scent—his scent.

He shook his head in an effort to clear his mind and settle his gaze. A second glance revealed a coagulation of shadows. One appeared to be forward and the rest followed in reserve.

“Oh God.” Victor whispered these two short syllables in an extended exhale. The fear of being hunted eclipsed the joy of his morning chase. While he was not certain he was prey, he had certainty on another score. He was without parity a second time during his trip. For this reason, he was forced to accept the obvious. He had failed to be mindful of what lay behind as well as forward and around. “Always check the circumference, ye bloody fool.” He offered self-talk to pacify his nerves. “Father says it all the time. ‘Check, lad,’ that’s what he tells me.”

Victor fought an internal surge of anger and groped for confidence. He shifted from a walk to a jog which was a natural progression of his mounting fears. He stepped lightly and remained below and downwind. If he had a chance to escape an enemy lurking in the distance, now was the time to blend and disappear. He slid down a hill and scurried across a valley. He climbed over a rock ledge linked to an adjoining hill. He resumed his self-talk. “Aye, probably a bunch of faeries. I must ‘ave passed a band during me chase today. Darn faeries anyway.” He picked up his pace on a steep descent. “Lord I ‘ope it’s not Fachans. They’re the worst.”

He took advantage of the apex of the next hill and searched far and wide. He did not recognize his surroundings. He saw no obvious landmarks from the morning hike. He was lost and he knew it as sure as he was troubled. “What would ‘e think of ye now?”

A sound to his rear brought his gaze to shadows everywhere and each was sinister. Though none posed an immediate threat, his

imagination grew exponentially. Like zips through the air, he heard two sounds and then three. Some of the shadows appeared to encroach quickly, too quickly, and he froze. Frantic, he became a fear-filled rock embedded within a glacier of fear. The hair on his neck reacted to chills coursing over his skin. His face grew serious. He cupped his hands around his mouth and issued a warning. “Fachans! Leave me be!” He waited for a response. “If I interrupted ye festival this morn’, I’m sorry, truly.” He petitioned their better nature.

No faerie spoke. Nothing moved.

“Ye hear?”

He wanted a response, the right response. Yet, if the faeries answered, he knew he was in trouble. But he didn’t want silence either. Silence neither confirmed nor denied that lurking menace. He listened. He waited. He tensed even more. He cut his eyes left and right. Nothing. Silence hung in the gallows by a thin cord ready to drop an angled blade that would slice down and through the first unwanted noise. His next decision was neither easy nor wise. He shrugged off the apparitions as folly. He thought himself foolish to believe shadows haunted the hills or hunted him still. He chuckled lightly in an attempt to diffuse the tension. “Me blasted mind is playin’ games.” This feeble attempt to soften his fear had little impact. He was alone, lost, and confused in the forest—three ingredients for certain disaster.

For a boy who was an eternal optimist, an abundance of pessimism governed him. He grew desperate. If he were to survive, he entreated his legs to run faster than ever. The chase, although potentially fictitious, began. He became the hunted; at least his mind told him so.

He ran across a dry creek bed and jumped over the bank. Danger drove him. A figure appeared to the right. A burly bear stood upon its hind legs and bawled. Victor ran faster. A wildcat landed upon a fallen tree, arched its back, and yowled. Victor whirled away. Ahead, and into the sun, he saw faeries floating in a phalanx. They laughed with derision. Victor halted and reversed course. He moved limbs up and down. He ducked and weaved his way around trees. This was not for sport. Victor, subject A, avoided every shifting shadow, subject B. When a thick-pawed, rib-thinned wolf leaped through the air, Victor gasped and jumped and rolled through tall grass. Though he remained prone and still, he was certain his heavy panting revealed his position.

He summoned his father’s wisdom. Higher ground, he told himself. Find a defensive position; offense comes later.

A standstill between shadows and either the imagination of a weary boy or the grounded instincts of a competent hunter were underway.

XI

Willington was an unexceptional village with typical people living unremarkable lives. Filled with the educated and not, the wealthy and the opposite, the prominent and less so, Willington was home to every possible socio-economic grouping. In total, Willington was just plain ordinary. If the village had one extraordinary feature, it was more ordinary than most.

Time marched through the streets and entered citizens' lives like a mule ride at Beltane's Day Festival with expected stability as well as ups and downs and speeds depending upon one's age. To the youthful, the ride passed at less than a turtle's pace and needed to hurry along. To the elderly, the ride was fast and needed to slow down. Again, typical. Whether as solitary souls or collectively as a community, Willingtonians experienced the occasional success, failure, ease, and crisis. Be it births or funerals, fires and robberies, birthdays and weddings, or graduations and festivals, scene upon scene of this ordinary village opened and closed without distinction.

By all appearances, Willington would never be renowned for anyone or anything unique. No one dismantled the amusement ride. The culture of Willington was, as if by fate, without fanfare and the village would remain unknown by everyone. Willington was not Rome, Greece, Athens, or Sparta. Every day was no different than any other revolution of a ride with nothing to experience but the usual. Time and again, everything remained the same. Willington was not excellent in the least.

Undoubtedly, the fate of Willington citizens would be unappealing to any intrepid soul wired for something more than the ordinary, something different, and not just different, but the exemplary. An incisive look into any Willingtonian's life proved the exemplary did not exist. There was only boredom itself, boredom with excitement, boredom with despair, boredom with satisfaction, love, and failure. Boredom was the one aspect common to every experience and all subsequent thoughts and emotions. The reason was simple. The citizens of Willington did not look beyond their experiences and corresponding thoughts and emotions. This syndrome is no different than experiencing a high and low point without moving beyond that

high and low or searching for the reason for either. In essence, the ordinary became normal and what was normal was expected.

To illustrate, if a Willington child received either a number of gifts or one gift for his birthday, under normal circumstances, nothing more would be known beyond the joy of abundance or the sadness of little. Yet, if the child realized a multitude of gifts as excessive, such abundance would be viewed as a lie and the gifts marginalized. If he valued the single gift, it would be received as even more significant. The lesson should be apparent. There is privation in many and wealth in little. If wisdom from both abundance and paucity were accepted as extraordinary, most citizens would reject the ordinary outright.

As might be expected, some citizens left for foreign lands in search of conquest and fame, all rather ordinary. Those who travel, often the wealthy, did as they wished, but to what end? Then there were those citizens who fished nearby creeks or foraged for food that would sustain them until tomorrow, a rather normal existence. The shut-ins and poor did what was a necessity in order to survive. Since Willington citizens marched to the cadence of normalcy, they were oblivious to a remarkable unknown that would transform the plain into the magical, the sedate into breathlessness, heartache into victory, and happiness into nirvana.

Willington, it must be stated, was unique for one reason. This village lacked unbelievable people. The unfathomable was not possible in a community anemic in character. People lacked the resolve to be iconoclasts and possess something great, especially the prospect of truth. Willington lacked inspired souls longing for experiences and corresponding insight equal to cataclysmic shifts that would shock the subconscious and conscious into a transcendent super-consciousness and, ultimately, a Christ-consciousness. If citizens of this ordinary village could escape and explore beyond a pervasive disbelief long ingrained by countless lies, life and death could and would be different.

Sebastian Chiffon was born and raised in Willington. He was as ordinary as any other citizen. In fact, he was more ordinary than most. To prove as much, one need only consider his life. He was vested as a husband and father not out of passion, but by ordinary obligation. His professional fame stemmed from his creation and fabrication of fine apparel. With exotic cloth and expensive silk, ribbon, lace, and thread, he cut, combined, and sewed patterns of the unimaginable into the incredible—all rather ordinary. Dresses, suits, shirts, blouses, and hats in colors, plaids, stripes, and floral prints flowed seamlessly in and out of his mind, through his hands, into the windows of his shop, before being worn by plain ordinary folk. Immersed in the painstaking details

of collars, sleeves, bodices, cuffs, and gloves, he guided his efforts with scissors, razors, pins, needles, and machines. A master at his craft, he became great, an ordinary great.

Sebastian received ordinary satisfaction when his clients wore the fruits of his workmanship and his lifeless clothing became animated. He treasured the smile of a lady enraptured before a full-length mirror as she fashioned flowing folds and fine lines of an exquisite evening gown which accentuated curves, buttressed breasts and buttocks, and secreted salient features in need of secreting. He marveled at the bolstered assurance of a man clothed in a business suit that made thin shoulders appear broad, while hiding weak torsos, and rifling limbs in need of length for successful captains of industry. Again, quite typical. This one joy of his profession, though not unique in the least, for any man should find joy in his labor, somehow ameliorated his misery as tolerable and permitted him to endure what he despised—his existence.

Would he have been better served if he had respected his trade? Perhaps. Did Sebastian have to remind himself of his failure to be anything but a clothier? Again, perhaps. But these were ordinary questions and a reflection of his less than ordinary attitude. He viewed each of his creations as but another stitch that formed and fashioned not his life, but his tenure in a world that was as unsatisfying as his profession and, even worse, an existence on par with a shadow of a line in an inferior artwork which would not fade soon enough. One need not ask if he lived meaningfully in the moment. The answer was obvious. He toiled through every motion within larger routines with an eye towards defeat.

A life, that is a full life, regardless of the circumstances, is self-directed by those with character soaked with passion and a resolve anchored with purpose and truth. A man who manifests an extraordinary life is led by divine inspiration. One who simply exists does not. Sebastian did not live willfully or by providential leading. He had become an empty shell of a man designed and clothed in the stale and depthless dreams of those who directed and expected him to conform and perform accordingly. He was but a shadow of a shadow fading into nothingness.

Derivatives from Sebastian's existence—his reputation, wife, children, home, and friendships—none of which were a direct result of his own inclinations, came from others. Given the choice, Sebastian would not be who he was, doing what he did, located where he existed in the present moment. He had been placed upon a ride he never wanted to mount and one he would never dismount. Under the circumstances,

he despised the ordinary. Yet, not at all surprising, he cooperated with and accepted lies represented to him since he was born, lies he now portrayed to himself and the world. He was on the ride, after all, that insipid journey going round and round to nowhere special.

Over the ensuing decades, Sebastian recalled his boyhood dreams with decreasing intensity. Those dreams became nothing more than haunting memories of events caused by people who ripped his hopes to shreds. Ironically, he considered himself lucky. If his dreams continued to disappear, and the hauntings as well, as far as he was concerned, he would achieve some success, for he would no longer suffer the teases and taunts and what could have been.

The many battles he weathered over numerous regrets were once severe. In earlier years, Sebastian tried to ignore such regrets, but the boy within him had refused to relinquish a hold of what he wanted desperately, a different future, a different life. That boy, not easily calloused by spite, not readily hardened by heartache, not willingly weakened by defeat, yearned for certain divine visions which came to him and him alone. Though his dreams might never be realized, the boy prized his hopes until prizing his greatest hopes became a drudgery. After years of agitation, though both man and boy would never be immune from specters of the past, the inevitable occurred. Sebastian decayed from within and the boy grew to greater insignificance and his dreams were nearly forgotten. Forgiveness, however, was a different matter. The man refused to forgive his tormentors.

Whether he had suffered direct or indirect attacks by one or many, each of his assailants had robbed him. They robbed him daily even in the present. His losses became so well known until each became an acquaintance. Loss in general became so ingrained that loss became a companion and then a friend. This was the reason Sebastian labeled the instigators as his enemies. He refused to forgive them. They fueled his pain and, not surprisingly, his father and mother had been his greatest detractors. Memories of his parents blended with memories of others until one enemy was indistinguishable from the rest. One of those vignettes surfaced without fail. He saw it clearly.

The day was no different than any other. To the north, a child darted across Main Street and entered the General Store. In the center of town, a girl window-shopped. Farther down, a mother carried a package while holding the hand of her young son. A relatively quiet

venue, save an occasional wagon and horse passing through, painted an ordinary day.

The ordinary included a gang of boys running through the street. This was Justin's band of misfits. They were looking for mischief. The boys shouted and jeered for no other reason than to shout and jeer. This was their idea of play.

Justin lagged behind as if by design. He was big, but not in a muscular sense. He wore a layer of baby fat he could not shed. For this reason, he hid his blubber behind a coat most of the year and this additional padding made him look even fatter. Though Justin ran slower than his underlings, he used this weakness to his advantage. He observed from the rear. He blabbed incessantly and waved his flabby arms and, consequently, appeared to be larger than life as he directed his wayward followers this way and that and orchestrated all coming action.

He was the leader, in part, because of his size. Sure, he was slower and speed often meant superiority, but no boy could best his strength. A few had tried and failed. Then there was Justin's voice. He was louder than the rest. Loudness is not a key leadership trait as a rule. In fact, the opposite is true. But Justin displayed confidence and, by all appearances, as well as a matter of survival, he was forceful. Any leader of a gang must use force to survive. His perceived confidence and arbitrary force made his loud voice more effective.

By contrast, Seth, a senior member of Justin's horde, was loud, way too loud, and the boys knew Seth's volume was a sure sign of weakness. Since he was not as confident as Justin, he yelled even louder. Any force Seth exhibited was no more impactful than a head fake followed by screams and an eventual bowing out of the fight, whatever that fight happened to entail. Seth was all about appearances of strength because he was weak. Most members of the gang were younger and, if they discerned the truth about either Seth or Justin, they dared not express it. In order to belong to the gang, it was safe and ordinary to ignore Seth outright and grant Justin his due respect simply because he was fat and strong and loud.

In some ways Justin was also a cunning and daring lad. This made him an icon among those who were more mannerly. Justin's parents were too busy to make his upbringing a priority. He enjoyed a freedom borne from unbridled rearing. He was neglected and he mirrored this reality. He neglected himself and others.

On this particular day, like so many others, Justin stopped in the center of the street. He wanted to rest. He could not breathe and he schemed in such a way as to grant his lungs a respite. "Hold up, guys!"

He bent over his knees and struggled to extend and wave his flabby arm.

The boys halted and returned. They surrounded their leader.

Seth yelled his typical tripe. “Dang, Justin! Are you stopping again?”

Justin saw this as a threat to his authority. He had to respond. In survival mode, he stood and threw his shoulders back—his shoulders were loud. While laboring to fill his lungs, he eyed his troops and said, “Watch and learn!” He loped clumsily to a nearby store with large windows. He rapped on the glass and shouted, “Sebastian is making a dress! Sebastian is making a dress!”

The boys reveled at his antics. Justin turned and laughed. He led the boys down the street and the gang followed and shouted in unison, “Sebastian is making a dress!”

As soon as Sebastian heard the knock on the window, he lowered his head. He knew what was coming. This occurred time and again—the mockery, the scorn. Sebastian looked to see if his father was nearby. With some assurance that he had the time, he placed his needle and thread on the table. He avoided sudden moves. He lifted his chair and scooted back without making a noise. He ran to the front of the store and saw Justin and his gang running away. They stopped and harassed another boy on the other side of the street. They stole his book and passed it among themselves.

“Whatcha reading? Justin yelled. “A girl’s book?” The others laughed and the boy jumped for his property.

Sebastian watched. He saw the smallness of man. He felt the smallness of man. As he crept back to his sewing, he felt small.

Mr. Chiffon entered the room and examined the pieces of fabric. “Follow the line,” he said. The dictator hovered. “Make your stitches tighter.” He looked at the clock and tapped the table. “You are behind, Sebastian.”

“Yes, father.”

“You were to finish this yesterday.”

“Yes, father.”

None too pleased, Mr. Chiffon sighed and departed.

Sebastian swiveled and gestured to his mother. She did not see him waving. He searched for his father again before whispering, “Mother.” He waved frantically.

Mrs. Chiffon glanced at the factory doors and approached her son tentatively.

“Mother, Tommy and I were to build a bridge in his father’s wood shop today.”

“Perhaps tomorrow, Sebastian.”

“But mother, you always say that. Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow. Always tomorrow.” His shoulders sagged. He dropped his sewing. He slapped his hands upon his lap and threw his head back. “I don’t want to make dresses. I want to be an architect.”

“You will. And you will be an excellent architect.” She smiled weakly and turned her gaze away.

When Mr. Chiffon returned, the conspirators quieted. “What is the meaning of this?” he asked roughly.

Mrs. Chiffon walked away without saying a word.

Sebastian was alone in his mother’s wake that was relatively waveless given her submissiveness. Sebastian submitted as well. He picked up his work and continued to sew. When his father departed, Sebastian said to himself, “Sebastian is making a dress!”

Memories. Haunting and dispiriting memories. Sebastian could not deny them. He despised Justin. He despised his father and mother. He despised all who proved to be the source of his misery. Most of all, he despised himself. His dreams, like a greased catfish at the bottom of a brown pond, were hard to find, hard to grasp, hard to bring to the surface, and, if secured at all, almost impossible to hold firmly upon the ground.

The source of Sebastian’s misery is critical to understand. Consider the one joy he received with the lady radiating before a full-length mirror in a stunning dress and the businessman clothed with confidence. His clients’ reactions to his craftsmanship reflected Sebastian’s unrealized hope of becoming an architect. He had hoped to erect stunning structures, bridges of notorious acclaim, constructs of steel with wires rifling streaks of grey across countless settings and serving as complements to the sun’s daily formations of shadowed directrices angled precisely and purposefully.

Thus, strips of cloth running body-length, wrapping around shoulder and hip joints, turning and crossing and twisting around a second, third, and fourth anchor, and descending a final time into completion, formed not fine apparel, but glorious bridges viewed by Sebastian and him alone. The irony. He saw it. Sebastian made others into exactly what he would have created had he pursued his highest hopes. He would have designed bridges of distinction. Alas, while he turned his clients into what they were not, engineering marvels and feats worthy of renown, Sebastian became the embodiment of shallow

aspirations of dictators—his creators—those who were equally unfulfilled and, like them, Sebastian played his role perfectly. Again, the irony. The ordinary irony of an ordinary soul in a less than ordinary town and in a time that was just plain ordinary.

The unspoken truth is that forceful personalities long mummified in erring philosophical cloth and never to be unraveled from such death-grip permanence, those who were fearful of any deviation from their own manufactured destiny, fashioned Sebastian long before his birth. They took the fabric of expectations woven by the vilest of vices and ran it along this innocent boy, wrapped it around pivotal events in his life, turned and crossed the fabric over experiences and goals not of his choosing, wound this fabric along the span of his precious time on earth, and, finally, sewed it into a construct which persisted in his present despair. Sebastian was, in the end, remarkably unremarkable. In the parlance of the apparel industry, he was a cheap suit. In terms used by the architectural and engineering industries, he was neither plumb nor square and without a firm foundation.

In a philosophical sense, Sebastian was inorganic to his very core. He was and had been an entirely artificial construct controlled by those who did not clothe him with what he would have willingly worn. He did not wear a multi-colored coat befitting the second-in-command of an empire. No. Sebastian was clothed with ill-suited designs befouled with more than a hint of unearned fame and filthy lucre. His parents and grandparents, and their parents and grandparents, supposed progenitors of life, dragged Sebastian into the worst form of bondage. They were not concerned for the hopes of a boy who could have created marvels rivaling the glory of the great pyramids. They were consumed with perceived distinction and dynasty. Sebastian was a by-product, a series of illusions projected by those driven to achieve their own selfish goals.

Sebastian would not achieve anything close to historical significance. He would never orchestrate the preservation of a foreign country or save his brethren from a fate as unwanted as famine, at least not while he was trapped within a passage-riddled sarcophagus without a means of exit. He did nothing but follow a directed path to an unfortunate end.

The strongest personality and prevailing overseer of Sebastian's past, present, and future was his father, Mr. Eammon Chiffon. Sebastian was nothing like him. As if tailored for the role of a clothier, Mr. Chiffon was tall and lanky. His lengthy limbs faithfully accented sharp creases of his shirts and pants. His straight spine ensured the sophistication demanded by a superior suit. His brow

dignified hats suitable for royalty. He represented and wore the best of fashion.

Then there was Sebastian Chiffon. He was short and stocky with rounded shoulders and a full face. He did not look the part of a respected clothier. Sebastian was rather dumpy or worse. His clothes, which were also the best of the best, actually made him. He did not complement his attire in the least. Mr. Chiffon was a perfectionist with exacting standards which precluded expressing his disapproval of his son's unremarkable features and obvious disinterest in the family business.

Such was the atmosphere within the house of Chiffon. If Sebastian had been sufficiently introspective in his later years, he would have acknowledged his drive for hyper-excellence as compensation for not being remotely like his father. Father and son were polar opposites. As a businessman, his father was beyond reproach. Though he was exceedingly arrogant, he was affable when appropriate. He was refined, polished, and seasoned. He was erudite and classy. Sebastian was not. He stumbled clumsily through relationships as awkwardly as he crossed unobstructed floors. He was an embarrassment even to himself.

Sebastian resembled his mother, a plain, short, and rotund woman. She looked like a baker. He did too. But for his fine clothes, a casual observer would have envisioned him, with his soft body and pudgy fingers, kneading dough and producing racks of leavened bread and anointing succulent pastries with icing and unashamedly sampling every third one. Even bystanders unskilled in the theatrical realm would have surmised rather easily that Sebastian was miscast. He did not fit the role of a clothier by appearance, not to mention his want of desire.

Sebastian's unremarkable features and hopeless attitude defined him. Forced to comply with his father's expectations, he channeled his discontent into every perfect garment he made. He attempted to meet the measurements of a world fraught with flawed perceptions, unreasonable expectations, and unattainable projections. Not surprisingly, he refused to acknowledge his own flawed perceptions, expectations, and projections. He was a hard shell of a boy who withdrew from life. He played the role of victim perfectly without realizing most Wellington citizens had been cast to play a variation of the same character. He was alone and miserable in a world filled with miserable and lonely people.

"Okay! Now wait one second, Mr. Lorne. I may or may not be confused, but I have questions for ye nonetheless."

"And?"

"Well, this place, Willington. Your description is very unfavorable and really no different than how you describe Sebastian and his poor attitude."

"And?"

"My point is that how can a place and a people be so unflattering and uninspired?"

"Lad, do you not see the obvious?"

"I guess I do. Willington and the people who live there are not about beginnings that is for sure. It's as if they reflect death itself, at least in the way death is typically viewed."

"And?" Mr. Lorne smiled. He seemed to enjoy himself.

"And, well, obviously nothing good could possibly come out of Willington. Then there is the example of Sebastian's father. Mr. Chiffon did not teach Sebastian how to live life, that's for sure."

"Didn't he?"

"No! In fact, he did the opposite. He killed his son's spirit."

"Did he?"

"Mr. Lorne. You said it yourself, did you not? This is not some complicated riddle!"

"Lad, ye have to be careful lest you arrive at errant conclusions."

"What do you mean? Sebastian's father is an ogre! Do ye not agree?"

"I agree that the nature of man is what it is."

"And?"

"Well, just that lad. Man is consistently the same whether he exists on the extremes or in the middle and in this city or another one."

"You are saying that most men are ordinary?"

"Would you not agree?"

"I don't know. I guess I never really thought about it. I am certain of one thing. Your story must have a twist. Otherwise, nothing will change. I cannot imagine Sebastian accomplishing anything significant."

Mr. Lorne smiled slightly and nodded. "We shall see, lad."

XII

Loving fathers guide their sons and daughters patiently and gently and they do so out of necessity and desire. Fathers lead young minds and hearts into the glory of possibility. However, many do not. Overbearing patriarchs are not unusual. Some fathers level heavy-hands and eventually drown their children in despair.

Sebastian's father was a despot. In what could be judged as an attempt to fill a hole in his own existence, he exercised his influence exceedingly. He was a miserable man without the least concern for his children's desires. He controlled Sebastian and Lydia exactly as he had been controlled. In fact, he was not bothered in the least for directing them to unwanted destinations. Mr. Chiffon rather liked exercising his unchallenged authority.

He demonstrated the extent of his power at a family dinner forty years earlier. He sat at the head of the table. His parents were to his right. Sebastian and his sister, Lydia, were to his left. Seated across from Mr. Chiffon was his wife, Marie. With Mr. Chiffon atop of his throne, he tapped his glass. The ringing was out of place. Such a sound, even if never heard before, piques one's curiosity with a positive tone. People expect to hear uplifting pronouncements and experience subsequent gaiety. It was a ringing effect after all, as if ushering in another year, a wedding announcement, news of a birth, something joyous, a reason to celebrate. Mr. Chiffon's subjects waited, and they did so quietly, if not glumly, for no one was festive, which meant delightful conversations did not fill the air before fading, while even more lively discussions lasted indefinitely and anyone could choose to participate or not.

The Chiffons wondered what positive words their leader would impart. They waited obediently. This was Mr. Chiffon's first objective. He expected obedience. He paused and looked at those who viewed him with a mixture of anticipation and suspicion, with a heavy emphasis on the latter. He would achieve his second objective in short order.

Mr. Chiffon returned his utensil to the table. He placed his hand on the arm of his chair and, as if a king adjusting his posture, he made himself appear as regal as possible. From the sound of the ringing of his glass to his first spoken word, his antics were as contrived as his bearing. Sebastian looked at Lydia. Mrs. Chiffon looked at her husband and then at her children. The delay was discomfiting. Only when he was willing did he speak. "Your attention. I have good news to share at the start of a new week."

Each of them locked on to his every word, for supposedly good news was in the offing. He never had good news. Mr. Chiffon paused

again. He factored the possibility that someone would probe for a hint while others might murmur among themselves—the kind of behavior exhibited within happy families. No one did any such thing. All remained silent. He continued. “The Chiffon family has had a line of fine clothiers for generations. We have clothed kings and queens, noblemen and ladies, leaders of businesses and the working class, families, and children.” He looked at this father. “You taught me well and I honor you.”

Mr. Emmitt Chiffon, as disingenuous as his son, looked humbled. He acted as expected in a polite family setting. However, he already knew of his greatness and needed neither praise nor thanks from his son.

The man at the head of the table, the one in charge, turned to Sebastian. He tendered a seemingly genuine smile. “I must do the same. I must ensure the health and wealth of my children and their children.”

Though she cautioned herself, Mrs. Chiffon interpreted her husband’s expression and words as sincere. She was drawn to a hope vanquished early in their marriage. However, since the focus was upon their son, she took a small leap of faith. She tilted her head and offered a partial smile to no one in particular. She thought there might be some laudable agenda to her husband’s oration. She leaned forward in her chair and rested her elbows upon the table.

With Sebastian as his focus, Mr. Chiffon’s words flowed uninterrupted. “In this harsh world, there must be some certainty that tomorrow or next month or the unfolding year will bring stability.”

Sebastian sat more upright and became more enthused. He grinned at his mother. She reciprocated.

“It matters not the profession Sebastian enters. Would he be an excellent architect? Yes, he would.” Mr. Chiffon grinned in a sinister, know-it-all manner. “He will design his future no differently than mine. Sebastian will erect his life within a world of ideas and use his intellect and skills to serve mankind and his family. This is what he deserves. Sebastian and the Chiffon dynasty deserve success bridged over generations, success which will endure without fail.” He approached the climax of his monologue and paused for effect. He looked at his father again and then back to Sebastian. “As such, after much consideration, and with an ample weight given to Sebastian’s hopes, I am pleased to announce,” he delayed his speech briefly as if to find an appropriate way to end his comments. “Forthwith, Sebastian shall become my apprentice. He will fulfill his destiny as a clothier.”

There it was. The end. He stopped speaking and held his breath. He waited.

Mrs. Chiffon, Sebastian, and Lydia gasped in unison. Sebastian slumped and lowered his head. Mrs. Chiffon sat upright and gripped the end of the table.

Mr. Chiffon took notice. He exhaled slowly and inhaled deeply. By look and manner, he made it known that any mutinous act would be punished severely. He tapped the table with his finger. He spoke with coldness in his voice. "Sebastian will not return to school." There it was. The formerly unstated, but always known, was disclosed at last.

In a sweeping second, Mr. Chiffon altered eternity and eviscerated any of Sebastian's hopes. The stern patriarch's smile melted in a heartbeat. The smile was a prop. The prop was no longer needed. Mr. Chiffon stared at Sebastian and said callously, "Report to my office tomorrow morning at eight sharp." He stared at his son and lowered his voice. "Do not be late."

Mr. Chiffon threw his shoulders back and turned to his father and mother and smiled with a sense of triumph, not joy.

Sebastian steered his gaze away and toward the center of the table. He looked at no one and then, without emotion, he cast his gaze to the ceiling. Tears pooled in his eyes. He searched. He wanted to know what to do or say.

His mother grimaced. She held the arms of her chair and attempted to stand, but stopped for fear of reprisal.

Mr. Chiffon's parents smiled politely. Though they were pleased, no one could tell. They held superfluous emotions in abeyance. Emmitt Chiffon paid his respects. "Well done, son." Emmitt's wife tendered her remarks. "I am proud of you, Eammon." She looked directly at her grandson. "Sebastian will bring the Chiffon name and dynasty even greater distinction."

Marie Chiffon, angered by the announcement, knew her son was devastated. Lydia sat quietly. She was afraid to voice her disagreement to this life-changing decision. Perceptions, one of power and the other hope, clashed like rams fighting for dominance until power defeated hope.

Mrs. Chiffon simmered and then boiled internally. She looked at her husband and asked, "What of my son's hopes to become an architect? What of his schooling?"

Mr. Chiffon expected some response from her quarter. He would permit it only once. He was armed with a rejoinder and would not fire a second time. With characteristic force, he delivered his

message with absolute precision and clarity. She would not doubt his already spoken decree a second time. “Nonsense! Sebastian, *our* son, will learn about life by running the family business.” He achieved the desired result and brought closure by posing a positive slant—his positive slant. “It is what any boy would want.” He looked to his father again and added, “to follow in his father’s footsteps and command a dynasty.”

A battle waged within Sebastian’s soul. A meek character upon a cruel stage, he struggled. He did not want his life choreographed, not in this manner, not for this end. Though he rejected his father’s revelation, he was powerless and he knew as much. Slowly, without confidence, he stood. He placed his napkin down and, without permission, he left the table.

“Sebastian!” Mr. Chiffon shouted as he slammed the arm of his chair. “Take your seat! You don’t leave the table without my permission.”

Sebastian’s grandfather placed his hand upon Mr. Chiffon’s arm and nodded once to indicate restraint.

Sebastian did not hear his father’s demands. Always a dutiful son, he had never disobeyed his parents in open defiance. Sebastian’s longstanding obedience was not a reflection of respect for a man he admired; he obeyed out of fear alone.

In a feeble attempt to prevent an escalation of tension, Sebastian’s mother stood haltingly. She, too, was afraid of the man she was duty-bound to obey. However, she mustered enough gumption to offer her husband a voiceless chastisement and then sheepishly followed a troubled son stumbling down a dark entrance into what would be a lifelong maze without the possibility of escape.

Mr. Chiffon’s goal had been met without revolt. Absent consultation with anyone, he destroyed Sebastian’s future. His son’s aspirations dimmed to eternal hopelessness.

As if to gloss over the unexpected departure of the future king, Sebastian’s grandparents, perfectly dressed for a coronation, raised their glasses of sherry and hailed what they believed was an auspicious proclamation. Their grandson was graduated from school and promoted to a profession and, ultimately, an empire. Their only son assured that his son would continue the family legacy, which, to Sebastian, was nothing more than an inheritance of slavery. The lie that a family of master clothiers spanning generations was a noble history worthy of honor would not die.

Banished to his bedroom, if only by self-exile, Sebastian waited for his term of imprisonment to begin on the morrow, a sentence

signifying defeat and surrender. Yet, something called within his soul still, something stirred, remnants of a fading dream, a last hope he feared would be lost forever if he failed to act. The prospect of abandoning his dreams proved unbearable. He yearned as if his life depended upon a certain someone and a certain action. That certain someone was himself and the certain action was escape and he would do so immediately. Such was his intention. Amidst paternal machinations in disagreement with filial desires, he entertained what was not ordinary at all.

An ordinary Willington child did not run away from a home that was perceived as stable. To do so required daring and resolve. In order to exhibit both attributes, one had to be extraordinary. News of his escape would not be insignificant. Eventual disclosure to an unsuspecting public that Sebastian Chiffon had rejected centuries of deceit would be sensational. The impact among certain circles, the children in particular, would disrupt a cultural mindset. Willington was filled with people conditioned to comply collectively, even if one steered himself toward this communal mindset volitionally.

However, instantly emboldened with his own individual mandate, Sebastian summoned the will to reject any part of a collective despair. He packed quickly. The time was now. He would act now. He would never have another chance. He tossed his quilt away from his bed and jerked the sheets off the mattress. He tore them into strips and fashioned a rope. He secured the end to the bedpost and scurried to the window. He opened the sash, alighted the sill, and peered into a fog-filled night.

He searched. He had to search. He looked for any obstacles directly below the window. He looked for people who might see him; he did not want to be noticed. He looked for a direction he would travel. He was without bearings and did not know his next move. He had no plan. If he crossed the threshold and dropped to the street, where would he go? What would he do? How would he survive? Little did he know that he searched because he needed time to establish a credible excuse to stay. Oh, the perversions of the mind and heart! He succeeded. He found obstacles and objections to his radical plan. He found the end of things before beginnings were begotten.

His verve dissipated to confused surrender. As if to seek confirmation, he looked back and into his room. He saw what was known—home, family, books, routines, and misery. The ordinary was everywhere; the ordinary was everything. Even his afternoon sewing job, which he despised, was familiar and his small allowance gave him some ordinary pleasure. Most often he took this paltry sum to the

marketplace and bought models, books, and puzzles of structures, anything that brought him closer to the architectural field and a future never to be erected.

Sebastian was a victim. He had always been a victim. He was attached to what was known. Forced into a world not of his choosing, he was without an independent foundation. He became who and what he despised; he became his father. He did not want to be someone he was not. He wanted to construct his life, to design and build, to bridge one piece of land to next and over rivers and canyons, expanses as wide as his dreams. He wanted to create what had not been conceived. Is there no wonder he ached? He ached for what would not be. That ache reflected what he could not articulate at his young age, a truth he was unable to reject. Who could not see that he had been hardened by what he knew and, as a result, he would never seek the unknown? Well, Sebastian knew and this truth hurt like no other.

Was Sebastian unfair to himself? Was the unknown an impossibility? Did he quit before the battle began? At the risk of reaching an unfair characterization, did Sebastian become who he was not, which was tantamount to the death of his true self? In a very real sense, did the ends not precede and preclude every possible beginning to his young life?

Sebastian sat upon the windowsill and realized the unknown was not a greater motivation than his known existence. The gravity of this thought unnerved him, but it was not unnerving enough to spirit him out of the window and closer toward victory. He was losing the battle before it began and he knew the reason why. He could not discount a despised reality which had greater influence than the urge to flee. His failure to escape into an extraordinary unknown spoke to a lack of will. Without the will, he could and would not be all he had hoped. Rather, he would be and do what was familiar and no more. His failure to honor his true intent would ensure and, even advance, a false reality, a grand lie. Sebastian knew that he was ordinary and this truth would forever be his fiercest, unspoken enemy.

Many have climbed up and onto dangerous ledges. Many have chosen to be brave. Many have willfully crossed a threshold to eventual greatness. Untold numbers have exerted the will to negotiate obstacles with the sole intent to fulfill their utmost hopes. Their extraordinary acts made them a special breed. Some succeeded; most failed. However, they made the defining choice. Those who prevailed discovered the future and mapped the past. Those unwilling to begin the trek, those resigned to defeat, they conformed and complied. They were broken. They would not admit to this truth, but broken they were.

They feigned happiness without conceding their misery. At their core, these broken souls were inauthentic and attached.

Sebastian did not know that attachment was, upon close inspection, an ugly word, and, in the context of life, perhaps the ugliest. To be attached is to be leeches to something or someone. For would-be-mavericks, attachment is the most reprehensible of conditions. Attachment is a concept as limiting as much as it is unforgiving. When one is attached, he, ultimately, denies his true nature. He is not alive. He is not a life. He does not live life in the truest sense of the word.

Man becomes that to which he is attached. This maxim is beyond dispute. History is replete with lovers, warriors, scholars, and leaders who found ruin for a singular cause, their unwillingness to remove themselves from fleeting distractions—those recurring happenings which eventually become permanent. Their initial goals may have been laudatory, but attachments undermined their destiny. They lost objectivity. Consider a conqueror who thirsted for fame only to expand his kingdom beyond what was manageable. A man immersed in his lover forsook a primary calling to his destruction. An academic theorist vigorously advanced a flawed theory to his eventual scorn. A religious leader furthered an errant belief into a self-serving cult.

The date the attachment is realized matters not. Be it a year or ten thousand, whenever the revelation is known, the once great are reduced to irrelevance and, quite often, ridicule. Those who failed to understand their foolish attachments become history's enlightened lessons of what not to emulate. Quite ironically, in the end, this is how they became significant. For this reason, they are mocked and disparaged.

Those who survey history and probe the mysteries of human nature understand the perils of attachment. They understand that detractors such as ego, greed, and stark weaknesses preclude authenticity and deny what is true. Then there are objective observers who appreciate the perils of attachment. They accept the opposing premise, that to be unattached is a prerequisite to accomplish worthy and extraordinary feats.

At his tender age, Sebastian no longer harnessed humanity's inner drive to act for a greater good and even higher and nobler goals. Sadly, with the squelching of his youthful exuberance, he ceased to consider such a potent thought. He was young and now jaded. Attachments clouded his vision. He could not appreciate the premise that when man presses forward with disingenuous goals, he acquires

what is false, denies what is true, and fails to be unattached to anything and everything.

There is no greater injustice than for man to be attached. When this occurs, he is not congruent with his true nature. To be true denotes an unencumbered state of being. If not free of impediments, a man fails himself, humanity, and his Creator. His life-force festers within certain incertitude. His spirit may pulsate and yearn to be as destined only to have this yearning extinguished by mediocrity. Such an event is the evanescence of life-force, like the blowing out of a strong candle flame by a weak breeze. The end of life-force gives birth to complacency and apathy. Ultimately, the mind, heart, and will become chained and uninspired. This is exactly where Sebastian found himself, hopelessly attached and no longer one of the willing.

Sebastian did not discern that leaping from a window and racing into an exciting unknown was the choice he was destined to make. He had no idea that, once he deferred to his father's demands, and yes, even then he had a choice in the matter, he was no longer his own. If only by his failure to act, he did not realize he was not true to himself. He became an indentured servant, a common slave. He would not reject attachments and a fate leveraged by a lineage of small thinkers, forebears beholden to preserve a pack mentality which rendered individual hopes as hopeless.

In the Chiffon dynasty, custom blended with custom, which blended with ingrained mindsets and rigid expectations. The blended were far removed from finely stitched truth. What was attached to the Chiffon history became further attached and, eventually, irrevocably attached. Only a miracle would sever what was regrettable from Sebastian's life—that which was known. Rarely do unremarkable people look for miracles. They avoid change. They adhere to what they despise. They embrace the ordinary. They become attached to the ordinary.

The Chiffons preserved and advanced perceived multi-generational distinction within an undetected or denied indistinction. They fostered a perceived macro vision that was but a micro mentality. The Chiffons were small and uninspiring in every sense of the word. Sebastian's family continued a tired and worn routine, nothing more than a dominant lie connected to tangential lies which prevailed without challenge into defeat. Absent victories, even minor triumphs, exposing a history of deceit and igniting a righteous fight for a soul's essential worth and worthy aspirations, Sebastian's fate would be forever vanquished by an unforgiving, familial malaise.

The Chiffons were a microcosm. They and, in particular, Sebastian, epitomized how and why Willington was and would remain unremarkable. He proved as much when he turned away from the windowsill and retreated to the perceived comfort of his room. As if to hide his failure to be anything but ordinary, he closed the sash slowly and quietly—his unsuccessful attempt to escape would forever remain a secret. He advanced a lineage of defeat into the future by drawing the curtains and shrouding his shame in a room filled with doom. He tiptoed farther into the labyrinth and to his bed. He rearranged his quilt and buried himself under a cocoon of false security. Though warm and settled, he was miserable. He would awake in the morning and become someone and something he never intended.

Not surprisingly, before Sebastian drifted into a troubled sleep, the knock came in due course. His mother's arrival—one of those tiring expectations—was a sure sign she was attached to him. Sebastian and his dreams were an escape from her own misery. She sought refuge in his future. Her presence at his bedroom door was part of a pathetic routine. In a gentle and loving voice, she whispered, "Sebby?" Faithful to a fault, she, too, was unhealthy. Even worse, Sebastian had become attached to her. She whispered again, "Sebby, please open the door."

Sebastian was drawn to sympathy, particularly her sympathy. He was tempted to grant her access to his room and invite her into the recesses of his broken heart. He hurt and she knew he hurt. He wanted her to share his grief as much as she had shared his hopes. He was her first child and they were close, too close. His mother was his friend, confidante, and fellow aspirant. They knew his creations would blossom as pervasively and abundantly as a field of clover. Far and wide, they saw a world of his making. Oh, how they had deceived each other and Marie Chiffon led the way.

With his father's dinner-table-decree, which was far from an act of diplomacy, Sebastian saw his mother more clearly. She exhibited one trait that was more prominent than others. She was compliant. And if compliant, was she not equally fearful? For a lack of courage, she was an excessively obedient spouse. Having deceived herself, she allowed herself to be deceived. She was the master deceiver. She was the Judas of her own existence. She betrayed her own soul. Unbeknownst to her, Marie Chiffon taught Sebastian to do the same. He fell prey to her failings as much as his father's fanaticism.

While Marie Chiffon advocated Sebastian's possibilities to a stern patriarch like any competent advocate, her efforts died from quick and harsh counterarguments. As a husband who served as the supreme judge of all-things-Chiffon, Eammon Chiffon issued final judgments

that were impervious to a feeble wife's many appeals. He rendered rebuke after rebuke to her repeated pleas on behalf of a son's future she portrayed as bright as a full moon. However, without equal, Mr. Chiffon subsumed this feminine, spiritual pull and eclipsed the possibility of a son's ascension to historical and providential acclaim.

Sebastian's father was insensitive and inflexible. Even his friends and colleagues tolerated his rigid demeanor out of fear. Marie Chiffon was no match. Sebastian never saw her win any discussion. She would never impress upon her husband that their son would become a first-rate architect.

Sebastian considered leaving the sanctity of his bed, unlocking the door, and allowing his mother to enter even further into the labyrinth. He refused for one reason. He despised the thought that he would become who she was and would always be. He loathed knowing he sought an escape, but lacked the courage to prevail.

His mother was no different. She had a routine. She circumnavigated her husband's world. Boredom circled boredom. Unhappiness orbited the unhappy. What misery! Did she not see her own plight? Did she not know her own circumstances were to be Sebastian's and he would become exactly who she was in some form or fashion and without the power to prevail on any front? Did she not know that no greater purpose would be served and any hopeful outcome would not be secured beyond her husband's designs?

Sebastian heard the final knock and whisper followed by fading footsteps. There would be no further interruption. His father would not come to his bedroom. He was a man of exacting calculations. He measured twice, if not three times, and cut once. With his son, he spoke but once with words measured for one goal, his alone. He pinned pre-cut cloth against a selected pattern and sewed the pieces together; syllables became stitches; sentences became seams; paragraphs completed the pattern; lectures ensured that the finished outcome fit exactly as expected. His father spoke heartbreaking decrees until the final creation was a son made less than he could have been.

Sebastian was a product awaiting the final touches—monogramming and ironing. Not unlike ascending the throne, his father would present an obedient son to society as his heir apparent. The dumpy-looking boy of a distinguished clothier would be paraded as if a one-of-a-kind chapeau, a cane, an ornament of distinction. Sebastian would fit the part; he was made to fit the part, even if he lacked the physical attributes and genuine desire.

That fateful night, Sebastian surrendered. He relinquished his hopes. He enmeshed himself permanently within a contrived world, a

fiction. He did not know he was one of the authors of his own tragedy. Had he known this fact, he might have truly acted. He could have rewritten the ending as a new beginning before that one ending ended. This was the sad truth. The sun set upon his dreams and the moon ascended over the dark night of his soul. Sebastian aligned himself within his father's gravitational pull and took possession of his father's lies.

Sebastian authored his own lie into existence. His lie, like all lies, was the end of a sorrowful plot to a sobering autobiography. His story was a fiction of a fiction sourced within centuries of fictions. What should he have expected from such an ordinary existence? If only by his father's actions and a son's compliance, Sebastian documented his own fate stroke by heavily chiseled stroke into rock, a substance not susceptible to erasure and rewrites. Upon this rock Sebastian's spirit would languish, unless and until he was redeemed.

"No, this cannot be! Mr. Lorne, why didn't he leave? He should have escaped while he had the chance. There can be no wonder why Sebastian became the miserable man we saw at McDougal's store. Do ye agree? Does this not make sense?"

"Lad, are ye asking questions based upon some confusion?"

"No, I am just frustrated, surprised even. I wanted Sebastian to run away before it was too late."

"Ah. It's tough being a member of the audience, is it not?"

"Yes, and I do not mind telling you that if I were writing the story, I would have chosen a different path."

"Why?"

"Well, I don't know. To make Sebastian into something more than ordinary?"

"You presume he will remain ordinary?"

"Mr. Lorne, I understand your point. I am simply expressing some frustration."

"You best consider what I shared earlier. Do not make what is not." Mr. Lorne became very serious and said, "Lad, let me share a wee bit of advice."

"I'm listening."

"Life is circumstantial. All of it. We live in a world of circumstances and nothing more. Now, I am not asking you to understand this point, only to consider this principle as you listen to

the rest of the story. If you do, the story will become more than you expect.”

I accepted his observation and said, “Fair enough.”

XIII

Sebastian cried himself to sleep. He awoke startled in the early morning and recalled where he was and the ominous day awaiting. He dispensed with old routines and started a new one. He hurried down the hall and rounded the corner to the kitchen. His mother was making breakfast. He came to an abrupt halt. An uncomfortable pause filled the room. He avoided eye contact, grabbed a biscuit from the plate on the counter, and left without saying a word.

His mother turned as if she wanted to say something. She raised her arm. “Sebastian?” Mrs. Chiffon called to her son with an unsteady appeal. Though he had disappeared as quickly as he arrived, she called to him again. “Sebastian?” She spoke his name without authority. She had no authority. She never had authority to influence him or his future, much less right a wrong ensured by her own inaction. She had been complicit with her husband’s goals ever since their son’s birth. This was the reason Sebastian’s rebuff hurt her so. She knew truth and truth did not lie. Dismayed, she did not know how to proceed. She leaned over and squeezed the batter in her hands and through her fingers until she held nothing.

She cried pitifully. She whispered something. She had hoped to share sage advice, regrets, anything. Sharing was an excuse. She had to see him, to touch him. She had to look into his eyes. She had to impart a simple and clear explanation. Yet, other than calling his name, she did not know what to say.

She had prayed in and out of a fitful sleep for most of the night. She found the right tone and words only to find a better approach followed by other variations. She would offer her son empathy. She would comfort and encourage him—to what end she did not know. This is what she had planned, one of those impulsive reactions which might somehow justify her past choices and a future that would be no different, a cowardly response, a reflexive attempt to place half-hearted words over a son’s wound that would never heal. Whatever she shared would achieve one objective, maybe two. First, she would convince herself of her relevance. This is what she had always done. Time and again, she had offered words which only advanced the inexplicable without adding to her credibility. But now, on this particular occasion,

she would set a new tone. Though she lacked strength, she would appear reassuring in her weakness. As a second option, like tying multiple strings together, she would bind lines of flawed reasoning long torn and worn and frayed. These strings, weak and incoherent at best, would mollify Sebastian's pain without furthering his hopes in the least. Such were Marie Chiffon's intentions.

Nothing. Nothing was a theme she did not discern. She had nothing and could do nothing on behalf of her children. She was nothing more than a potential friend to a son and daughter who needed something more. Her children had friends. They needed moral authority. Sebastian and Lydia deserved a mother of character, not a fiction of a mother and no more.

Sebastian marched himself to his father's orderly office. He sat in a chair opposite a large barren desk. Unless he planned to revolt, he would become a mere footnote to the annals of a boring family history. He would become not ordinary, but less than ordinary. He would become a lie masquerading as truth, a clothier by trade, an imposter in general. Defeated, he was nearly an exact replica of his father.

Mr. Chiffon arrived promptly. Without making eye contact, he perused the schedule against a list of orders and, without hesitation, said, "Come with me!"

On a day as important to Mr. Chiffon as any, and to him alone, he was arrogant even with his own son. He did not offer a wholesome smile or inspirational prelude. He did not look at Sebastian and say, *I am proud of you, son! Glad to have you on board, son!* He did not say, *Son, you will be a fine addition to the Chiffon enterprise.* He spoke nothing positive. Not unlike a recently promoted sergeant wielding newfound authority and demanding absolute compliance and fealty, he barked an order. "Come with me!" was the extent of his father's greeting. He commanded and Sebastian obeyed, or at least he appeared to comply.

The newly christened subordinate, now a mentee to a mentor, was no more than an automaton. Sebastian stood unassured and, to the shame of his mentor, uttered but one sound. "Unck!"

Sebastian had hoped to reject his father's demand. Such was his intention. He would fight for his future. This was his chance, perhaps his last chance. He would present a worthy argument come what may. However, this never-before-spoken-until-it-surfaces response was either a failed appeal to reason or an innate defense mechanism. A battle in his soul raged and cowardice won. If reason and courage were at the root of his attempt to speak, they did not reach any semblance of coherency.

The simple fact is Sebastian choked. Grown in fertile self-loathing and malnourished for years by unspoken paternal contempt, the spineless expression of “Unck!” became a mortifying reflection of a soul who was less than whole. This sound, unmistakable and often denied for the weakness it conveyed, was a choke which would occur time and again throughout Sebastian’s life whenever the smallest challenge appeared insurmountable.

To a knowledgeable audience, this internal alarm was a seizure of neurons within the cerebral cortex which prevented a free-flow of thoughts and corresponding emotions to targeted muscles. The result caused unwanted actions or reactions. After all, aberrant behavior often trumps what is healthy. Whether muscle spasms or verbal quirks, what is unhealthy triggers embarrassing physical and verbal tics sourced within a guarded subconsciousness. The tics are unattractive and despised by those who are afflicted and equally uncomfortable to bystanders. Undoubtedly, Sebastian’s response to his mentor’s first instruction was an utterance from a powerless and broken boy.

The conditions were ripe. With heavy feet, unstable legs, and weak arms, Sebastian attempted to rise from the lone chair purposely positioned directly in front of his father’s desk. In synchronous fashion, his chest tightened and his neck muscles gripped without warning which dammed saliva from exiting the gullet. There was no *Good morning, Sir*, or *Yes, Sir*, *By your leave, Sir*. Sebastian voiced an utterance signaling the passage of a son not into manhood, but impotence and defeat.

“Excuse me?” his father asked in disbelief, hazarding the possibility his son’s disrespect lingered from the previous night.

Sebastian froze. He knew what he wanted to say, but he could not retrieve the response. Though he should not have said anything, though he should have remained silent, as silence would have implied some degree of respect for his new boss, Sebastian believed saying nothing would inflame a man who would combust instantaneously absent a son’s extinguishing reply. Such is the power of the choke, a reaction which dams reason to the mind as well.

“Unck!” Sebastian replied again.

His father stood ramrod straight, an all too familiar posture, and stared. Prepared to deliver a never-to-be-repeated admonishment, he remained silent. Mr. Chiffon could not discount the obvious. This hapless development and Sebastian’s nervous tic could not be avoided and served to do nothing but confirm a father’s understanding. His son was weak. Sebastian was an embarrassment to himself and his father.

Anxiety would hereafter overwhelm Sebastian whenever and wherever he was beset by pressure.

In no time, he was referred to as *Uncle* by those willing to shame him in public and private circles. This nickname was not an affectionate or revered moniker. He would never possess an endearing appellation bestowed out of love and respect. He became an oddity subject to scorn, as if he were the ugly half of conjoined twins or a boy with six fingers. Sebastian was abnormal and, therefore, unhealthy.

His face reddened by heat, his scalp wet, Sebastian saw the room spin at a dizzying speed and then saw no more. He toppled backward and over the chair and landed as awkwardly as his infamous utterance was birthed.

Mr. Chiffon stood indignantly over the mess and, without a second thought, walked out of his office and into the garment factory. “Feeble and pathetic,” he said quietly. “Just like his mother.”

The new mentor was without his new mentee. Lost in a forest of confusion, a scary place filled with easily negotiable obstacles, Sebastian needed a hero. The abrupt harshness of life was undeniable and overwhelming without an intrepid soul willing to encourage a son who lacked the strength to endure what was unwanted, but surmountable. Sebastian, who still hoped for what could be, was without a father willing to perform selfless and glorious feats, acts worthy of admiration and replication. Sebastian needed a savior. Alas, he had none.

Mr. Chiffon knew what had occurred. His mentee, pummeled by petty pressure, had fainted. As a mentor, he chose to ignore this episode. He allowed his mentee to flail in a sea of despair. He would take ownership of neither his mentee nor the humiliation associated with his mentee’s weak constitution. By incumbency, a decent father would account for a son’s inadequacies as a paternal failing. A worthy mentor would stand with a mentee in need of guidance. Mr. Chiffon did nothing of the sort. He did not perform the role of father or mentor as scripted. He did the opposite. Mr. Chiffon performed roles which reinforced lies. To his discredit, he performed according to what were false perceptions of his roles and he did so flawlessly. He was no nearer to truth and his only son was destined to follow a lie, a father’s lie, the family lie.

The ramifications were obvious. Sebastian, who was expected to perform the role of an apprentice, did not know his prescribed lines or stage directions. And, without a competent director, Mr. Chiffon would not perform his role of mentor unless his son performed his character. What a fix! Like a twisted circle without a beginning or end,

these two tragic characters were embedded within a riddle without resolution. Father and son, mentor and mentee, were at an impasse.

Seconds became a minute and at the close of the minute Sebastian opened his eyes. He found himself alone in the dark, next to an upset chair. He scuttled to his knees, barged clumsily out the door, and raced into the factory. He joined his father parading proudly down aisles of machines and workers. At each station, the occupant stood and offered an obligatory greeting as if in the presence of the Pope. The unwashed nodded while genuflecting in fake deference to a sanctimonious overseer as sinful as any of his charges. Out of a sense of self-preservation, his minions suffered this offensive ritual and dared not intimate the truth to either the Pope or amongst themselves. They feared Mr. Chiffon and in his overbearing presence, they accepted him as he wished, and this was as if he were pure light with the ability to expose inherent flaws within the fabric of their lives. He encouraged this perception and remained far above the unredeemable.

To the rear and slightly left of his holiness, Sebastian drew near. Mr. Chiffon felt his mentee's presence and took note of the interruption before returning his attention to Miss Renshaw. He spoke with absolute authority. "Miss Renshaw, young Mr. Chiffon will be learning the family business. Toward this end, he will spend most of the day with you. Please do your utmost to educate young Mr. Chiffon about the prefabrication process."

He spoke these lines without sincerity. The words were not as important as the man who spoke with one intention—to be heard. He spoke words into existence because he could and would whenever and for whatever reason. Yes, the order given to Miss Renshaw was genuine, but it mattered not what Sebastian would be taught. Mr. Chiffon could have issued his order at the next station where the instruction to his mentee would have involved the proper cutting of fabric. Mr. Chiffon's one imperative was clear. He wanted everyone to know of Sebastian's new destiny. He wanted everyone to know of his decision, that he had directed his son to a certain fate. Mr. Chiffon wanted everyone to know what they knew already; he was in charge.

Miss Renshaw nodded to Mr. Chiffon and Chiffon the Younger, who, whether perceived by the employees or ordained by their master, had become the newly appointed Cardinal of the realm, the overseer-in-waiting. All understood Sebastian to be Mr. Chiffon's successor.

Sebastian returned a nod to Miss Renshaw and said with a grin, "Good morning, Miss Theresa." The grin was a subconscious attempt to seek normalcy. Sebastian wanted to relate with Miss Renshaw as he

had done in the past, with familiarity and warmth. That he used her first name reflected his intention. He would be as he had always been, at least with her. His new destiny would not affect his own relationship with the workers. Of this he was certain.

Mr. Chiffon turned his head slightly. An oppressive silence pushed any lingering noise out of the way.

Sebastian looked toward his father and squirmed. He corrected his mistake. “Unck, forgive me, Miss Renshaw, Unck.”

The workforce knew Sebastian and they knew him well. There was no reason to introduce the boy, the beloved and precocious child who yearned for a realm other than the Holy Seam, as everyone called the Chiffon enterprise. Sebastian wanted nothing more than to be rid of the tiring formalities of a formulaic and false religion. The family business, not unlike the Catholic Church, was equally dogmatic. According to Sebastian’s beliefs, what should have been, was not, and equally important, what was, should not have been. Both Theresa Renshaw and Sebastian, as indicated by their brief eye contact, knew the truth, but they advanced the new and never-to-be-altered lie.

Miss Renshaw genuflected as both father and son departed for the remainder of their morning rounds. Sebastian dutifully followed two paces behind his father. Unseen by his mentor, each step Sebastian took in his father’s wake dissipated any of his youthful resolve. Resiliency was not one of Sebastian’s strong attributes. Despondency rained down and washed away the last vestiges of any dreams destroyed by a vicious reality as real as it was fake. Sebastian delved ever deeper into a fiction and he, too, became a fraud. He became irrevocably attached.

Sebastian’s mother entered the factory and stood in front of two large doors. Wearing a heavy mask of regret, she searched for Sebastian. She frowned when she saw him. With circles under her eyes and hair uncharacteristically unkempt, she folded her arms tightly across her chest. She did not belong in a room full of people creating products. She was not a creator. She was a destroyer. This one thought defeated her. She had nurtured and loved her children with the best of intentions. Yet, without doubt, she lost control, a control she never possessed in the first place. Her husband had control and never ceded control. The perception that she had control was a deception, a lie she advanced to represent some sanity in an insane world. This grim reality became self-evident when she saw her son walking toward the front of the factory. She knew Sebastian was neither healthy nor happy.

As if stripped of everything dear to her, Marie Chiffon, whether in her kitchen or her husband’s factory, possessed nothing.

She saw this clearly. In the sense that a detached mother knows, for she had been forcefully removed from her son's hopes, she could not deny the infection of a damp, cold, fog-filled heart. Her son was ill and she had never been part of a cure. She looked upon him and cringed. She watched for no particular reason than to watch. She was more helpless than the hinges which gave the swinging panels behind her movement. At least the hinges served a purpose.

Mrs. Chiffon, a pathetic character upon a stage where the drama twisted into a tragedy, was purposeless, spineless even, like pages of a book torn asunder, no longer glued and fixed to a rigid brace. An ingloriously somber character, the sun did not highlight the back of her head. No halo exposed her worth. She was not crowned in glory for the simple act of birthing a son into the world, a son who would do nothing remarkable, a son who would not conquer life much less the death of daily episodes within a meaningless and unfulfilling existence. In a word, Mrs. Chiffon was at the end of things if only because she ensured the end of things.

Sebastian looked to the right and saw his mother and immediately confirmed a gut instinct. His mother was less than remarkable. He derided himself and noted how he had become as dutiful to his father as his mother was a false prophet. He despised her. Of this, he was sure. She had encouraged his dreams knowing those dreams would never materialize. She knew before he was born that his future would be as prefabricated as any ordinary garment. Sebastian scoffed. His mother was as blind as she was naive, as self-deceived as deceived. She had escaped her own misery and entered her son's never-to-be-realized happiness. She had ensured both his and her demise. She was a leech, an unhappy and wretched leech fearful of eternity. Not unexpectedly, mother and son were allies no more.

"Do something, Sebastian!" I was enraged at the continuing downward spiral of Sebastian's situation. "Will he not do something with his life?"

"Lad, I sense some confusion, finally."

"I should say so! Sebastian is lost in a swamp when the path forward is clear!"

Mr. Lorne was amused by my emotional response.

"Why do you laugh, Mr. Lorne?"

“Young man, you gave me riddle about beginnings and endings more disciplined thought than you offer the legend of Sebastian Chiffon. Perhaps you are too emotionally involved?”

Mr. Lorne’s comment made sense. The riddle was more of an academic exercise. With the story about Sebastian’s life, I was vested in ways which denied objectivity. I sighed deeply and said, “I will listen with an eye toward balance.”

“That would be a good idea. I can assure you things are going to get tough for Sebastian, just as they will for you.”

With this sobering observation, I fell quiet and listened intently.

XIV

Sebastian had a new ally. Death. But death did not represent enlightenment. Death was not a practical means to make hay out of a dreadful harvest. Death did not serve as a catalyst for change that could be viewed as good. Quite the contrary, Sebastian chose his new ally for its archaic role of taking when the timing was ripe or when the one taken did not care that he was taken at all.

Death comes. It must come. Death’s mission mandates that it journey forth and arrive at the appointed time. Whether it runs, walks, creeps, or crawls, whether it attacks ferociously or subsumes quietly without notice at high noon or midnight, from the front, back, left, or right, death, unfettered under natural law and a law unto itself, whether it descends from lofty planes, rises from cellars, and looms large as the most ominous and omnipotent force, without prejudice, and not in the least a respecter of character, constitution, or creed. Death wants souls. Death devours souls. Death takes. Death thrives so that life will not. The strong are not immune and those who are weak beckon death onward and ask to be rid of their vexed minds and heavy hearts. The weak seek the end of the race and are indebted to death’s alacrity while the strong succumb to the inevitable.

Vanquished souls know death is acceptable not because it is unavoidable, but for its convenience. In the worst of times, death is appealing. Crises usher forth the unthinkable. Those on the fringe—where struggle and cynicism are constant reminders of a futile existence—they acquiesce. They invoke death when life is non-negotiable. Death is easy. This is the assumption. Death resolves what is hard. What is hard, after all, is unacceptable. Death is palliative in concept and final as a practical reality.

Children ponder death early in life and then add to their limited understanding of death continuously thereafter. The coldness and harshness of death as a concept is birthed when young minds begin to appreciate that life is terminal. Death is never far. Sebastian was not immune from such end-of-life thoughts. Here one second, life; gone the next, death. Simple math. Addition. Subtraction. A basic calculation. Ignore death for a time, as everyone does, but there is a reckoning. There must be. The soul weighs the magnitude of the end. Death is probed and challenged. Depending upon the circumstances and given one's knowledge, personality, or motivation, he philosophizes and then acts upon life and death to varying degrees.

Regardless of his philosophical bent and subsequent acts, death is either accepted or avoided—accepted as inevitable or avoided as unwanted. If accepted as part and parcel for the reason for life, which would be an extraordinary revelation, life blossoms. If death is shunned, as it is by most people, life is not viewed through the lens of possibility. As a consequence, man does not work, love, and play unbelievably. The corollary is clear. When death is accepted, life is possible under any and all circumstances. The strong thrive. When death is rejected, the weak are controlled by an inferior force and they, too, become inferior. The weak crumble. The lesson is disquieting. The weak become indifferent toward life and sensitive to death. They remain at the mercy of what is and will be, which is not a promise by any means, but the very end of things.

Just as Sebastian could not negate natural law, he would not overcome a directed destiny. The repercussions could not have been more severe. He became indifferent to life. He saw death as final and he saw it in everything. He did not accept death as superior, as meritorious, as the source of what could be. He did not see beginnings. He saw endings, nothing but the end of all things. Suffice it to say, Sebastian was ignorant of death's true purpose.

Sebastian's false perception of death—his philosophy—became more appealing than his father's mandate that he become a clothier. Sebastian resigned himself to this end and to the end of a life he once projected in vivid detail, a future rich with success. The reason was simple. He no longer fought against impossible odds for the chance to prevail. Nor was he caught in the middle and contending, as most do, with thoughts and emotions about a battle which could tip in either direction. Sebastian was not lukewarm between two poles. Uninspired, unwilling, defeated, he had gravitated away from the warmth of promise and ran to the frigidity of death. In such a state, he would lose the race. Without winds of hope or oars of inclination, he

drifted in a sea of despair. Death was the sea monster which twisted its tentacles around Sebastian and, though, he was drowning, he did not care. So austere was his plight, he refused to fight for his survival. He had no fight left within him. Life was no longer attractive. Death was, however, and death, as is its wont, waited for the resigned and defeated.

Sebastian asked questions. What is life without dreams? Why breathe if the next breath is without hope? If one did not or could not hope or dream, why not capitulate? Sebastian answered his own query. He would no more encourage life than fight death. Death would prevail.

Beyond any rationale, people seek to control what is outside their jurisdiction. They play god. They hasten death. They avoid life. Weakened vessels tack deathward. Decidedly indecisive souls wander the infamous middle and toward the end of things. Life is a constant war and death is the wild card for those willing to play it in their final hand. Given his current trajectory, which, at the age of sixteen included a dreamless present, Sebastian extrapolated from his past a future of no significant difference. Why would he not accept his flawed understanding of death's role?

Other than his father's poor example, Sebastian had no one. There was no hero sharing about or comparing death's relevance amidst life's true meaning. Sure, there were alternatives. There were fathers of friends. There were local merchants and priests from the local parish. However, Sebastian did not spend much time with friends and, as a result, he saw most fathers from afar. He had little interaction with business owners. His father controlled the family budget and made all purchasing decisions, which meant Mr. Chiffon controlled his son's time and bought his soul. Priests were more accessible, but what did they know? What could they offer? Could they free his spirit from a life of despair? Could they instruct as to death's pre-eminence?

Priests were but young men schooled to believe what was proffered by older men who, themselves, were once in the same position. Priests, directed by senior priests under a dated hierarchy of a church steeped in biased doctrine, followed the evolving dictates of the Holy See and a prescribed enforcement of scripture. Mere cogs in a grand machine, each priest was controlled and groomed to groom and control the masses, a centuries-old and simple but profoundly effective scheme. Barring their personal pasts before entering this calling, priests did not experience the same burdens as their parishioners. This is what Sebastian surmised at an early age.

Priests did not claw their way through tiring toil. Priests did not struggle. They lived in relative ease. Sebastian intuited as much.

Priests enjoyed an easy existence. He witnessed as much. He knew the truth. Priests prayed early, visited the infirm and dying by noon, prayed again before tea, planned for upcoming marriage ceremonies, funerals, and religious classes thereafter. They prayed in the late day before counting and recounting offerings donated by the gullible, those who filled pews weakly and weekly, the poor who ensured the local church was fiscally solvent, the archdiocese received its cut of the action, and the papacy enjoyed a fraction from thousands of churches the world over.

A young Sebastian tapped keen insight—death could be gleaned only by a life of strife. He knew that most adults would never acquire much less understand this premise. Sebastian knew one undeniable religious lie, a lie which the rest of the flock believed with unquestioning devotion—the notion that priests understood death. Sebastian knew the essence of life and death could not be known by men sheltered from the rigors of daily toil. Those who read holy words scribed upon holy pages, those seeking to be wholly holy, those who taught the masses how to be holy, they did not know of death. Who could overcome such solid logic? He asked a salient question. What did priests know of death? He arrived at the answer. They knew little to nothing. Priests did not battle tough elements which, more often than not, defeated most souls. Thus, if priests could not weather defeat, how would they possibly know of death?

Priests had little to no firsthand experience with which to place the end of their placid existence into eternal context. Their hands were silky smooth; their fingers and toes suffered no callouses. Hard labor consisted of pruning flowers or hoeing a small plot of vegetables planted not for feeding themselves during feast or famine, but for leisure. The majority of their congregations did not raise roses for pleasure. The working class grew crops and raised livestock as a matter of survival.

Priests toiled how? By pontificating upon the infallible word of God? They taught inerrant decrees just as other faiths had leaders who taught their own variations of the same inerrant heavenly edicts. Priests declared death to be as it was and would be, the teachings of the glorious church, lessons not subject to alteration. Even priests refused to challenge established doctrine and they spurned any of their fold from such blasphemy. They taught a holy message and ensured compliance. The rationale was clear. If the church controlled the philosophical and spiritual basis for the beginning and end of life, the church controlled the middle. With an uneducated and illiterate flock, priests, with a healthy dose of fear, did not have a difficult task.

Sebastian arrived at an ironclad conclusion. Priests, far from a benchmark of excellence, did not and could not offer deeper or broader perspectives of death than those held by ordinary and discerning commoners. Just the opposite, priests knew little of this topic. The working class did. Since priests did not live as ordinary folk, they did not contend with death like ordinary folk.

At his tender age, Sebastian knew of death and its significance. He knew by practical experience. Hard lessons were his greatest teachers. Suffering revealed truth. Priests, without suffering similarly, could not know. They could not teach their flocks about hardships and that one truly feared unknown—the end of one’s passage upon the earth. Priests did not grapple with rugged trials—back-breaking, gut-wrenching trials that tear skin, crush bones, and bleed flesh as man breathes faintly and, without fail, the soul claws feebly here and there and toward eternity. No. It was rugged experiences, not priests, which taught individuals, families, and communities about life and death. The clergy would never understand. They did not suffer as others.

Sebastian’s past experiences taught him a deathly theme daily. His father cast a deathly pall over the Chiffon home. No longer spiritually inspired, Sebastian now sowed thoughts and emotions on the downside of hope and into the valley of gloom until he reaped a crop of doom. He hedged his bets within the negative. He enjoined caution. Beginnings were but stutter steps to a spiraling defeat. His negative mindset and heart set shaped his interactions with people and situations. Life was but pending death and this notion influenced his worldview. Not at all surprising, the church, an otherwise positive influence for most children, clouded Sebastian’s perspective. He knew priests should not be trusted. Distrust became a reliable asset. He understood and accepted this fact personally. Yet another hard experience taught him so.

On a rather customary Sunday morning, Sebastian served as an altar boy. Father Baxter, who officiated the liturgy, stood in front of the congregation and, in preparation for communion, gestured to Sebastian to retrieve the chalice from the altar. The request was unorthodox, unexpected, and unwanted. Sebastian did not know how to respond. He did not want to respond. So, he did not. The reason was simple. He had never handled the chalice and was not permitted to do so. Thus, he refused to move. He asked himself if Father Baxter had forgotten the chalice. If so, Sebastian wondered why the priest ignored

rules regarding the handling of so holy an object and the long-standing restrictions placed upon altar boys, traditions of control, a means to groom.

Sebastian's inaction gave way to hapless uncertainty and eventual folly. Father Baxter's simple request underscored a history which proved Sebastian did not cope well under pressure—as if to suggest he weighed upon the end of things rather than possibilities. In a sense, the boy damned himself. Any challenge, no matter how trivial, only served to magnify his struggles and inadequacies. Baxter's request for the chalice was a perfect illustration. Sebastian knew he could not retrieve the chalice. As such, death defeated another beginning. A stale and static view of death chartered his course. He stared at the priest. Sebastian stood motionless in his white robe. He cocked his head to the side and feigned confusion. He raised his hands slightly. The priest could not misinterpret what the boy expressed. Sebastian condemned the order to do what was not proper.

Time stalled to a mind-numbing, heart-stopping predicament and, to his distress, Sebastian imagined he had become the center of attention. Within seconds of the priest's directive, the parishioners appeared to stop praying. They looked expectantly. Friends ridiculed him. His father sat in fear that his only son would somehow fail in this simple task and tarnish the family name.

However, did Mr. Chiffon and others know the protocols governing altar boys? Did they know of his legitimate, spiritual reservations? Did they know the chalice held the blood of Christ? Did they know that he knew the answers to these credible queries, ones he thought and answered once those seconds ticked away to an interminable pause?

Sebastian's concerns had precedent. Years ago, he witnessed Father Mumsley stumble during mass. Mumsley was an elderly priest with a girth unbecoming for any spiritual man, a sure sign that he lived a life of gluttony and absent strife. Within his fat fingers, the chalice tipped and a touch of wine dropped. To the shock of all, the blood of Christ fell. Mumsley recoiled and the congregation issued a collective gasp. He placed the chalice on the altar and raised his hands—a contrite response. He demanded silence and silence was given. He labored to a kneeling position and applied holy water to the floor. With a white towel, he gently dapped the excess liquid. After mass, he burned the towel as with any sacrificial offering. This errant priest knew the inerrancy of church practices.

Sebastian was no fool. But would he approach the altar and handle the chalice in the end? Father Baxter defied church protocol and

Sebastian juggled doubts. Lots of them. Confused and flustered, he questioned further.

Did Father Baxter forget that altar boys did not handle and never handled the chalice? Was the priest in a hurry? Should he comply with the priest's order? If he chose to get the chalice, should he genuflect when he approached the altar? What would happen if he touched the chalice? Was the chalice heavy? Was it full or empty? How should he handle the chalice? Where should he place his hands? How should he hold his head? How should he walk? What, God forbid, would happen if he stumbled? The list of unknowns surged in a forceful rush. The pressure was great. His heart raced; his mind fogged; his feet, heavy with blood that no longer flowed, were cemented, forever affixed to the floor. Sebastian lowered his eyes. He accepted defeat. Death chased him. Death forced the end before any beginning rose to prominence.

Sebastian glanced at the chalice and then shot a look at his father. Though Mr. Chiffon sat with his eyes closed and prayed in such a way that everyone was forced to notice his sincere petitions to the Almighty, Sebastian was certain the man stared at him. Through his eyelids, Mr. Chiffon watched his only son fail to perform this one simple task.

A few seconds seemed like thirty; thirty seconds seemed like five minutes. Sebastian had yet to move toward the tabernacle, the very foundation upon which the church was dedicated as a matter of rite to administer the rites, the location deemed hallow once the eucharist, the body of Christ, was enshrined therein. The significance of the altar was, as Sebastian had learned, holy ground and no layperson approached this sacred spot for fear that a bolt of lightning would strike the trespasser. Only one man was permitted to commune reverently with the symbolic stone, the living stone, God's Son, the Christ, the One who declared that, upon the faith of Saint Peter, He would build His church—the Catholic church. The priest alone could tread upon holy ground.

The church hierarchy, daunting at best, overwhelmed Sebastian. He saw the chain of command clearly: God, Christ, Saint Peter, Pope, Cardinal, Archbishop, Bishop, Priest. He did not belong in this entourage. He did not dare go where sinners would be snatched by the jaws of hell, where fire and damnation ruled and voices wailed unrelentingly for eternity.

Father Baxter gestured assertively a third time in an almost violent manner. Sebastian, who was of a weak disposition, walked not toward the altar, but to Father Baxter. Sebastian had made his choice.

In his capacity as the altar boy, he would ensure the priest did not commit a terrible infraction against established protocol. Sebastian had a holy mandate. He would prevent Father Baxter's excommunication for so simple an oversight.

The closer Sebastian stepped toward Father Baxter, the faster and more emphatically the priest gestured. He leaned his head in the direction of the altar. He whipped his hands in short bursts. His robe jerked abruptly. Baxter was so definitive with his actions, he may as well have shouted his order. Yet, onward the stolid child marched. The scene, comical to some, became increasingly uncomfortable to others. Father Baxter nodded with clear intent. His whispers grew to an audible urge. He was adamant. "The chalice! Get the chalice!"

Young Tommy Simpson sat in the front row and pointed and snickered. Scotty Jones, a boy with a scientific mind, whispered, "Doofus Exasperilus." Instantly, Sebastian was categorized as a new species Darwin had overlooked in his theory of evolution, a creature which evolves by regressive behavior when battling nonthreatening norms only to end in certain defeat. Scotty's catchy classification alerted other children who then ceased daydreaming or playing finger games. They watched an unfolding drama, a mystery, for no one knew why Sebastian walked in a trance.

"Please get the chalice, Sebastian!" Father Baxter said as the boy approached.

Sebastian stared at the priest and chanted a mantra under his breath, words conveying his gravest reservation. "Holy ground! Death! Holy ground! Death!"

"The chalice, me lad! The chalice!"

"Holy ground! Death!"

Murmurings rippled along the first few pews and fell like dominoes seeking finality. The bored were stirred by something new; they came alive. Suddenly, life had meaning. Life mattered. Children stood for a better view. Parents tried to quell the swelling raucous.

Mr. Chiffon no longer prayed. His eyes wide open, he tensed at the pending harm to his good name. Lydia, aware that her brother acted irreligiously against the pleadings of the priest, buried her face into her mother's side. She could not bear to think of the shame he would endure, ridicule which would persist for months, and she would suffer some residual harm.

By the time Sebastian reached Father Baxter, he was lost to reason. Though he intended to clarify if the priest truly wanted him to retrieve the chalice, Father Baxter's vehemence revealed something else. The priest did not forget the chalice by accident. No. He left the

chalice upon the altar by design. Father Baxter and the church had a sinister motive. Sebastian Chiffon would be sacrificed for the sins of the local church. He would die that day. The priest secretly invoked Abraham. Sebastian was none other than Isaac. He would be taken on high without knowing the whole truth. Sebastian and Father Baxter, as if Baxter became Sebastian's father by proxy, had their respective roles. God would be justified, edified, and glorified by Baxter's faithfulness.

When Sebastian stood next to Father Baxter, no one remained amused. The actions of one altar boy scared the masses. The congregation, as if hypnotized by some demonic power, coalesced inwardly and upwardly in a collective effort to see and hear. Sebastian's soft mantra, spoken loud enough for those in the first pew to hear, rippled backward. By the time the mantra made it to the last pew, the words, "Holy ground! Death!" became, "Get the chalice yourself, you fool!" People watched in horror. The boy would be damned for his insolence. The rush of murmurs swelled to mass alarm. Children leaned across parents and into the aisle. All eyes sought a glimpse of the bizarre spectacle—one Sebastian Chiffon possessed by an unholy force.

Father Baxter reached out and grabbed Sebastian's shoulder. The altar boy did not misinterpret the reason for this action. The priest honored the Lord's will. He would grab a knife and drag Sebastian to the altar.

Sebastian refused to cooperate. He broke free, soared off three steps, and ran down the aisle screaming, "Holy ground! Death!"

The panoramic scene, a symbolic painting of a heavenly battle against evil, told the story. Father Baxter fell to the ground, leaned backward, gripped his chest, and stretched one arm upward. He dropped his head back and looked to the heavens for a savior. The congregation erupted. People turned and watched a demon-possessed soul run toward the rear of the church. Faces lined the sides of the aisles, an artistic tool which lengthened and widened the vantage point. Perspective was broadened as necks strained and eyes opened even wider to witness an act ending in eternal damnation.

The ushers near the door, fearful of Satan's reprisal, refused to intercede. They stepped aside and swung their arms outwardly. Sebastian bounded for the exit. His robe flowed backward and directed observers to the focal point—the priest. Sebastian placed blame at Father Baxter's feet.

Sebastian's countenance told the moral of a scene with a tone as black as coal. He had foiled an evil scheme and he was scared to hell

for doing so. Forward he charged; forward he went. Bug-eyed with his face white and taut with fear, he cried, "Holy ground! Death! Holy ground! Death!"

When Sebastian crossed the threshold of the church door, Mr. Chiffon rushed into the aisle. He raised his arms high and petitioned for divine intervention. He grieved and prayed without ceasing. As if he now carried his son's sin upon his shoulders, a cross he did not want to bear, he dropped to his knees and lamented the blow to his reputation.

Later that day, before the uproar dulled inside the Chiffon home, Mr. Chiffon compelled Sebastian to apologize to Father Baxter. As the sun settled along the horizon, he walked a solitary mile to the rectory. When he arrived, Sebastian apologized. Yet, he afforded the priest every opportunity to seek forgiveness as well. To Sebastian's surprise, Father Baxter ignored this holy duty. He did not admit to any mistake or misunderstanding of a time-tested tradition that only the priest handled the chalice.

Priests did not struggle in the least. They did not know of death.

XV

Distrust. Sebastian did not trust and with a lack of men to guide him on his journey, he had cause. The repercussions came in staggering waves and the result was certain as well as catastrophic. He had a distorted view of the world. His belief in God diminished to a solid unbelief as he aged. If a Sovereign existed, He was a dungeon master who appointed Mr. Chiffon as the warden. For Sebastian believed if God ruled over his youthful steps, he would not have encountered so many dead-ends in life. Rather, he would have lived in and with hope. Yet, here and there, everywhere, and at all times, he encountered nothing but defeat and went nowhere meaningful.

He asked a depressing question. If he hoped at all, to whom would he share? God? His father? The priest? None of them. Sebastian was alone. He had been alone since birth. However, he could not help but wonder. As long as one has the breath of life, does hope not hearken? He did not think so. He had one constant companion—doubt. He doubted until he convinced himself that life was a veneer to a vile truth—death ruled.

Two years after the chalice incident, Sebastian sat next to his father and among a gathering of God-fearing, God-loving people. The

morning mass involved the burning of small grains known as incense which resulted in a sweet smell wafting throughout the church. Sebastian was not scheduled to serve as an altar boy and he was grateful.

He would have been the boat boy who carried the boat, a small metal container with a spoon and grains of incense for the thurible, a metal censer suspended by chains held by the thurifer, the senior altar boy. Father Gentry trailed the boys up and down the aisles as he waved the thurible. The incense served as a symbolic sacrifice to sundry components of the church, including the humble flock, and its sweet scent escorted the prayers of the faithful to heaven.

As he prayed devotedly to an ever elusive, if non-existent, God for more opportunities not to serve at times that brought attention to nervous boys prone to making mistakes, Sebastian watched the ceremony with a light heart. Had he been in the procession, he imagined tripping, knocking the priest over with the thurible falling, the heated grains spreading, and the church burning to nothing but the marble altar and a chalice blackened and too hot to touch. No altar boy would dare retrieve the chalice, even if tradition allowed.

One would think a boy focused on the end of things would avoid mistakes handily. Is not a feared end one to be rejected? However, fear does not prevent misjudgments and mishaps. Like a fenced pasture ensures the safety of a horse, if Sebastian stayed within the borders, he would be far from deviations. However, eventually a rail falls or a jump is made. Guards are lowered or forgotten when past hopes are resurrected and the heart is emboldened for a fleeting moment. Deviations can and do happen. Self-preservation is sacrificed for a taste of that unattainable sweet nectar, a life-giving substance which lays just beyond the fence, a coveted juice which furthers a secret desire for new beginnings that would otherwise never be realized.

In his small world, and as a practical reality, Sebastian had no male example but his father. Sebastian had no choice but to tack toward him when conditions appeared to be safe. Otherwise, he did not. That given Sunday, the-incense-burning-Sunday, Sebastian approached his father when he should have avoided him.

Sebastian was in a good mood generally. As the Chiffon family walked home after mass, he felt bold enough to start a conversation with his father. Sebastian intended to ask a question. He would create an opportunity which he believed would elicit a cherished conversation that would become a life-long dialogue.

According to Sebastian's way of thinking, he was almost a man. As such, as a divining rod of sorts, he bent towards that paternal pool, that special place in which a son seeks to wade. He believed his question had probative value and was worthy of an answer. Given a lack of radical thoughts advanced for his father's consideration over the years, Sebastian aimed high and hoped the leader of the Chiffon clan would be proud. Without the usual, self-imposed constraints—he leaped over the fence—Sebastian narrowed the distance between them. He was encouraged. He smiled. On the subject of church, priests, and death, at least to his enlightened estimation, he would enter and be within his father's good graces.

“Father?” he asked.

As usual, Mr. Chiffon walked alone and he walked slowly. One foot fell in the span of time the average man took three normal steps. The heel hit, the sole fell flat, the ball of the foot rounded until his toes rolled and propelled his other foot up and forward. As he walked, he looked at the sky. Anyone who knew Mr. Chiffon, or had been close enough to gain a sense of his hollowness, understood how he affected an impression of complete immersion in the moral premise of Father Gentry's homily. And to validate his sincerity and prove no other parishioner was his equal, Mr. Chiffon carried his bible next to his chest. His heart—his alone—was the Ark of the Covenant, the sacred repository where he placed the good book until the following Sunday.

Every week, as soon as Father Gentry dismissed the flock, Mr. Chiffon stood quickly before any other Scottish arse lifted from those hard pews. In full view of the congregation, he raised his chin heavenward, crooked his elbow, and slammed his forearm and hand at a forty-five-degree angle across his torso. In this insipid fashion he held his Bible over his heart. The representation he created was evident. Others did not see his bible; they saw a man—the one and only man who carried the infallible Word of God properly and reverently. The placement of his arm and hand in a direct line to the Ark of the Covenant served as an exclamation point, as if he beckoned all to witness the seriousness with which he gave the Word of God and the Sunday message.

Sebastian watched his father assume this position without fail every week. What foolishness, the boy thought. He considered the possibility that his father acted unconsciously; but, in the end, he concluded the opposite. Other fathers carried their leather-bound books at their hips. Their arms were loose, hands relaxed. They strolled while Mr. Chiffon strutted. He was the peacock preening and parading. If, in

the rare chance his father spoke with another father, for Mr. Chiffon was not popular, he looked at the man before him, then to the man's Bible resting at his hip, then back to the man and, to add insult to injury, he cut his eyes to his own heart-level Holy Sword and then stared back at his audience, a most unworthy soul.

Sebastian wondered whether or not his father ever realized a sword was better placed at the waist for fast and effective use. Not one father, as if posing for a royal portrait, placed his Bible near his chest. To a man, they were spiritual warriors by their stances alone. As men of substance, they were at the ready. If called to action, they would reach for hilts at their hips in one quick motion and draw their weapons. Mr. Chiffon held his sword in a strategically inferior and tactically incompetent position. He was showy. He represented nothing more than cheap symbolism.

Why, then, knowing his father as he did, would Sebastian ever pose a question? Perhaps, he thought thusly, that if his probe had any merit, and of this he was sure, Sebastian would prove his own mettle as a warrior. If his father found the query equal to his time and deliberation, perhaps he might change for the better. Perhaps their father and son relationship would grow into something worthy.

True to form, Mr. Chiffon, ensconced within his stuffy notion of spirituality, seemed bothered that anyone would address him before the sweet aroma of incense had faded from his clothing.

"Father?" Sebastian asked a second time in a louder voice.

Mr. Chiffon, upon recognizing his son's voice, slowed his pace even further and turned. He came to a stop. He did not look directly at his son. He kept this head aloft. He waited impatiently. He tapped his toe once—and firmly. Normal fathers would not have tapped their toes at all. It was within this atmosphere that Sebastian began the father and son bonding.

He smiled, canted his face to one side, looked up and made eye contact and said, "Father, we must acknowledge Father Gentry's homily for what it is, should we not?" Sebastian used words not customary to his typical manner of speaking. He came across as insincere. This was his second mistake. "Father Gentry spoke of death in parallels that are not representative of the toil of common folk."

Mr. Chiffon stared in disbelief. He waited for Sebastian to conclude his observation.

"Well," he continued, "given the relative ease of a priest's life, would we not be better served seeking lessons about death from the working class?"

Mr. Chiffon's feigned interest turned to genuine contempt.

Sebastian, fully convinced his father busied his mind with the depth of a son's wisdom, smiled not offensively, but hopefully, assuredly even. This was his third mistake. Since the pause persisted, Sebastian became further encouraged. He chose to add greater insight to his observation and committed his fourth mistake. "If Father Gentry were aware of the advantages of tough living, I am certain he would agree with my reasoning. Priests, after all, do not toil and, thus, do not and cannot appreciate death. Father Gentry is certainly in no position, based upon his lack of experience alone, to teach the working class about death. What are your thoughts, father?" Sebastian clasped his hands at his waist and waited.

Mr. Chiffon was stunned.

All the while, Sebastian had no doubt his father was impressed. This was his final mistake. After all, according to Sebastian's analysis, Mr. Chiffon was one of the working class. His father would have to agree to the entirety of his observation and strength of his query. Sebastian had a suspicion his father neither could nor would dispute that invaluable life and death wisdom was most often gleaned by sheer sweat and brawn. And sweat and brawn were birthed and died daily and knowingly by the meekest and most disfavored class, the poor and laboring quarter.

Mr. Chiffon remained transfixed with incredulity. He could not explode in so polite and public a setting; yet, he certainly could not appear to compliment such a foolhardy assertion. He would not impugn the priesthood, those saintly souls with a mission to save lost heathens. And he refused to intimate, as a matter of principle, that he was not among the elites of society. Those who clothed the upper echelons of society were not laborers, but artists of stature with the attendant wealth to warrant distinction. Mr. Chiffon did not doubt. He was not of the working class.

However, Mr. Chiffon had another problem. If he did not respond to his son, he risked granting the boy's intuition plausibility. If he gave approval by his own tacit acquiescence, he risked bucking a trend that had long served him well. Invariably, he had shielded himself from the need to engage others when not preferred. To engage his son would be a tragic mistake and establish a new precedent. Mr. Chiffon would have to then entertain his son's genuine attempts to converse on lofty spiritual planes on a more frequent basis. Such a notion was an untenable possibility. Sebastian, after all, did not carry his bible near his heart and only those with an internal Ark of the Covenant were worthy of initiating high-minded spiritual probes and subsequent holy

dialogue. To an ordinary man, Mr. Chiffon's reasoning would have been deemed rather ridiculous. However, he was resolute.

The Buxton family passed and then the Buchanans. Mr. Chiffon offered stoic nods to each.

Sebastian smiled as if he had arrived at that special place, a priceless experience, a wholesome discussion with his father that was long overdue and everyone should be pleased for him.

Meanwhile, as Mrs. Chiffon walked with Lydia, she stalled and turned. As was her custom, she walked and waited. But this time was different. When Mrs. Chiffon looked at her husband, she, having suffered a harrowing marriage for years, knew Sebastian faced an oncoming, feverish storm. Her husband's face foretold a lashing that would scar her son. Even Sebastian cooled internally the moment he realized his father was not impressed. He asked himself if he had committed some unknown and unpardonable sin.

Mrs. Chiffon released her daughter's hand and trotted forward on her toes with a semblance of grace. However, her best performance did not hide from other wives what could not be hidden. If only for her expression alone, she would not have fooled those subjected to similar pressures wrought from the same form of marital distress. Mrs. Chiffon arrived timely and, as she had hoped, provided her husband an out. She would be the sacrificial lamb. She would diffuse a volatile situation. She would suffer the blow for a feckless son.

Mr. Chiffon nodded to other families as he readied his rebuke. He grabbed his wife's arm gently but firmly with his free hand, for the one holding his bible had not moved. He pulled her close. He gave her a snide leer while nodding toward Sebastian. Speaking loudly enough for only mother and son to hear, he condemned both of them. "You have failed this miscreant and me. Rectify thy sinful ways, woman!"

The head of the Chiffon family ruled ruthlessly. He spoke into existence how things would be and added words of shame and damnation to seal his decree. He spoke rebukes and reprisals. He was lord over his domain and, as such, he would defend the priestly class from any subversive attack from within his own rank and file.

Sebastian had been defeated. Death ruled. The end of things prevailed.

Against a history of defeat, small but current hopes ended without new beginnings. With the sounding of yet another death knell to an already spiritless father and son relationship, Sebastian swore as resolutely as ever that he would never make the same error in judgment. His mother suffered on his behalf. She withstood public and private mortification. Mr. Chiffon walked off in a self-righteous huff.

Stunned into despondency, Mrs. Chiffon cowered as she walked along the road. With her head low, she further despised her husband and life itself.

Sebastian had but the faintest satisfaction, however. Though oblivious, his father had agreed to his underlying premise. Mr. Chiffon had answered Sebastian's question by his actions alone. Mr. Chiffon's harsh and public condemnation of wife and son served as confirmation that those in the trenches knew the meaning of death. Common folk, by sweat and brawn, sowed lessons of loss daily and reaped the meaning during harvests of pain, lessons the priestly class, including self-appointed priests like Mr. Chiffon, could not and would not appreciate. As far as Sebastian was concerned, priests, with their myopic and flawed spiritual conclusions, did not understand death. Priests were of a class which did not toil and, thus, did not and would not know the meaning of death.

Sebastian did not recall the rest of the walk home from church that day. He buried this experience next to other caskets of regret in the burial grounds of his heart, fertile soil, unholy ground, an angry venue not worthy to hold any holy covenant.

His mother never asked what caused her husband's senseless attack. She had no need to ask. Her husband, by happenstance, taught her to consider the source of any happiness and misery. She did. She discerned that he was a miserable man. Deep in her heart, she knew her son would follow his father's path.

"Ah! Mr. Lorne! I should have stopped you when ye spoke about death. But after the topic of distrust, which only makes death appear even more ominous, I have a few questions. And, yes, I am confused. And I am certain you know this already."

"That's good. Let's get to it then."

"Well, it appears as though Sebastian views death as serving no other purpose than to end life as he knows it and nothing more. Is that correct?"

"In part, lad."

"Then his distrust of people, especially with those in authority, underscores that death is something he either wants or would not reject in a depressingly hopeful way. Like he is just plain tired of life and hopes to end it."

"That is well said, lad."

I thought about this line of thinking and then weighed Sebastian's feelings. "Sebastian's attitude is terrible, his heart is heavy, and his father did not help him much."

"And?"

"Whether by happenstance or by design, Sebastian stumbled upon a rather valid point. Common folk do appreciate death because they experience greater and more constant struggles in life."

"Are the wealthy not able to do the same? To value death?"

"Mr. Lorne, that is a good question. I suppose they can, but this would depend on their attitudes." I said this knowing that I ignored Mr. Lorne's main point; after all, I believed that the poor do struggle more than the wealthy.

"How so?" Mr. Lorne asked.

"Well, those who have wealth would have to be humble, truly humble. Otherwise, common folk, those who are humbled by a number of forces on a daily basis, will always have a deeper appreciation for death. But this causes me to wonder how Sebastian will ever alter his outlook about life if death is acceptable simply by his resignation. Short of a miracle, he is stuck in a pretty tough spot."

"Shall we see?"

"Yes."

XVI

Forty years later Sebastian was as dispirited. Even though he had a successful business, owned a home, and had a wife and children to whom he was obligated as an expectation without the passion of a man serving a profound purpose, he followed his father's footsteps dutifully. His profession was his priority and his family knew it. He was deeply entrenched, which is to say he had long accepted his lot in life. Though he wondered what could have been, he knew dividends were not forthcoming from quarrelsome words uttered to himself. He had satisfied expectations since his youth and continued to do so in the present. Even he expected himself to fulfill obligations as a means to substantiate his rather shallow existence.

Given the nature of the mind, which is adversarial, Sebastian wrestled with these thoughts as Beast pulled the wagon haphazardly through ruts carved by wear and rain and then more wear. Unless a stone became wedged underneath a wheel or a limb obstructed the path, the conveyance rolled without objection. Needless delays elicited dissatisfaction from Sebastian. He was intolerant of obstacles and the

reason was simple. Obstacles either slowed or stopped what was ordinary even if only for a moment, and this was not good. He did not want the ordinary to linger, but to end.

When obstacles occur, something happens. The constant tamping of unwanted thoughts, feelings, and actions is interrupted. The end of the unwanted is delayed. It stands to reason that repetition of what is despised eventually grows to be comfortable and known and ordinary. Tamp. Tamp. Tamp. Such constant repetition solidifies undesirable patterns within the subconscious. These ingrained schemes are accepted as generally unalterable because they are unchallenged. Sadly, this sense of permanency becomes agreeable to most. Unless there is some unprecedented upheaval, a supernatural event—the obstacle of all obstacles that would end annoyances and unearth a latent desire within the soul—the ennui of life prevails. Why does humanity not see such absurdity, that being at ease with unease becomes palatable and tolerable to the point of becoming enjoyable? Is it for the fact that unease is known? After all, that damn rock obstructing the progress of the wagon forces one to dismount, to do something different, the unusual. For the briefest moment, one's mind and heart are distracted from what is known, that constantly constant, that comfortable ache borne of a longstanding regret. Alas, the obstacle is inconvenient and without realizing the query is posed, one asks, "Why does the rock appear only to force me from enjoying my misery?" Yes, the one asking the question fails to appreciate the idea that he is miserable and enjoys his misery.

Sebastian was in no position to see much less understand the importance of obstacles, or that he needed to be unsettled frequently and unexpectedly until he was agitated, as if poked with a stick until forced to fight for renewal, for something different, for his best interests. Such a prospect was an impossibility for so desperate a character as he. The tamping, that constant tamping, prevailed with success. Sebastian existed quite disingenuously and begrudgingly without the motivation to change his perspective. His many hopes were but skeletons, horrifying remains of what would have fueled a once potent being. He survived within the contrived on a daily basis. Conditioned he was, conditioned until competent to assume the responsibilities of his every spiritless task. Tamp. Tamp. Tamp. He was a pattern sewn into an article of perceived distinction without the substance of a thirsting soul.

To Sebastian, death was but the end of his futile efforts. While he could not avoid life any more than death, he now ignored both at the same time. In essence, one was the other. His failure to be a worthy life

amounted to being a meaningless life waiting for an equally meaningless death. Ultimately, Sebastian would not know that death is life because he failed to be a life worthy of death.

On this particular day he travelled along the main trading route back to his village from distant lands much like he followed all routines. He embodied the notion that life was a recurring monotony which precluded any positive, probative ventures or meaningful, philosophical musings. His days were filled with tedium. Whenever random and profound reflections occurred, those damn obstacles, he reacted with a desire to rid himself of the unexpected and unwanted. He wanted the ease of existing without any undesired thoughts and feelings, the ones associated with a hint of hope. Reflections, which were obstacles within the mind and heart, encouraged promise. Sebastian avoided promise as much as he avoided rocks in the road.

A lumberjack could not have clear-cut a path through the forest better than Sebastian cleared promises from his mind and heart. Promises were nothing more than potential distractions. Promises unsettled routines and provided perceived solace. He succeeded in business because he planned and executed his affairs to the smallest detail in the most predictable way and without the need for promises. He refused to be inconvenienced by introspection and inspirations.

Deemed irrelevant, he did not weigh the essence of life and death in a truly soul-searching manner as would an optimist. While he paused at times to witness the grandeur of nature, he had to after all, for obstacles do occur, he did not ponder each occasion to any esoteric or metaphysical conclusion. Observations of a beautiful sunset, a raging storm, or the sweetness of a slumbering child were nothing more than an annoyance, a delay of what would be in the end. The sun would set. The storm would fade. The baby would grow. If he happened to ever so briefly marvel at the majesty of nature, he did not bestow homage as one would grant God. Events, thoughts, or sensations captivated Sebastian's mind and heart by chance and only for the briefest moment before evaporating quickly, as if by design. He rejected any inkling to understand timeless truth. He could not and would not be bothered.

Meticulousness was the main thread woven into his being. That his fate was preordained and he was renowned as the best clothier was not without orchestration. Consequently, Sebastian did not dream and he did not inspire others. He simply demanded the best. He controlled the concept of a new dress, shirt, or suit from the initial pattern to the finishing touch. Those subordinate to his whims adhered to a strict regimen. He denied deviations that would unravel his goals.

Vexed by obstacles he could not control, he was irretrievably yoked to what he had and expected. Basic logic prevailed. What he had was borne from expectations and what he expected resulted in what he had.

Death, however, was different. Death was nothing more than the loss of mind, will, and emotion. Death was the loss of the breath of life and no more. The sum of this simple arithmetic assured Sebastian that, with his passing, all annoyances would cease. A meddlesome stone, an impassable route, or a subordinate who did not follow his orders were, in many ways, an aggravation worse than death. Obstacles were but ends to expected outcomes and death was the ultimate solution.

What of the end then? Sebastian had no expectations beyond his final moments in this world. And if anything did exist beyond life, he did not want what was unwanted, especially if it was something new and exciting. Not surprisingly, concerning his present journey, delays would incite the same angst as an employee altering a design without his approval. Anything or anyone not aligned with his expectations invoked his grossest displeasure. In this light, death would end all. Death would be no more than the termination of a troublesome existence. Death was expected, accepted. Most obvious to Sebastian, death was not an obstacle in the least.

Amidst the tranquil country scene, Sebastian and Beast travelled unimpeded. There were no obstacles. Their patterns persisted unabated. With temperate weather, light traffic, and the absence of delays, he was ahead of schedule. These circumstances presented him with a choice. He could deviate from his current path and take the Southern Bypass and arrive ahead of schedule, or he could remain on the Common Way and arrive on time. The Southern Bypass, with sharp curves and treacherous descents, nearly halved the distance of the main route.

Sebastian pulled the reins. Beast stopped. Sebastian climbed down and looked at the entrance to the shortcut. He solicited his donkey's input. "Beast, the Common Way would get us home much later tonight. The Southern Bypass, would get us home by dinner. What do you think?" He glanced at the entrance of the shortcut a second time. He took stock of his cargo. He noted the sun's position. He tugged the ropes binding formless garments that would soon unfold with exacting angles and subtle curves sewn by tightly channeled stitches into fluid refinement. He patted the portfolio of new patterns created by esteemed trendsetters in Italy. Filled with an ordinary zeal and an expectation to shave hours off his journey, he made a budget-conscious choice with the precision of a new pair of shears. "This evening, I shall have a

gluttonous meal. Tomorrow, shall bring added wealth to my coffers.” He departed the ordinary route and merged onto the narrow path.

Sebastian was not unfamiliar with the Bypass. He had taken this route five years earlier under similar conditions with the cobbler and baker. Though he had acquired increased girth and his strength and endurance had waned, this alternate route, which spilled directly into the north end of Willington, was not entirely unknown. He knew the pronounced descent would reduce the physical demands of an extended journey and the weather would ensure safe passage. A hint of daring drove him. He was emboldened, but not from a sense of courage. He relished a low-budget possibility to cheat the clock and gain some personal advantage.

Beast did not share his master’s enthusiasm. The ass plodded more methodically than usual. Instinct forced the animal to lean back against the descent. His stride shortened. He braced his front legs with every step. He dug his hind hooves haltingly into powdery dust that was as dry as it was fine. He withstood the weight of a loaded wagon pressing him forward. The middle of his back bore the brunt of colliding pressures no differently than the clashing of warm and cold fronts. A raging storm unleashed within the animal’s gut sent sweat down his sides like sheets of rain soaking drought-stricken fields. Whatever abdominal muscles Beast possessed were exerted in a futile attempt to support his spine. He was truly a beast of burden.

Sebastian held the harness and hugged the side of the mountain. He guided the donkey away from the edge of the cliff. The jostling of the cart spooked hidden creatures scurrying to remain hidden. Birds darted about and collected intelligence about the intruder. The sun arced across a clear, blue sky and transferred energy to trees preparing for another winter. Leaves painted in vibrant red, yellow, orange, and maroon prepared to fall into a meaningful death and purposeful decay. Autumn was in full bloom.

The path eventually leveled and the journey became less taxing. The wagon settled. Beast relaxed. Sebastian’s forgotten sense of daring turned to one of ease. A different route did not keep routines away. He pulled at nearby grasses, stuck a captured blade between his teeth, and turned to thoughts of his evening meal and a night of rest. “Tomorrow,” he pondered, “will bring feverish industry to my workers and greater success to the Chiffon dynasty.” This superficial and calming statement, reinforced by a view of the distant village, a scene reflecting stability to a worn way of being, pacified Sebastian. “Business,” he whispered to and for himself. “Business.”

Part Four

Choices

A man who has but one option
must still make a choice.

XVII

Sebastian looked forward and saw a series of turns. He recalled this landmark and its apt name, Consumption Junction. The path reversed from right to left before it was consumed by the mountain and regurgitated ahead of the second curve. The first portion of the junction, a sharp curve inward, required a second, sharp curve which linked to yet a third. Negotiating these curves was similar to reversing direction on a sewing machine to double-bind a hem. Though patience and skill were required, the task was not complicated.

With a high elevation and harrowing cliff, Consumption Junction was the most treacherous part of the Southern Bypass. Beast tensed if only because his master became more than cautious. Well into the first turn, the less than intrepid team avoided the sharp drop to the right. Even brave souls who willingly glanced below for a quick second, a sure test of courage, needed a full minute to settle their minds and hearts. Sebastian did not look down. He looked forward and did his best to steady his nerves.

It was not until the unexpected surfaced that he was rattled. Screams, terrifying screams from a desperate soul—a child—climbed the mountain. When Sebastian exited the second dangerous curve, shrieks from someone in dire need dissolved his resolve. Cries borne of a maniacal urge to avoid a horrible death gripped Sebastian. He froze into a monument of terror.

He closed his eyes and honed his hearing. He turned his head up and down and then left. The crisis lay far below the path. His adrenaline surged beyond any level he had ever known. It was no longer possible to remain weary from his month-long trip. Alert, his fear of Consumption Junction became a distant memory. A frightful unknown rivetted him.

Beast was spooked. The animal sensed what his master could not. Raw instinct told the animal that something ferocious loomed in the distant forest. Flanked by a mountain on one side, a cliff on the other, and unable to move backward, the donkey refused to budge. He would not advance into certain danger. Sebastian grabbed the harness with both hands and tugged without success. Beast leaned back and brayed tensely; his breaths shortened to rapid snorts; his eyes fixed upon nothing. The animal feared the unseen. Sebastian coaxed the donkey as well as any sideshow barker promoting exotic elixirs. Beast refused to buy. He was unwilling to cooperate and any attempts to calm the ass were futile. The donkey moved further away from the mountain and closer to the cliff.

“Unck! You have to move!” Sebastian yelled as he tugged the reins.

Diplomacy and salesmanship were lost arts upon an unrefined audience. Beast rebuffed his master. “Bray!” was the animal’s strong rejoinder.

“Unck! Damn it! Unck!”

“Braaaaay!”

“Unck!”

“Braaaaaaaay!”

“Unck! Unck! Unck!”

If Sebastian had not been in the thick of a potentially catastrophic loss, the exchange would have been comedic to any observer. However, employees and their families depended upon the cargo Beast pulled. Sebastian depended upon Beast. Now someone in an imponderable predicament depended upon both of them. Yet, Beast remained intractable. Sebastian could not have laid the finest palm branches upon the ground as motivation for the ass to march onward to timeless acclaim. Victory would not come without a struggle.

Enraged at Beast’s stubbornness and the possible loss of his cargo, Sebastian raised his arm and yelled, “Unck! Move it!” He struck the donkey behind his ear.

Beast did not bray in the least. The animal lurched forward five yards and halted.

Sebastian struck the donkey a second time. “Unck! Move, you damn ass! Unck! Move!”

Beast gulped down five more yards. When even louder hair-raising screams charged up the mountain, Beast surged ahead without invitation. Only the weight of the wagon prevented a full gallop. His attempt to run was deadened to a crazed walk.

Sebastian hurried to Beast’s side and seized control of the reins. The closer they came to the screams the more Beast whipped his head. Both man and beast were locked in another battle of wills.

“Unck!”

“Bray!”

“Unck!”

“Bray!”

“Unck! Unck! Unck!”

The tit for tat exchange belied the mutual respect the duo had forged over decades of familiarity. Contempt grew into an instantaneous cash crop. Sebastian reaped his fill and asserted rightful dominance. “How I tire of you! Unck!”

To suggest that Sebastian was confused would have been a gross understatement. Like a kaleidoscope, elements which should have remained constant shifted in time and space, he saw altered impressions of certain disaster. His ears were drawn to someone in dire need; his hands were occupied with a recalcitrant donkey; his eyes darted about and would not be captivated by anything specific; his mind searched with futility for a solution; his heart raced in fear. He withdrew from Beast and whispered deep anxiety into a word thrown from his tongue like a flat stone skipped across the surface of a calm lake to no pending destination before dropping to oblivion. “Unck, unck, unck, unck, unck, unck, unck, unck.”

In this midst of this chaotic scene, Sebastian caught a glimpse of a greyish blur. Something raced across the path and into the woods. He heard what Beast had sensed earlier. He listened attentively. He heard sounds. Sinister sounds. His worst fear was confirmed. Growls came from below and left and in the general location of the screams. Sebastian froze a second time. “Unck!” he gasped. “Wolves! Unck! Dear God, Wolves! Unck! Unck! Unck! Unck! Unck! Unck!” He bent his knees and caved his torso forward and over his thighs while peering down and into the sloping forest. He did not see anything. Yet, the sounds revealed everything.

The child screamed again. “Yah! Somebody help! Please! Yah!”

These pleadings were misplaced if only because the child did not belong in the forest. Not dissimilar to a sick ruse which fate plays—a what is wrong with this picture game—Sebastian could not imagine why any youngster would be alone in so wild a setting.

“Unck!” Sebastian said with sobering contemplation. He was out of his element. Alas, he was a professional man heading home when the unexpected surfaced and to make matters worse, he was an untested soul who filled his mind with questions which did not address his immediate concerns. What of the child? Boy or girl? Lost? On an adventure? Looking for something? Hurt? Trapped? Sebastian did not have the answers. Nothing made sense. Everything was unknown and so damned inconvenient. He relied upon a simple fact. Nature and things in nature, wild things, were unwelcomed. Nature was neither routine nor known to him. Moreover, he was of the nature to run from conflict. Yet, he did not; he could not, at least not then.

Driven by an instinct requiring more bravery than Sebastian possessed, he moved swiftly. He tied Beast to a tree. He secured his walking staff and made his way into the forest. He had one objective, remain undetected. He had to survey the landscape and locate the child.

With the presence of mind to be downwind of the wolves, he moved to the right of the unfolding tragedy. He slid down the mountain, circled boulders, wove around trees, and moved through heavy brush. He was ever mindful to remain as quiet as possible. When he heard the child scream again, he lunged toward a large rock. With his back to the boulder, he leaned to the side and peered. He searched. With yet another scream, he jerked his head left and looked through the trees. There it was. He found it. Never could he have imagined a scene so terrifying. He saw a desperate soul fighting for his life. Sebastian's heart sank. "Unck!"

A young boy standing behind a large tree held a stick in each hand. A pack of nine wolves roamed the perimeter. The child's face, a portrait of hellish entrapment, was bloodless white; tears had long since reddened his eyes; sweat soaked his hair. Knobby knees and oversized elbows absent proportional muscles above and below these seemingly overgrown joints revealed a lad the age of eleven. Lean, youthful, and hopeful of growing into manhood, his fight reflected no less. However, the child was terror-stricken and fearful that the end was near.

Sebastian melted internally. He felt what he could not describe. Conflicting emotions competed for his heart. Courage and cowardice. He fought divergent thoughts which pitted daring deeds against convenience. Caught in the between unthinkable extremes, he sensed the magnitude of his personal situation. Quite remarkably, he was unconcerned about the child's plight. Obstacles. Inconvenience. The boy was an obstacle and, therefore, inconvenient. He wanted neither. He wanted what was normal. What was normal did not involve gut-wrenching choices.

Converted into a silent scout, a role Sebastian did not know how to perform, he crouched low. He surveyed the terrain and saw two distinct features—a deep ravine to the boy's left and a sizeable knoll directly behind the tree serving as a frontal shield. The boy had protection on three sides. Sebastian looked to the right of the boy. Between the knoll and the road leading away from Consumption Junction was an area of gently sloping forest dotted here and there with large and small trees. This was Sebastian's only reliable means to reach the child.

He slammed his back into the rock and despaired. "Unck! I can't do it!" He whispered this sentiment over and over again. "I can't do it." Choices. He made his choice. Every aspect of the child's fight served as confirmation not to help the child, but to preserve Sebastian's selfish ends. Conflicted like no other time in his life, he conceded defeat before the fight began. The end precluded the beginning. Ghosts

of the past floated to the present. He was not surprised. Given the current challenge and his response, he would agree readily that he had been conflicted the span of some four decades. His history followed him. “It is not possible to save the boy,” he whispered to himself sternly. He banged his fists upon his knees. He argued with a bias.

The alternative was obvious. He crafted an excuse. He would avoid the unwanted. However, the speed with which he dismissed the idea of saving the boy troubled him. So, he forced himself to think of his choice again and then a third and fourth time. He weighed options. Though unsettled by so unconscionable a choice, he made a final assessment and it was no different than his initial choice. “No! There is no way. We will both die. My efforts would accomplish nothing.” If speaking and hearing these words gave his choice some degree of legitimacy, he spoke with authority. “I can’t save the child. It’s impossible!”

Sebastian would not tolerate competing thoughts and feelings to his primary goal of self-preservation. All other possibilities were impediments. He forced-marched rioting agendas off the one path he would follow, the path he followed since he was a child—the path without risk. He would jeopardize nothing for any cause lacking the promise of a known routine and expected outcomes. As such, a world without risk was acceptable. Safety. Security. This was his true intent. For, he was certain any attempt to save the boy would result in the loss of everything.

Sebastian would preserve coveted safety and security. He acted as if he could not escape through open windows. Challenges were but sills he could not scale across and down. The sash, the views beyond the sash, and the act of escape represented every possible impossibility. He accepted impossibility as the norm. Though a child’s life would likely be lost in the balance, the idea of impossibility was as prevalent to Sebastian as it had ever been. The impossible was ordinary.

Sebastian slinked back to the wagon and drove Beast further up the road. Yet, with his every step, he wrestled with moral choices other men would have made without hesitation had they been in the same situation. As the boy belted out continuous pleas for someone, anyone, to help, Sebastian stared down the mountain. He gauged the boy’s location. Sebastian was a coward. He knew as much. Yet, the more distance he put between himself and that desperate scene, the stronger and more nagging the counterarguments to his cowardice grew.

“Help me! Somebody, help me!” The boy screamed, but his voice was fading.

Meanwhile, like welcomed music to his ears, Sebastian focused on the grind of the wheels against the path. The more he focused, the louder the grind, the greater the distraction.

“Mr. Lorne! Wait! Wait! Wait! How could this be? How could Sebastian ignore the child?”

Mr. Lorne was humored by my reaction. “Lad, have you not been listening? Did you not state earlier about Sebastian’s view of death, especially given his lack of trust?”

“Yes, I did. I know. Sebastian distrusts everyone. But how could he place so much weight upon his own goals and deny the possibility of saving the child?”

“I think you know the answer.”

“I do?”

“Lad, who does Sebastian distrust more than anyone? Who is it exactly?”

This question shocked me if only because the answer was not immediate. I fumbled for a response. “His father? God?”

“Do not make what is not,” Mr. Lorne said.

“I have a sense that Sebastian places greater trust in things which will preserve and protect his current station and this allows him to avoid what matters above all.”

“Very good. Now, and I ask again, who does he distrust most? I thought of the answer, but was no nearer to it.

“Lad, who is it exactly that benefits from his selfish acts?”

“Sebastian,” I replied.

“Well, you said he needed a miracle. So, who does he distrust more than anyone?”

“Himself!” I said as I smiled.

Mr. Lorne smiled as well.

“Go on, Mr. Lorne. Please continue. I must know what happens to Sebastian!”

Then Sebastian focused on that something else and his conscience got the better of him. Suddenly, unexpectedly, he heard those maniacal screams for what they actually were. He closed his eyes

and squeezed his fists. His knuckles turned white. His fingernails left imprints in his palms. He could not bear his cowardly actions. He could not bear his inglorious past. He thought of his mother—to hell with her. He thought of his father—damn his arrogance. In the face of such infamous standard bearers, Sebastian knew with certainty that the boy would be eaten alive. This thought proved to be an enemy Sebastian could not defeat; yet, it was an enemy he could not ignore.

Without hesitation, if only because he knew hesitation was a precursor to greater temptation not to do what should be done, Sebastian stopped the wagon. He turned Beast around and made his way to a spot behind and to the right of the boy. He walked to the edge of the path and confirmed the best possible route into the forest. He looked at the trees and slope of the terrain. He calculated innumerable variables intuitively.

Certain of his course of action, Sebastian unhitched Beast. He tore into the supply of fabric and retrieved a bolt of white material. He cut a piece and wrapped it around the harness and smacked Beast in his hindquarters. The animal ran wildly and willingly down the Bypass. If all went according to plan, Beast would not stop until he made a less than triumphant entrance into Willington. Sebastian hoped the villagers would recognize the donkey as his and form a search party. He estimated that Beast would arrive in less than three hours. An additional four hours would be needed to organize the party and make a return trip. Within seven hours, Sebastian and the boy would be swallowed whole by a dark forest.

XVIII

With no prior experience, Sebastian began a life-saving mission he had not given due consideration. He did not know how to plan much less execute what was necessary. Who was he but a man acting without delay? He would do his best with whatever resources were available. This was his intention.

He took a large piece of cloth and laid it across the road. He withdrew a pistol hidden in the wagon that was for use against highway robbers. He had never fired the weapon. Sebastian grabbed his knife and moved quickly. He bundled food, matches, and essential supplies. He slung an animal skin filled with water over his shoulder.

With the wagon poised at the edge of the path, he surveyed the terrain a second time. His immediate objective was simple. He would land the conveyance as close to the boy as possible. He moved to the

side of the wagon. Gripping the boards, he dug his feet into the soil and heaved with all his might. The wagon did not budge. He hustled to the rear.

The boy, who continued to yell, had no idea he had been found or that help was imminent.

Sebastian sat upon the ground and for some strange reason, he paused. Far from a religious man, he offered unexpected supplication. “Unck! Give me wisdom and courage. Unck!” Sebastian prayed to no one in particular. God was not real, and if He did exist, Sebastian questioned whether He listened to the insufferable and lowly.

Sebastian’s distrust of the Catholic church had morphed to an unhealthy hate. Religion was a fraud at best. He questioned why men placed emphasis upon a woman who gave birth to a child, even if the child was God incarnate, as somehow a qualifier for a holy status. He could not reconcile why people prayed to a mortal mother in order to secure some undeserved gain. He rejected the idea that priests, sinners to the last one, could absolve other sinners of wrongs revealed reluctantly within dark and secret-filled confessionals, sins disclosed mostly out of a sense of obligation and not for any heartfelt regret. The church was a lie and the church leaders crafted lies to perpetuate a grand lie which would remain unchallenged by the ignorant and gullible.

According to Sebastian’s understanding, human relations were based upon power and money, and money was power. The church was no different. Money was the goal. Power equaled control. Sebastian believed the history of the church, long mired with a number of sensational, doctrinal positions which defied any rational or spiritual basis, such as the selling of indulgences for absolution of transgressions, represented a peak perversion of money and power. Such practices were a mockery to any Creator.

Sebastian questioned why the Catholic church held a monopoly on salvation to the exclusion of other faiths. Are not all men from the same God? The answer was clear. All religions were self-serving enterprises. All faiths diluted a credible God into a controlled theme for a desired outcome and a particular advantage. Christians. Jews. Muslims. Agnostics. Hindus. Even atheists. Each faith advanced a separate agenda in a stagnant market and rarely did any of them encourage evolving and enlightening tenets for the glorification of God alone. Differing faiths did not dare sacrifice their unique and coveted principles. This practice was no different than the bakery business, horse trading, and the clothing industry, and equal to natural habitats where bears dominated other bears, wolves did the same, and birds

controlled territories of flight by might and right. Sebastian refused to accept twisted rhyme and reason for the insane ebb and flow of a chaotic world loosely bound by frail belief systems. He would not accept that some elusive God created this mess. He believed competing religions were but any given sect's rationale to justify the inexplicable. In the end, as far as he was concerned, those faiths with the greatest amount of money and power were effective at marketing. Those faiths, therefore, acquired greater power and money to the detriment of other belief systems.

Critical to religions, business, and even natural settings, marketing campaigns are largely driven by fear of loss and greed. In a state of fear, people believe God is unattainable, that is, unless they comply with the dictates of disingenuous leaders evangelizing in the name of the one, true faith with a sure path to salvation. Fear is the reason most followers feign untiring and inflexible devotion to an unseeable and unknowable God. Conversely, they believe in some greed-based benefit—a salvation they will never lose—all the while knowing that others are damned for not being in the right place, at the right time, and believing the same right notions.

Sebastian was certain the gullible did not realize the extent to which they followed false faiths anchored by false doctrines. Religion was the lie of all lies, a means of universal enslavement of souls and absolute control.

No one and nothing could change Sebastian's mind or heart. He did not and would not believe otherwise. However, as an unbeliever at that precarious moment, as he attempted to save a stranded boy besieged by a pack of wolves, he was forced to fabricate a belief in some, that is, any divine power. He needed help and protection that was unattainable elsewhere, least of all within himself.

Sebastian finished his meager prayer and placed his back against the wagon. He dug his heels into the path and pressed with all his strength. His feet slipped; the wagon did not budge. After a third attempt, topped with more screams from below, Sebastian leaned forward not to regain his strength, but to seek answers. Sweat dripped down his face. His eyes narrowed. He was in a fix and he knew it. He had made a sacrificial choice to save the boy, but as a practical matter, he could not execute the first part of his plan. He needed leverage to lift the wagon and leverage would not be had without a lever.

A snake could not have shed its skin faster than the supplies slid from Sebastian's body. He raced across the path and into the woods and found nothing but sticks and branches too thin for the task. His eyes darted left and right and forward and behind. Frantic, he saw no

useful instrument. With each cry from the boy, Sebastian increased his pace. He went deeper into the forest and then circled back toward the Bypass. It was then and there, close to the path, within a gully and trapped in a thicket of vines, he found a limb six inches in diameter. The thickness was ideal, but he did not know its length.

The vines, a confounding, wiry mesh of varying sizes, twisted around and clenched the limb with thousands of holdfasts. They refused to release a prisoner doomed to decay within an inescapable chokehold. Not unlike a boy facing a pack of wolves, the limb had become an unwitting victim to one of the many cycles of nature. Now the limb's demise was a larger liability to Sebastian and the child than to itself.

Sebastian pondered the significance of circumstances. Limb, boy, and man were bound together by fate. If he did not free the limb, he would not free the boy. If he did not free the boy, his own life would be bound by tentacles of fate. His future would be squeezed to death with doubts. Should he attempt to retrieve the limb or not? Should he look for another option? Would the child survive if he did not use the wagon?

Sebastian despised the idea that he would be pursued by meddlesome what ifs and could have been scenarios, thoughts which would not rest for answers that would never come. Vines of regret and despair that would wrap around him tightly and take root deep within his soul were to be avoided.

Sebastian's situation could not have been worse. The vines were as formidable a force to the limb and Sebastian as much as the pack of wolves was to the boy. Though not as ferocious, the mesh of vines sapped precious time from the mission and vital energy from Sebastian's body. An otherwise menial task became an inordinate toil with eternal significance. The menial became the mission. If the limb was to serve as a lever that would propel a wagon forward and down the mountain and crash seconds later into uselessness, the menial was all that mattered. The limb, no small obstacle, would pave the way to success. The menial became monumental and he knew one thing for certain. He had to dislodge the limb.

With his fingers interlaced, he bent down and secured the end that was exposed to the light of day. To his disgust, like the wagon, the limb did not move. He forced it in every possible direction. He jumped on top of it. Then from the low right, he pulled upward in a tiny arc and moved it to the left and down. He reversed direction. He shifted it sideways. With strenuous effort, he accomplished little and grew angry and violent. He released his hold and kicked the vines. For the second

time, he stood on top of the limb. He jumped and drove his weight down. The boy screamed and Sebastian was enraged by the insanity of his predicament. He pulled each vine one by one. The limb, still secured within a mesh, roiled Sebastian into greater fury. More screams pierced the expanse. Sebastian heaved, pushed, pulled, and despaired. "God damn it!" he cried out in a stifled scream.

He faced a Gordian Knot. He had to unravel the mess. He had to create enough space between the limb and vines to move it up and around in a wider, circular motion. He lifted the limb again and shoved and pushed. The vines conceded little ground. Over time, as precious minutes disappeared, the vines loosened and widened and then even more, but only after Sebastian had exhausted himself. Though his muscles were spent, thousands of embedded anchors were torn like stitches ripped from a hem. When Sebastian reversed direction, the range of the circle increased. Fatigue gave way to more violence and more fatigue. As if inspired, Sebastian saw a possibility, the end of a beginning and then something new. The vines may as well have signed a resolution of surrender. He pulled and heaved and the boy yelled as if he were a raving lunatic.

When the tentacles relinquished their hold from the upper portion of its prisoner, Sebastian squatted low and positioned himself underneath and placed the bough on his shoulder. He pressed upward and lowered himself and pressed up again. His thighs screamed under the strain. He shook with weariness and his ire knew no boundaries. He shook with quiet rage. His back ached. Sweat poured down his face and blinded his vision. Veins in his arms bulged; his fingers were thick with blood and scratched and bleeding. He fought through the pain. Each thrust upward drove the far end of the limb into the ground and the lower vines relinquished their holds.

Resignation wrapped around Sebastian's muscles slowly and securely the more he forced the vines away from its prey. He extended the upper end into the air at a forty-five-degree angle and in a final effort, he forced the object higher, extended his arms underneath, and advanced his feet in short, arduous steps. The limb rose to a nearly upright position. Within that triangle, Sebastian was the potense. His arms quivered. His knees quaked. With a surge of energy, he stepped forward and pushed the limb beyond a ninety-degree angle and stumbled out of the way. For the slightest moment, the limb stood still and then gravity took hold. The limb veered sideways and slammed to the ground. The far end, still trapped by vines, catapulted up, and the tentacles yielded even more.

Sebastian rushed over and wrapped his arms around the top and hugged it close to his chest. He pulled and tugged and moved in a rolling motion. Gradually, an eight-foot piece of wood surfaced no differently than a splinter released from a flesh wound festering and full of puss. Relieved, Sebastian fell to his knees and caught his breath. The wolves growled and the child shrieked. Chaos. Utter chaos. “God damn it!” Sebastian shouted under his breath. “God damn it to hell!”

Sebastian stood feebly and took a weak hold of the freed captive and dragged it clumsily to the wagon. He inserted one end of the lever underneath and braced the middle portion against the back edge. Forming a new triangle, he positioned his body under the lever yet again. He shifted his feet and adjusted his hands.

The boy cried out as if mercy were handily available.

Sebastian pushed upward and forward and the wheels rocked slightly. Sensing slight momentum, he quickly released the pressure and waited for the wheels to rock toward him and then away at which point he pushed harder. He was the source of energy. He pressed and released with the back-and-forth motion and the wheels began to move. He rocked and rolled and rocked and rolled. Slowly, the shifting weight forced the wheels forward and down into fertile ground.

The child’s cries became hysterical.

The wolves sounded off as if ready to execute their plan.

The clock ticked seconds away with abject indifference. The wheels split tall grasses with deliberate intent. The wagon left the edge of the Southern Bypass and rolled into the forest. If all went as planned, both wagon and cargo would provide a good defense against the pack.

The unchaperoned vessel picked up speed and bounced off a tree to the left and against another to the right on its way to somewhere. Indiscriminately funneled here and there, the wagon rolled and trampled saplings and then rose abruptly and fell as quickly after hitting rocks and mounds and depressions and rotting logs. Wood planks and nails banged and creaked. Stress joints gave way to age and impact. Then, as if divinely appointed, the goal was achieved. The wagon careened into a large oak some ten yards behind the boy.

A lightning bolt, the sharp collision of wood against wood cracked loudly across the venue. The wagon tipped up into the air and forward in a half-somersault. Ropes binding a large load of cloth snapped free from anchors along the perimeter and rose as effortlessly as doves uncaged for a maiden flight. Bolts of fabric released from a long and undeserved prison sentence sailed unceremoniously in and through the air. Fabric rained down in a bow of assorted colors as if to invoke a future promise. Sturdy rolls of fabric danced a short, Scottish

jig before settling upon the forest floor. Then the lull descended, the eye of the storm. There were no screams, no growls. An uncomfortable quiet covered the wreckage as well as the life and death conflict just beyond the knoll. Silence reigned supreme while living beings assessed the unknown.

At the base of the knoll, the exact spot the boy huddled behind the tree for protection, streaks of yellow, blue, orange, green, white, and red fell away and stretched outwardly and brought unnoticed beauty to a scene as evil as any could be painted. Other bolts of cloth had fallen on top of the knoll. The rest landed near or underneath what was left of the wagon.

The wolves could not account for the commotion. With heightened but restrained aggression, the pack shifted in unchoreographed movement. They expanded and closed rhythmically along their established perimeter only to expand to a lesser extent while moving side to side, and rising up and lowering, akin to a massive ocean wave building at the behest of wind gusts and dissipating as quickly and then vanishing without a trace. The predators instinctively assessed variables caused by a foreign invader. As if to show the other wolves their unchecked bravery, some dodged toward the commotion and returned. A black wolf with a silver chest stood statue-like in the mix. He was the leader. He controlled his troops as well as any competent battlefield commander.

The crash startled the boy. He froze. He was too scared to look for the cause.

Still unseen, Sebastian, lagged far behind the wagon. He waddled and uncked his way down the hill. But for tugging his undergarments downward, he could have been mistaken as a fat groundhog racing awkwardly with his wide arse flopping sloppily from side to side. Only his unconscious attempt to keep his clothes from rising into the nether regions of his pelvis revealed his humanness. He labored under incredible strain. The pressure was inordinate. Breathlessly, as streams of sweat poured down his terror-stricken face, he raced against time with the horrible sense he was losing the contest before the contest began.

The extraction of the limb from the vines had depleted Sebastian's energy. Each step was heavier than the last. He was further hampered by supplies swinging haphazardly from his shoulders. When he landed on his left, the water jug swung across his chest and bumped into his swinging, right arm. When he found support on his right, the food swung in the opposite direction and smacked his chin, or the supplies did not return with equal speed and became entangled in front

of his chest with the water jug. These annoyances only added to his stress and further impeded his movements. Obstacles. Damn inconveniences. Such senseless juggling of resources did not scale with his heroic attempts and mission. But for his fear, Sebastian would have been overwhelmed. Fear steeled his nerves.

Ironically, fear was now his ally. Fear focused his thoughts and channeled his emotions. He ignored the obstacles. However, fear could not prevent a misstep. He lumbered clumsily and tripped over a rock he would have seen under normal circumstances. He dropped to his knees. His hands and elbows fell flat and he his body slammed to the ground. His face bounced into the underbrush and he surfaced with a war face streaked in brown and camouflaged with leaves. The supplies scattered every which way and the pistol and knife dropped from his waistline and out of sight.

Sebastian panicked. "The wolves!" he whispered. His mind conjured the worst possible images. Did they hear? Were they coming? He kneeled and scanned the horizon for any sign of movement. He expected to be attacked and devoured. The most unthinkable outcome would unfold. He would be eaten and the child would be next.

Sebastian placed one foot on the ground and searched for the pistol and knife. Leaves, having fallen with increased numbers over the last week, blanketed the ground. Worse still, they lay fluffy and crisp. Each sweep of his hands sent rustling sounds which, to Sebastian's sensitive state, were magnified manifold. He touched quickly, delicately, and found the weapons. He retrieved the supplies and returned them to his shoulders. He shot a glance forth and saw the edge of the knoll a short distance away. He stood and renewed his mad dash. His mind raced. His heart raced faster. Sebastian was accustomed to pins and thimbles, not pain and torment. Groomed for the expected, he expected no less. But he was out of his element and the expected was nowhere to be seen. He was not at all pleased.

The boy, cut from different cloth, lived in a world of unknowns. Randomness was a way of life. However, at this point in time, the child wanted what seemed to be an impossibility. He wanted to survive. He wanted a new beginning. Though he called for help, he did not expect a man to enter this tragic drama. The child was deep in the woods, far from civilization. He had screamed for hours to no avail. He was tired, drained, confused. His pleas had been absorbed by trees or ricocheted off rocks and into the blue sky where swirling winds carried them to uninhabited lands or they dissipated into nothingness.

But there was the sound, the crash. The child heard something stir to his left. He looked at the top of the knoll for any sign of a wolf

attack. He envisioned the worst and the worst became a reality. A mass of flesh fell over the edge. The attack had begun. He jumped back. He shrunk in fear. He lifted his sticks. "Yah!" he screamed. He prepared for battle. Regardless of any disadvantage, he would not concede.

After Sebastian's ignominious entrance, he righted himself without delay and grasped his staff. He looked nothing like a hero. Yet, as if summoning the stature and acclaim of Moses entering the promised land, he exercised some measure of authority and surveyed his surroundings.

The boy had backed up against the knoll in a deathly fright, but with one quick glance, his fear vanished as quickly as it arrived. There stood a man. The boy recognized a man, not a wolf. The boy raced toward Sebastian and held him as if he were his long-lost father. In an act befitting desperation, his emotional guards crumbled. He sobbed instantly. "I chased a rabbit!" he exclaimed. "I chased a rabbit!" Without a request for an explanation, he confessed his error. "I got lost. I chased a rabbit and got lost." Tears elicited from an unbearable scenario flowed down his face.

Sebastian was speechless. Though he had raised a son and daughter, he had not experienced such an onslaught of thoughts and feelings. He did the only thing he could and should have done. He held the boy as he scanned the forest for their common enemy.

The sun, suspended in a mid-afternoon position, would remain aloft at most another five hours. Daylight was a precious commodity.

Certain that the wolves were digesting the crash, Sebastian grabbed his pistol. The hunk of metal teetered in his hands. He pretended to know how to use it. He raised the barrel, pointed it at the pack, winced, and fired a shot. The boom rang in all directions. The wolves scampered no differently. Sebastian recoiled as much as the weapon.

He secured his walking staff and knelt before the child. "What is your name?" he asked.

The boy stepped back and replied, "Victor. I am Victor."

"Victor," Sebastian said, "I watched you from afar. You are very brave. You must remain brave."

Emotionally drained, the boy offered a confession. "I'm scared."

Sebastian noticed something unique about the child. He was rugged and independent, his legs and arms, bronzed by long summer days, were a testament to his strength and endurance. His hands, calloused and scratched, revealed determination. His keen eyes told of his focus. He was wiry and agile. He was nimble with unmatched

balance. He was a warrior even at his young age. He belonged in the wild.

Sebastian believed this boy had traversed rivers, fields, mountains, and canyons with the same ease his own son read Aristotle, Chaucer, and Locke. Victor belonged in nature as much as Sebastian's son was made to suffer the classics. However, he knew a course in practical survival taught by a pack of wolves should not be a part of any curriculum for anyone, much less a child. The most experienced woodsmen would rue the encounter they now faced.

Sebastian searched for the wolves and distracted Victor by design. "Where do you live?"

"Forkwood, Sir."

Sebastian gave the lad a startled look. Only for the rustling to his left did Sebastian glance away. The wolves grew restless. He shouted over his shoulder, "Yah!" He did not dare give their enemy any indication that he and the boy were inattentive.

He unwrapped a biscuit from his food supply and handed it to the child. He took command and barked an order. "Eat this while you pull material into a pile." Sebastian pointed to the nearby fabric.

The child had yet to notice the array of cloth covering the ground. Dutifully, he took a bite and walked toward the material.

Sebastian was humbled as he watched Victor. The child appeared to be more than respectful and educated. However, those who lived in Forkwood, an area east of Willington, though a hearty people with free spirits, were largely indigent and unrefined. Victor, like brilliantly colored fabric scattered along a forest floor shadowed in greys, seemed misplaced in Forkwood.

What would possess Sebastian to ponder these thoughts? Though he fought for his own life and that of the boy, he warred with prejudices he should have ignored.

XIX

As unbelievable as it sounds, preoccupied with the notion that Victor was a child of poverty, Sebastian stepped forward of the tree serving as their frontal shield. "Forkwood?" He whispered nonsense in a place and time demanding strict adherence to matters concerning life and death. "Forkwood? Really?"

The wolves growled louder after Sebastian took those foolish steps. They lowered their heads and the upper part of their spines followed. Crouched in a hostile posture, they waited for the signal.

Sebastian exposed himself to danger. When he came to his senses and saw his mistake, he stiffened. He stared. He could do nothing else. Not that he would have moved given his trepidation, he feared that a return to safety behind the tree would trigger an attack. “Good God!” he whispered. “What a damn bloody fool.” He slowly pointed his staff at the pack with an unsteady arm. “Easy now.” He spoke to the wolves. He eyed the tree without fully turning his head. He calculated the distance. He had crossed no more than two ells.

Misplaced, out of place, far from where he wanted to be, he scowled more at himself than at the wolves. “Foolish!” “Distracted!” He issued chastisements while bracing for a brawl that would spill over to the other side of the tree. He was doomed and the boy was more at risk than when Sebastian flopped onto the scene. He chuckled a fear-filled chuckle for the irony of his error—he crossed a line in the woods much like crossing from Wellington into the humble hamlet of Forkwood. He did not like the wolves and the wolves did not care whether they were liked or not. They had but one intention, to devour the man in front of them. Hunger was their only prejudice. And then there was Sebastian. As the most fervent purveyor of social stigmas, he confronted the harshest of divisiveness.

The wolves crept closer. A few crossed their loosely defined perimeter and sniffed the air. The leader of the pack remained patient. The wolves required no added sense of importance. They were not particular. Borders did not bind them. They were killers. They were in no hurry to go anywhere but a banquet of their choosing.

Sebastian needed help, a tool, something. He would take anything. And anything arrived. The most unlikely of warriors made an unexpected discovery. Sebastian was unckless. The vice of prejudice, that ugly bias activated by the slightest fear, had somehow given way to the virtue of courage. One Sebastian Chiffon was no longer afflicted with a verbal tic. He did not choke in the midst of the most unimaginable circumstances. He was amazed by this epiphany. He celebrated without knowing how to celebrate. The loss of this unflattering utterance had come without warning. He stood motionless and, quite astonishingly, speechless. Not an unck was spoken. No differently than recollecting one’s location after waking from a deep sleep, he shook slightly with an undercurrent of mounting energy. Yes. He was sure. He confirmed the revelation. The uncking was gone.

Tentatively, but with a hint of boldness, like a boy thoughtlessly stepping onto a cliff because his friends were reluctant to do what was daring and it was too late to return to safety and eventual scorn, he advanced toward the wolves. He spoke but one word. “Hey...

Hey... Hey..." He fished for other words to declare his authority and to prove that his steps were justified, as if words would somehow underscore his bravery. "Hey, ah... now, ah... the boy is off limits! Do ye hear? Off limits!" His voice grew in strength until he embodied his firm conviction. "The boy is off limits, I say!"

The wolves drew back.

Sebastian smiled. He giggled like a madman. He whispered and asked, "Why the bloody hell am I stepping toward the wolves?" He did not delay in responding. "I am not caving to pressure. I am not choking!" He leaped forward. He waved his staff. "Hey you... you... swine, the boy is off limits! That's how it will be! You hear?"

The wolves paced to and fro.

Sebastian tapped his staff upon the ground. He improvised a silly tune. "No uncking, no uncking, no uncking, you see!" He danced to a silly finish and stopped. He asked questions with a sense of freedom. "How could this be?" He shrugged and sang his response, "I don't rightly know the answer, hee, hee, hee!"

His infamous Unck, an enemy he had battled time and again, a battle he had always lost, was gone. Poof! It disappeared! Now that he finally faced a credible enemy, he won the war over an internal inadequacy which never had to be waged in the first place. His propensity to choke had been a lie fed by a fiction embedded within deeper lies.

The contrast was not lost on Sebastian. Unimportant pressures like tight delivery deadlines of yet-to-be-completed clothing orders induced many an unck. Everyone knew he was weak. His wife pitied him. His daughter conceded he was not cut from the same coarse cloth as other fathers. A new generation of children at school asked Ian about his Uncle, devastating for a boy longing to belong. For decades, prejudice dripped from a spring of self-loathing and spilled from a waterfall that affected everyone. The waterfall was not beautiful. It was and would always be ugly. The waterfall splashed into memories Sebastian wished had not existed at all.

Not long after his father ordered him to enter the family business, Sebastian attended Sunday religious education class. Mr. Cullers stood behind a lectern and discussed the virtues of struggle. "In Romans, chapter five, verses three through five, we learn that God wants man to suffer. Why?" Mr. Cullers waited for an answer.

The children sat quietly. They did not care to reply.

Mr. Cullers responded in their stead. "Because God knows suffering makes us stronger and leads to perseverance, character, and hope."

The students were less interested even after the answer.

A knock on the door provided an interlude. A man motioned and Mr. Cullers departed. In a room without an authority figure, the children stirred and murmured. Justin filled the vacuum. He whispered loudly, "Hey Uncle!"

The children looked at Sebastian with brightening eyes and eagerly emerging smiles. They knew what was coming.

Justin began his lecture by asking his own questions. "Do ye struggle with that needle and thread? Do ye persevere with that thimble thing? Do ye 'ave enough character to, well, ye know, hope? Does ye hope to make a dress?" Justin, the teacher, stood and gesticulated with his hands wrapped around his neck. He uttered choking sounds for comedic effect. "Unck! Unck! Unck!"

The children eyed each other and laughed.

Justin continued. "Unck! Are you going to make a dress after church today? Unck! Unck!"

The children appreciated interruptions to a Sunday School class that was anything but exciting.

Justin walked to the front of the room and, with his hands wrapped around his throat, he dramatized a massive choke. "Unck!"

Sebastian squirmed in his seat. Though he should have remained silent, though he should have forecasted the additional heartache he would incur by responding, he said weakly, "Unck! Mind your own business, Justin. Unck!"

Then it happened. The class shouted in unison, "Uncle!"

Justin achieved his goal. He goaded with purpose and, as usual, was successful eliciting some response from both his victim and audience.

Mr. Cullers heard the commotion and stepped into the room. With hands on his hips, he glared at Justin. He frowned at the class. Justin took his seat. Sebastian lowered his head to the desk.

Sebastian recalled this memory. "No more," he said. "No more uncking. No more Uncles!" He could not believe this dramatic recovery. His confidence grew to a hardened resolve. He yowled true not to scare the wolves, but to express his delight. He was amused as

much as he was thrilled. He felt whole. He felt a rush of virgin enthusiasm—a first in all his years.

“The wolves be damned. I am a new man,” he whispered. He paused and wondered out loud, “Why now?” He posed this rhetorical question and giggled the madman giggle again without offering an answer. The answer did not matter. He was a new creation with a new beginning on the heels of an ending long in the making and it happened in the most adverse conditions and at the most unexpected of times. No one would believe that he braved a pack of wolves in an attempt to save a child. But the beliefs of others were not important. Their prejudice was not his prejudice. Whether a recreation, a new creation, or simply the original unmasked, he was other than who he had always been. With a rising hope which could not be stolen by anyone, he enjoyed an uninhibited rush of confidence and that once elusive sweet nectar of victory.

Sebastian acclimated himself with the wild which, in some strange way, became a means of self-promotion, a trick of sorts that enabled him to assume responsibilities rightfully belonging to those with higher pay grades and greater experience, those with mettle, seasoned veterans willing and able to risk what was necessary to achieve lofty objectives by ordinary standards. Each time Sebastian looked at the pack, he became more courageous. He sent a clear message. He yelled unreservedly that the boy was off limits and he alone would ensure Victor’s survival.

A wolf darted forward and challenged Sebastian. Startled, the hunter gasped and jumped backward. He knew he was not invincible. He was scared. He raised his staff. “Hey there!” He stood resolutely. “Back off! You, you, you, uh... you swine!”

The wolf retreated.

“I didn’t unck! I didn’t unck!” He raised his arms and yelled, “You hear me? I did not unck!” He pounded the ground with his staff. “The boy is off limits!”

Oblivious to the cause of such antics, Victor watched from behind the tree and marveled at Sebastian’s bravery.

Sebastian whispered again. “The wolves be damned. I am a new man. Hee, hee, hee!”

Sebastian returned to the perceived safety of the tree singing a tune. “No uncking, no uncking, no uncking, you see.” He retrieved the loaded pistol and knife and put them in his pocket. He moved the bundle of food and jug of water to the base of the knoll. Then, as if possessed by a demon that was overwhelmed by an uncontrolled urge, he bolted forward of the tree and waved his walking staff. Foolishness

turned to insanity. He became predictably erratic. The wolves, unsettled by his behavior, paced with less confidence. Sebastian made these antics a routine.

With the pack in a hesitant posture, Sebastian used this opportunity to build defensive positions. Unless prepared, he knew the pending darkness would lead to their death. Time was of the essence.

“Over here, Victor!” Sebastian waved the boy to the base of the knoll. “There is a large amount of material on top of the knoll. We must retrieve as much as possible.”

Victor glanced up before turning his head and staring at the wolves. Even after Sebastian’s display of courage, the boy was too scared to accept any idea as worthy. He rested his eyes upon Sebastian. His face told a tale of woe.

Sebastian encouraged the lad. “Victor, a search party will come soon.” He explained Beast’s return to the village, but he did not offer a time when help might arrive. He gave the boy limited information and instilled hope. Sebastian wanted them to stay busy. Inaction and despair were killers. He would not allow either to destroy their chances of survival.

Sebastian placed his back against the knoll, interlaced his fingers, gestured with his head. “If we can get more fabric, we’ll start a fire.” He reassured the boy. “The fire will keep the wolves at bay. And if we can reach the wagon, we will use the broken planks to build a fort.” He went silent and allowed for these words to take hold.

Victor looked down briefly and then up again. He conceded to this difficult request. “Let’s get the fabric,” he said.

“That’s the spirit!”

Sebastian squatted and nodded. “Place your foot into my hands.”

Victor wrapped his arms around Sebastian’s neck and climbed up the makeshift ladder. When Sebastian rose to a standing position, the boy placed his other foot into his hero’s hands and pulled himself higher until his head crested the edge of the knoll. He reached forward and dragged fabric toward him and down. Bolts of beauty fell to the ground.

“I need to go higher!” Victor yelled. “I am going to step onto your shoulders.”

Sebastian slid his hands under the boy’s feet and pushed upward. With the added length, Victor’s chest and stomach matched the level of the ground. He crawled ahead and worked quickly. He came to a kneeling position. His fingers foraged feverishly for fabric. He pulled each bolt toward the edge before forcing them downward

with his feet. He angled his torso to one side and then the other and secured what was available. "I can't reach anymore!" he yelled.

Feet first, Victor slid backward and found Sebastian's hands. When the boy felt pressure against him, he dropped below the knoll and his upper body followed. Leaves, dirt, and twigs rained down. Sebastian released one hand from the boy's foot and wrapped his arms around Victor's legs. The child slid through a chute greased with oil and sweat.

"I saw the wagon," Victor said excitedly. "I saw planks of wood."

The child's words gave credence to Sebastian's proposal. He nodded approvingly.

Victor offered a sobering counterargument. "The planks are far away and they must be heavy."

Sebastian nodded again and turned his attention to their unfinished task. "Victor, we must make the perimeter and set it on fire." He pointed to the opening on one side of the tree. "Place fabric in a line from the tree to the knoll and I will do the same on the other side."

Further buoyed with inspiration, Sebastian wasted no time.

Victor feasted upon their sense of urgency.

The wolves growled. They sensed that the stakes had changed. They had witnessed pistol shots and the crazed maniac who advanced forward of the tree. They saw collaboration to retrieve fabric from the knoll. Now, with twin efforts to build a defensive position, they felt a resoundingly rebellious tone.

Sebastian dropped fabric to the ground no differently than planting seeds along a furrow. He yelled, "Yah, Yah, Yah!"

Victor mimicked his hero. "Yah!" He saw the plan unfold and he was elated. "Yah! Yah!" He laughed to himself. He rejoiced in the unexpected developments of the last thirty minutes.

Sebastian assessed his work and Victor's line of defense. He was pleased. He found a stick and wrapped fabric around the end. He took matches from his pocket and lit the torch. He raced forward and hopped along the perimeter until he reached the tree, at which point he hopped from the tree to the end of Victor's handiwork. The fire burned without uniformity. Depending upon the content of the fabric, either smoke or fire rose into the air. The smoke served as a screen and was more of a hindrance than a help. The smoldering material sent a darkish, silvery cloud that would hide any attack by the pack. However, the fire was somewhat intimidating and appeared to burn the smoke away, at least this is what Sebastian forced himself to believe.

Victor was unaffected with any liabilities imposed by the smoke. He saw a fire and only fire. The fire was good. He smiled and raised his arms into the air. "Yah! A fire!" he shouted triumphantly. "Yah!"

The boy's enthusiasm was infectious. Sebastian joined the war dance and yelled, "Yah! Yah! Yah!" He gave the child another order. "Victor, find wood and brush! Get anything that will burn!" No sooner had the words been spoken, they tore away and gathered more combustibles and placed them at the base of the tree. Sebastian added loose debris to the perimeter which made more fire than smoke. The mixture proved effective.

Victor moved back to the knoll with Sebastian. Even though the boy knew the answer, Victor asked, "Do you think the fire will work?"

Sebastian drank from the water jug and handed it to Victor. "The fire will help, but," he paused and looked at the boy, "the fort is a necessity." Sebastian was not willing to claim even a partial victory.

Victor reverted to his customary vigilance. He watched for any attack by the pack.

XX

Although Sebastian's comment had tempered Victor's enthusiasm, he did not regret lessening the boy's enthusiasm. He preferred that they maintain a guarded posture. Comfort would lead to defeat. Vigilance meant their joint survival. Meanwhile, Sebastian diverted the boy's mind from thoughts of wolves lurking forward of the fire. "So, you live in Forkwood?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir."

"Hmmm." Sebastian looked at nothing in particular. "Forkwood?" he asked the question aloud, but to himself.

Sebastian walked to the tree and added fabric and wood to the fire. He dodged up and down and around and peered through the smoke. He looked for fiends beyond the tree. "Yah!" he yelled. On the way back to the knoll, he whispered, "Forkwood." He could not shake this surprising disclosure. "Where are your parents?" he asked.

"My father is home," Victor replied.

"What does he do there?"

"He's a woodsman."

"A woodsman?" Sebastian was not familiar with the term.

“He takes people on hunting and fishing trips.” To give his father’s occupation even more legitimacy, Victor added, “He teaches others about nature.”

The wolves growled and howled with greater intensity. The duo whipped around and saw nothing in particular. Victor moved closer to Sebastian.

“It’s fine, lad. I think the smoke unnerves them. They can’t see and this bothers those devils to no end.” Sebastian continued to distract his new friend. “And your mother? Where is she?”

Victor did not like this topic. He lowered his head and whispered, “She was murdered six months ago.”

Sebastian fell silent and stared at the child before turning away. He did not know how to respond. After a long delay he said, “She would be proud of you.”

Victor shrugged his shoulders.

Surprised and saddened by this revelation, Sebastian understood just then how much the boy had suffered at such a young age. He tended the fire and digested this additional insight. His genuine intent to distract the child may have worked, however, he found himself without focus. Victor’s family was from Forkwood. His father had lost a wife. Victor, a mother. How could his father endure the loss of a son? Sebastian juggled a number of emotions. His burden became even heavier. Repercussions from any failed effort could not be ignored. He yelled at the wolves with greater intensity. “Ha! Ha! Ha!” He tossed wood where it was needed most and stoked the fire. The wolves’ growls unnerved Sebastian. He interpreted their chorus as a taunt, as if these natural predators knew the added pressure he now shouldered. “Yah!” he yelled angrily as he walked away. He refused to give the pack any indication they had won even the smallest battle. He returned to the knoll and continued the discussion. “Why are you in Willington?”

“I am visiting my grandparents.” The conversation took an encouraging slant and Victor allowed himself to grin. “It’s my first time there.”

“Really? Well, I say! How exciting. I live in Willington. Your grandparents, what is their last name?”

“Samuels.”

Sebastian stopped dead in his tracks and held his breath. He looked at the child in a manner which could not be misinterpreted. “Samuels? Blythe and Adalyn Samuels?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Sebastian shook his head slightly. He refused to concede the obvious. “Blythe Samuels!” he said forcefully to himself. He sat in silence and then asked, “Samuels, as in the owner of the bank?” He looked at Victor again.

Victor felt Sebastian’s disbelief. The boy chuckled out of discomfort. It did not help that Sebastian muttered questions in a manner adults ask themselves when attempting to resolve troubling incongruencies.

Prejudices are not always transparent, especially to an innocent child. Sebastian, on the other hand, realized his preconceptions of class and social status were gross injustices toward humanity. His prejudices, which he attempted to reconcile, were becoming increasing detractors from the danger they faced. “Well,” Sebastian offered with no small amount of hesitancy, “I am Blythe Samuels personal clothier.” As if to keep this thought to himself, he finished his sentence in a whisper. He did not want to somehow insinuate his inferior status. Sebastian repeated this comment for good reason and with conviction and directed his words toward Victor. “I am Blythe Samuels’ personal clothier.” He reached a profound revelation. He was attempting to save the grandchild of his wealthiest patron. For some reason, he expected Victor to understand the significance of his disclosure. He moved closer to the boy and touched his arm. “Did you hear me? I am your grandfather’s personal clothier.”

Without speaking, Victor confessed his ignorance. He shrugged. The child did not know the first thing about clothiers.

Sebastian spoke as if speaking to himself again. “I make his clothes.” He felt the weight of his words. He turned to the boy and stressed this point. “I make your grandfather’s suits and shirts. I make your grandmother’s dresses and blouses.” His serious demeanor could not be discounted.

Another grin crested Victor’s lips. His hero was a friend of the family, or at least a business acquaintance.

Sebastian did not smile; he frowned. What a twist to the conversation. What altered representations in the span of minutes. Sebastian had to bridge divides which, as a practical matter, separated him from humanity and, more importantly, the child. Victor had entered his world as unexpectedly as he had entered the child’s world and, to make matters worse, Sebastian knew the child’s family. Victor rather enjoyed the idea. Sebastian did not. Such insight was inconsistent with his history and way of being. He had struggled throughout life and largely for himself, and, as his past revealed, he did this rather poorly most of the time. Now he struggled for others—for

people he did not know and, more importantly, for people he knew. He understood the implications. He could not struggle as he had always done. He could not capitulate in the thick of the fight. He could not avoid the unknown. He could not avoid crossing thresholds.

“Forkwood?” Sebastian almost shouted. He asked with more than a hint of disrespect and angst. He said Forkwood in such a manner that the name sounded unworthy. “You live there?” He could not picture Victor living in that particular place while being the grandson of a family that owned a banking empire.

Victor nodded less than confidently. He felt a need to upsell the virtues of his home. “Have you been to Forkwood, Sir?”

“I should think not!” Sebastian was caught off guard and blurted his answer reflexively. He covered his tracks quickly and atoned for his indiscretions. “I am just a bit confused, lad, that is all. Just confused.” He hesitated before saying, “I rode by Forkwood once, no more than that.” He looked away in shame. He realized his tone was offensive and he was less the gentleman for being so unbecoming. But he was at a loss still. “Blythe Samuels, the banker?” he asked himself. He could not account for this news.

Based upon Sebastian’s reaction, Victor sensed his relationship with the Samuels family was diametrically opposed to the very idea his parents lived in an area Sebastian deemed unworthy. No small degree of shame crept into Victor’s soul. He looked down. His nervous grin melted to a frown. He was type-cast as one of those, a member of the lower class, the uneducated, the unrefined. Not once did he ever feel this stigma in Forkwood. Never. Though he was chided in jest by a child or two for having a mother who was ill-suited by all accounts to live in such an inferior place—she spoke properly, walked gracefully, and was as beautiful as the wealthy were rich—his parents did not discuss this perception. They lived a perfect life. Victor did not suffer as one of the unredeemable. He was neither redeemable nor unredeemable. He was loved and he loved most ideally without judgment or condemnation.

That his mother was from superb stock and a family of distinction meant nothing to Victor. She neither promoted this status nor did she think less of Forkwood and its inhabitants. His father was from superior stock and he chose to raise his family in Forkwood. Victor’s father wanted nothing more than simple, country living. In fact, Marvail Cameron was the wealthiest man in the world in all respects, save money. Victor’s mother admired her husband’s strong roots and grounded beliefs. She admired his humility. She was drawn to these noble traits, kingly virtues unmatched by any. Victor was her

prince and she treated him as such. He was no outcast. He was not without honor for the plot of ground upon which their humble castle rested. Wherever he found himself, he belonged—this is what Victor understood.

Sebastian had committed an unpardonable sin when he compared thoughts of wealth and squalor. He judged wrongly. He committed this sin even after he had made the most daring entrance into the gravest danger to save an unknown soul. Two opposing views battled for the core of his being, that of haughtiness and humility. Familiar with the former, the latter had long since been snuffed. He learned to be prideful while humility, an attribute he did not appreciate since he was a child, was unfamiliar. If one trait had to prevail, arrogance would be victorious, just as it had prevailed for decades.

The unspoken and unanswered question had to be posed. Whether Sebastian was ready or not, he fielded the query. Why would a man enter a nightmare to save another soul and, in the middle of such an act, impugn that soul's place within a social hierarchy? Sebastian provided an answer. A man who would willingly sacrifice his life for another would not measure according to worldly standards. He dwelled upon this fundamental point. The very idea that he could not reconcile his own prejudices was not a reflection upon Victor or anyone subjected to his rash personal judgments. Sebastian's gross biases were a reflection upon himself alone.

The truth was inescapable. Sebastian had imposed a judgment upon the child without cause. As a result, and not in some small way, Sebastian contradicted his intent for not only saving the child from certain death, he contradicted his purpose for acting so bravely in the first place. Was his choice to save the child not based upon some internal struggle to do right, a right which could not be ignored? He had to overcome his own cowardice and act honorably for the right reasons in the first place. His initial choice had nothing to do with false perceptions of anyone's status and worth. He could not alter his choice to save Victor based upon new qualifiers which did not scale with his original druthers. Doing so would undermine his genuine motives and render his original choice as meritless. His newfound bravery would be deemed suspect from the start.

Sebastian could no sooner save the boy while, without cause, shaming him. But that is exactly what he did. He shamed Victor and, as a consequence, Sebastian shamed himself. A lie may not co-exist with truth. He could not go left and right at the same time. He could not sacrifice his own life in order to save someone else while cheapening that other life for whatever reason. He did not make a

conditional choice to save Victor by specific criteria, as if this was this and that was that and such conditions were known in advance. Life—Victor’s life—deserved to be saved, regardless. This was the reason Sebastian made his original choice. His courageous act had to be unconditional. Sebastian’s reason to save the boy was not about the boy, but about his own personal life. He had to live his life without unjust constraints.

Sebastian was at another crossroads. In the past and in any other social setting, he would have deemed Victor as either worthy or not. And, to his growing disgust, he would have deemed the child unworthy. The fallacy of Sebastian’s entire world view was exposed in a single conclusion. The lesson was apparent. Sebastian had cheapened not Victor, but himself. He had imposed his own superior status upon the child and others. And now he could not tolerate this thought. By deeming Victor as unworthy, Sebastian levied a sentence upon himself. “Who am I to judge?” he asked.

Sebastian conceded a most telling observation. The boy’s mother—the daughter of a wealthy banker—left the idyllic for the inferior. This was his shallow conclusion. And he did not want to be shallow. He pondered questions. Was Victor’s mother less of a lady for living in Forkwood? Was she a greater lady for the choice? Was Victor less of a being for living in general poverty? Was his father unworthy solely for his occupation? How is a man or woman measured? Why judge others in an all-too-judgmental and unrelenting world? He dug deeper. Why make a soul’s journey more difficult by acting in haste, by noting differences, by heaping scorn? Doesn’t everyone deserve encouragement over rejection? These questions hurt and Sebastian began to appreciate the basis for that hurt.

He had thought, felt, and acted shamefully. As if the sun broke through the clouds and struck him with the heat of day, he saw and felt the full measure of his shame. Not surprisingly, he was confident that he was less of a man for holding prejudices. If he held the child as less than worthy for whatever reason, be it for his place of domicile, lack of financial wherewithal, or possession of so base a title as commoner, Sebastian’s choice to save the child would be discredited. Perhaps even worse, if he became even more resolved to save the child because Victor was the grandson of a wealthy banker, his choice would be dishonored with even greater discredit. In the end Sebastian would dishonor himself if his choice was not a matter of doing right because right is good and just and true.

Sebastian stood quickly and darted forward to inspect the fire. He added combustibles that were less inflammatory than observations

about social status and judgments expressed without forethought, words uttered carelessly and without love of man. He looked beyond the fire and watched the wolves pace. "They do not care where the boy lives. They do not care about my perceived success." These are the words he spoke to himself. He was contrite. Incensed by inequities, he accepted then and there that everything he had ever believed was the construct of a fraud. He acknowledged his sins in an open confessional. Smoke carried his prayers of forgiveness heavenward.

He walked back to the knoll in deep thought. In less than two hours he had transformed beyond shallowness and into depths he had never imagined. He was humbled to the point of an uncomfortable confession. "How sad," he whispered, "I made the courageous choice to save a child while saddled with the most offensive predispositions."

Victor looked at his hero and asked, "What is your name, Sir?"

"What?" Sebastian asked. He did not hear the child's query.

"Your name. What is your name, Sir?"

Sebastian did not expect this question and he did not know how to respond. "I am Mr. Chi..." He halted a reply the child would have accepted as a matter of course. He was Mr. Chiffon, after all. He would have been introduced as Mr. Chiffon to the boy in any public or private setting. Sebastian balked and he was certain of the reason.

In the most trying of conditions, he had interacted with the child at a profoundly intimate level. Formalities were not required. Customary titles could be shunned as useless, disgraceful, if not repugnant to those melded by pressures evolving and revolving around matters of life and death. Do two strangers wrestle with a bear to a successful outcome only to enforce a social protocol that would be unseemly for such intrepid warriors? Does a man dare to save another soul from a most unspeakable tragedy and then resume the pretense he is above the one saved?

This was at the heart of Sebastian's hesitation. With a simple question from a child who wished to be respectful, Sebastian received an invitation to bridge another societal standard he had enforced vigorously without second thought. Yet, even after rebuking himself about arbitrary prejudices, his answer was not forthcoming. The right response would have been given without difficulty or delay by discerning souls, but not by those who exercised snobbery in its most subtle forms. "Goodness," he whispered, "am I no different than the likes of Mrs. Wallace?"

Sebastian recounted what had transpired. He had raced down a mountain to battle a pack of wolves to save the boy. Now, quite unexpectedly, he had to move a mountain to be with the child without

a barrier imposed by titles. Sebastian knew he had to be with Victor in a manner befitting their current plight. He would lose nothing if he dispensed with the idea that they were different. Moreover, they would gain everything if Sebastian saw both of them as equal and informal in their fight for survival.

No longer unsure of his answer, he replied with a softness conceding profound deliberation. “Victor,” he said as he looked up and then down, “I am Sebby.”

Victor reacted cautiously to a response he did not expect. He tilted his head.

With added assurance Sebastian said, “Yes, yes, hear me, Victor. Call me Sebby.” He tendered a smile.

Both of them accepted the truth. Although the child appeared somewhat overwhelmed, Sebastian was Sebby after all. In such a short period of time, Victor knew Mr. Sebastian Chiffon unlike anyone understood the man. No one ever witnessed Sebby dare so valiantly. Victor did. No one ever listened to Sebby’s intellectual prowess under pain of death. Victor did. No one ever saw Sebby love unconditionally, a love which drove every fear-laden demon from his soul until he was unckless. Victor did. In fact, Victor never heard Sebby unck. How Sebby occurred to the boy was truer than every disingenuous projection and expectation foisted upon Sebastian Chiffon since his birth. Victor knew nothing of the generally accepted Sebastian Chiffon, the fraudulent Sebastian Chiffon, the imposter. Victor knew nothing of the man or his past. He only knew the true man standing before him—Sebby—and Victor was wealthy for this knowing. He was wealthy for having Sebby as a friend.

How Sebastian now occurred to himself is exactly how he occurred to the boy. Another cataclysmic shift brought another astonishing reckoning. He met himself exactly where he was without pretense and he was perfect. He did not hesitate. He dismissed all formalities. Though he would not have considered the possibility of a stranger calling him by his first name, much less his nickname, especially a child, social dictates became an archaic rule without application. He was no longer a man of extreme protocol. He was no longer tied to a controlling heritage of refinement. He no longer viewed himself as a respected leader in Willington based upon meritless markers of status and wealth, with connections to those with the same heightened conceit. As if dew melted by the light of day, he no longer associated his surname as one of distinction. Though everyone knew him as Mr. Chiffon, he was Mr. Chiffon no longer. He was Sebby. Until he met Victor, only his parents, wife, and closest friends called him

Sebby. Now the world could and should call him Sebby. Most fitting of all, he knew himself as Sebby. Sebastian Chiffon came to an end. A new beginning dawned in the aftermath.

Transformations have incalculable consequences. Prior to his relationship with Victor, Sebastian was as out of place in the woods as he was being addressed informally by those without entitlement. Now, he belonged in the forest. He belonged with a child in desperate need. He deserved to banish artificial barriers and to know and feel what it was like to be vulnerable and equal with others in all circumstances. Such were the consequences. Such was the transformation. Uninhibited, Sebastian allowed for Victor to know him authentically. Victor deserved no less.

However, Victor sensed the man did not belong where he now stood, just as the name Sebby was forbidden upon his lips. He felt awkward. He viewed Sebastian as if he were a nobleman of royal stock. But, given their unprecedented circumstances, this respectful child accepted the stranger's name. He had no other choice. He did not have time to argue the point. "Sebby! Watch out!" Victor yelled.

Their situation changed for the worse and beyond the need for pretense and formalities. From the extreme left and behind, a lone wolf flew through the air and knocked Sebastian to the ground and attacked. Standing with his front paws upon his chest, haunches raised, the fiend snapped his jaws and glowered. The intensity of the animal's growls matched rows of white teeth clenched tighter than a steel trap. Sebastian met a being who was not governed by titles or appellations. The wolf did not extend a paw in friendship or defer to rigid protocols. The attacker did not offer a greeting which elevated Sebastian as somehow more important for living in Willington or being a successful clothier. The enemy ignored arbitrary constraints established by unwritten rules of civil society. The wolf was a stranger and acted by natural rules, real rules governed by real names like hunger and territory and life and death. The wolf would take what it wanted while protecting itself and do both under the auspices of survival.

Survival was an appellation Sebastian came to know so well that he greeted this concept on a first-name basis in no time. Survival was his only goal. He stretched to his left and seized his walking staff and thrust it forward. He struck the brazen wolf. Blow after blow, he counterattacked. Blind fury drove his arms. He battered the wolf's head mercilessly.

The predator adapted to the man's instincts and dodged in an attempt to gain another advantage. Sebastian's blows dug into the wolf's body. With a gnawing hunger in its gut that was as deep as it

was present, the wolf was unwilling to retreat. Enraged by Sebastian's effective efforts, the wolf dropped to the lower extremities. He sank his teeth into Sebastian's leg and tore skin and ripped muscle. His jaws coated in red, his eyes filled with avarice, he looked up and snarled.

Sebastian screamed and writhed in pain.

The pack reacted without delay and charged.

Horrified, Victor was immovable. Fear nailed him to the ground.

Sebastian had the presence of mind to scan the area. With a wild swivel of his head, he searched up, down, and around. He knew the end was near. "Victor, grab the gun! Grab the gun!"

Jarred from a fear-frozen state, Victor lurched forward. He secured the pistol. With his hands shaking uncontrollably, he aimed poorly toward the lone wolf. Three explosions rang through the air. Three bullets, two more than necessary, for bullets were worth more than gold given their situation, bore into something, somewhere, but not the attacker. The pistol commanded and the forest fell into an unnatural silence. The intruder leapt from its prey and fled to safety. The pack scattered.

XXI

Sebastian lay in misery. Victor raced to his side. Rivulets of blood flowed forcefully in a bright red and soaked the injured man's pants to a deep maroon. Both man and boy swam in a pool of disbelief. The scent of flesh wafted through the air, a lure for hunters who waited somewhere in the underbrush. The pack would return uninvited to a feast sooner rather than later.

"Sebby!" Victor spoke a name, a man's name. He called to a friend in need. Their bond—forever a blood bond—bound warrior to warrior. Though the child might never appreciate Sebastian's sacrifice, seeds of understanding were planted. That understanding involved a role reversal. Victor had to survive and do so while saving Sebastian. The contrast was striking. A child who had lived beyond the need for stringent expectations readied himself without doubting his mission. He would help Sebastian cross over a threshold he should have traversed four decades ago.

After bouts of breathless restraint, Sebastian inhaled quickly and spoke with urgency. "Get me the knife! Some fabric! Move, son!"

Victor wasted no time.

Sebastian rolled to his side, pressed his hand into the ground, and raised his torso up and forward. He took the knife and cut a strip of cloth. With slightly bent left knee, he placed the material flat on the ground and positioned it above his shredded calf. Though his hands shook more out of pain than fear, he tied a knot above the wound. "Help me!" Sebastian pleaded.

Victor dug in his heels, leaned back, and pulled. Sebastian grabbed the boy's hands, stood with difficulty, and wrapped his arm around the child's shoulder. He berated himself. He held his head in despair. "I did not expect the wolves to climb the ravine." He rebuked himself for such a foolish omission. If only to preclude future failures, he questioned why he did not anticipate an assault up the ravine.

Sebastian was no different than most. He lacked knowledge. He lacked experience. These two deficiencies impaired his judgment, especially when random variables conflicted with his typical ways of being. As such, he doubted. He asked questions at this most troubling time. Am I a replication of fears woven from generation to generation? Am I incongruent with destiny? Am I a pawn to fate? Am I far removed from true intent? He challenged his core purpose and whispered, "If I am to save the boy, I must know how." He spoke these words through clenched teeth. This simple statement required an appropriate rejoinder. "I must weigh all options."

Lichen could not cling to trees any closer than Victor remained by Sebastian's side. Even after this tragic turn of events, the man remained the boy's lone source of inspiration. Sebastian represented the epitome of courage. He was the child's sole means of survival. This sobering thought gave rise to a revelation Sebastian had to acknowledge. The boy had become his one reason for living and dying.

Victor could not have known that Sebastian was the most unlikely of heroes. The boy was unaware of either Sebastian's past or his nature. Yet, such unknowns were of no consequence. Fearful of the immediate threat and longing to live, learn, laugh, and love, Victor was grateful. He had the man's help and companionship. Victor did not doubt. He would not doubt. The boy hoped because of Sebastian. His new hero represented hope. Victor believed. He was a believer. He would see tomorrow because he had a savior who braved a pack of wolves and yelled, "The boy is off limits!"

Not unexpectedly, Victor's dependence inspired Sebastian to overcome any shortfalls. But, are not the best of intentions ineffectual without complete understanding? Sebastian could not argue against this premise. Complete understanding presupposes experience and knowledge. Experience is an incompetent teacher without adequate

knowledge. Without either, he would exert his efforts with relative futility. Moreover, Sebastian had to accept a fundamental tenet. He had to accept that maligned emotions and thoughts tend to thwart clear objectives. Thus, he had to avoid the muddling and befuddling. If it were remotely probable for the wolves to climb the ravine, he should have weighed this possibility. Any advantage to ensure Victor's survival could not be overlooked. Sebastian forced himself to assess what could be.

He adhered to an admonishment. Both he and the child would die if his intentions were flawed from the outset. Sebastian cut to the quick and asked if his future would be as irresolute as his past. This was a fair question. His entire history reflected irresolution. Sure, he was only sixteen when he lacked the will to run away from home. But, does age really matter? Irreparable harm comes regardless of age. He suffered unspeakable consequences for past failures and those failures seemed to foreshadow his today and every tomorrow. Saddled with dated consequences, any pending penalties to his continued way of being could not be ignored.

Foolish though it was given their current plight, Sebastian reflected even more. He never intended to run the family business, but to travel. He never wanted to marry, but spousal arrangements were made and families were merged to increase wealth, power, and status. His conclusion? He had failed to honor past hopes. And now he had but one hope and he could not fail.

Some would argue incorrectly that a failure to pursue one's hopes has nothing to do with a failure to forecast a wolf scaling a steep ravine and attacking those who are unprepared. However, failures are often endings which deny new beginnings. Failures often beget failures. Endings beget endings. Failures amassed over a lifetime tend to reflect an ingrained pattern. With a pattern of endings tied to an attitude of endings, there was one consideration Sebastian could not doubt. He could not unduly influence the boy's future with his own ruinous past.

Sebastian labored under heavy thoughts and discerned a link between past failures and future failures, a pattern as unappealing as apathy itself. He knew he had to identify detractors which might impede his efforts. He saw the contrast between detractors and true intention. True intention had to be free of encumbrances in order to be congruent with possibility. After all, what is an intention if it is denied proper direction and, as a result, fails? A failed intention is no different than being lost and, subsequently, aimless and confused in a forest as foreboding as abject ignorance or an existence filled with defeated

hopes. One's intention to be an architect is for naught if he is forced into another profession. What is the intention to save a child who perishes? The intention is unfulfilled. What was once possible becomes impossible. Impossibility rules the day as the only possibility. The beginning of opportunity ends. The end becomes an end always.

Sebastian had become an uncommon giant for the boy the moment he fell unceremoniously from the knoll and confronted the most unimaginable struggle. Possibility. His choice altered the course of life for more than just themselves. Possibility. Based upon his choice, he charted a future while repudiating a long history of weakness and shame—his own weakness and shame. Possibility.

But would Sebastian embrace possibility? Truly? As he and Victor walked gingerly toward the knoll, never once taking their eyes off the forest, Sebastian looked at the child shouldering his weight. Sebastian felt raw feelings—bitterness and anger. He could not reject other emotions—contempt and rage. Faced with a radical transformation which contradicted an historical context, Sebastian dealt with these passions and, for this, he refused to grant himself a reprieve. Even though he applied sound reasoning, he viewed himself with even greater ridicule and doubted still. Why? Transformations are not always immediate and sweeping. They can be, but not here and now, not with Sebastian.

Sebastian confronted the kind of sobering honesty which purges the soul of feelings as vexing as they are crippling, an honesty that begets scorn even if only for the briefest moment, especially when a man's spirit longs for what is unknown and, quite suddenly, that very unknown becomes known as his *raison d'être*. Sebastian saw his reason for being clearly. Victor was a human being of worth and potential, the child of a mother and father, a grandson to grandparents, and a friend to friends. The child would be a positive force into the future. He represented possibilities sourced in beginnings. The more Sebastian sensed that he would become Victor's savior and cause new beginnings, the sooner he might reject self-inflicted scorn and manifest his greatest hope.

Images of Sebastian's son and daughter flashed in his mind. Lydia and Ian were home. They were safe and secure. His daughter played the piano while his son read a book. Educated and refined, he and his wife controlled their lives to a fault. Lydia and Ian never chased rabbits. They did not get lost in the forest. They were denied this possibility. The woods? The deep, dark woods? What an absurd notion! They did not risk in the truest sense. To a father's shame, Sebastian's children had never risked. He had orchestrated every

aspect of their lives. They were as compliant as mannequins modelling high-end apparel and nearly spiritless under a mandate of conformity. Their youthful intentions had been folded and stored no differently than fabric preserved in cedar chests lined with moth balls. Their hopes were nothing more than forgotten aspirations aging until the chest was opened at a time when regret bites hard and unsatisfied souls are pensive with profound sadness.

Now with an injured leg and under desperate conditions, Sebastian held the life of a boy upon his shoulders. The weight was heavy. Victor yearned to live. Possibility. Beginnings. Sebastian's catharsis continued. Anger boiled within his soul. That internal revolution surged. Possibility. His heart ached with a longing he never felt. His mind raced. He asked more questions. What is life? What was his own life? The life of another being? Possibility. A beginning. A series of beginnings. He knew the answer and the enormity of his conclusion equaled the simplicity of his queries. "A gift," he replied. "Life is a gift."

The most elusive enigma, probed by many and solved by few, was unwrapped by the most unlikely of souls in the midst of unspeakable adversity. His viewed life as nothing more than a coincidence of colliding influences and random circumstances converging in and out of countless permutations with one distinction surviving beyond possibility—truth. Truth was king. Truth alone revealed that life was a gift.

Sebastian stood at the precipice of greatness and was unaware of the fullness of this possibility. Peppered throughout the annals of history, renowned leaders, whether their tales are known by a few or millions, eventually shed all inhibitions. Disrobed of their perceived relevance, they wear the cloak of authenticity. They have no need for fame. They reject wealth. They see life as a battleground and willingly fight to the death for a divinely inspired hope. Thus, they are the rare few who become legends.

Greatness is not a reflection of a man's acts if those acts are sourced within selfish motives. Greatness is not a result of a man's aggrandizing nature and thirst for power. Greatness does not depend upon one's prowess. Rather, greatness rests upon one's choice to gift life without regard to himself and the ominous prospects of death. In this context, when one knowingly and unreservedly crosses the threshold of fear-filled unknowns, he acts upon truth. He becomes extraordinary. He understands a vital principle. Love is an act. Love is nothing else. When a man loves freely and unconditionally, he does so regardless of the repercussions. Such is greatness.

What was known by Sebastian, but unstated, is that when he was a boy, he never served as a catalyst for himself. He never served as a catalyst for others. He suffered without a hero. He lacked the will to fight for what was right. He did not challenge his father. He did not escape an unjust imprisonment within a clothing factory. Sebastian appreciated the ends of things and this meant living life within the infamous middle until the end of life ended for certain, when death came and conquered and each and every possibility ceased.

In the present, the one practical impediment preventing Sebastian from crossing any threshold was his wounded leg. Injured and with the will to save an innocent child from unforeseen circumstances, he cringed at his current predicament. He ceased to be an effective force for not his life, but the life of a boy. Ironically, the strong became the weak. Sebastian would be the next repast for ravenous beasts; the child would be dessert. Sebastian's future was not in doubt, He would die. Victor's life, however, as if a leaf tossed by violent winds, drifted aimlessly. The boy had little chance of survival unless Sebastian discounted his physical limitations, forecasted the movement of forces unseen, seized the improbable, and engineered what was possible.

Such was the pressure upon Sebastian Chiffon. Gravely pensive for the second time in forty years, he opened the proverbial window to possibility. He climbed up and sat upon the sill and stared into that frightful unknown. He could be ordinary or an inspiration. He could covet all attachments or manifest a destiny. Would he act and offer the gift of life? He had no desire to become a revered icon. He did not care if he became ageless with heroic acclaim in the tomes of human history. He did not intend to be either great or mediocre. He only wanted to do what should be done. He wanted to do what was right. He wanted to live life, his life. He wanted to love.

Few ever breach a knowing that truth alone matters. Sebastian arrived at this milestone. He searched for truth and only truth. For, once death is recognized as both meaningful and essential in the context of truth, everything and anything is possible. Everything is a new beginning.

Sebastian sighed deeply. He sighed his refusal to be as he had always been. He refused to remain entrenched within a despairing known. Humbled and without debate, he crossed out and down and charged courageously from an existence he despised. For the first time he basked in the glory of truth. He no longer existed. He was fully alive. He was a life with a distinct purpose. He lived life because he embraced

death and he would live or die gifting life to himself and, thus, the child.

Liberation of the human soul is no trifle achievement and requires unparalleled effort. That Sebastian freed himself from shackles that were but attachments others had placed upon him before he was born was a feat of feats. Wholly unattached, he had increasing clarity. He felt purely and dispassionately while remaining passionate for a calling he would not deny. Yes, he had complied with his father's demands. Yes, he had always provided for his own family as an obligation. Though his entire existence was once directed by obligation to the exclusion of purpose, in the present moment, purpose, not obligation, defined him.

Sebastian discerned a distinction between purpose and obligation. Purpose is a divine leading, a providential directive, a sacred calling. Obligations are mere subsets to purpose. When one lacks the intent to satisfy an obligation, both obligation and purpose become nothing more than a dreaded routine. If purpose, no matter how menial, is not faithfully honored, the mission is destined for failure. Is purpose neglected at times? Sure. When a man demotes himself by neglecting his duty, purpose becomes no more than an obligation and, unfortunately, this is when drudgery takes hold. Purpose becomes a soulless routine. If purpose is unfulfilled, the calling is denied.

A sentry who detects an enemy creeping toward friendly lines is faithful to a calling. A sentry who fails in this regard is but a shadow of a soldier. He becomes attached to a soulless routine and fails to honor purpose. This is when and how the enemy invades undetected in the stillness of night. This is when and how the sentry demotes himself. This is when and how he demotes purpose to a hollow obligation, a drudgery that captures the mind and heart. Tragedy occurs. The wayward sentry falls asleep. The enemy breaks through friendly defenses, slits the sentry's throat, and slaughters his brothers-in-arms. The possibility of any counterattack is lost. Purpose and possibility are defeated.

Attachments. Vile attachments. They are parasites which either defeat purpose or deflect purpose from a greater good. Soul defeating. Life draining. Oh, let it be known to those who might listen. One becomes lost for the fleeting moment purpose is ignored and unfulfilled, just as the man who is attached is to be scorned equal to the man who shuns duty outright.

Sebastian would shun purpose no longer.

XXII

Ava finished her morning chores except one. She had yet to do a labor of love, her favorite task, a responsibility she saved for last. Every day she made her way to a nearby creek to fill a pail for her father. This was a spiritual journey. The creek was her holy place. Other than sitting with her parents on the front porch listening to her father's yarns and Captain Crowley's famous expeditions, the creek was a safe haven where she would lose herself in dreams only the innocence of youth could produce.

The path meandered with spots located exactly where Ava knew to step without the benefit of eyesight. As if embedded within the fiber of her being, the flat rock, the root worn smooth, the low dip to the lower left, and every other feature, the path was a part of her. She walked and ran up and down this route equal to the number of times she made her way to her bedroom to sleep and play and dream.

The creek flowed with clear intent to go somewhere and that is where Ava lost herself with girlish frolicking and fantasies. The rocks under the rapids remained fixed unless a storm deluged the creek and pushed them to depths lacking friction. Ava often negotiated the rocks and waded into and through deep pools and followed the current both literally and figuratively. She once waded down to Wilhelm's Ford. She kept this a secret from her parents. Most often she sat under her favorite tree, a Sitka spruce, and created exotic scenes with incredible characters. The creek co-authored these stories. The rapids babbled words only she understood. The rocks listened to both Ava and the rapids and schools of minnows lined the bank with rapt attention.

Today would be no different. As soon as Ava arrived at the creek's edge and placed the pail near the shore, she stared at water harpooned by lances of light hurled by the sun. She threw a pebble into the creek and light exploded upon the surface and splintered into a spectacular display of white and golden sparkles splicing and shimmering into smaller sparkles. She called the sparkles sun dust. They were the essential ingredient for happy water. She believed the water absorbed sun dust to combat the gloom of overcast skies and hell's fury unleashed from horrendous thunderstorms.

Ava was a student of her father's artful storytelling. She had a keen sense of the primary character—friend and foe, antagonist and protagonist, hero and villain. While adhering to plots of good versus evil, Ava referred to the sun as life-force and storm clouds as death-force. The creeks and rivers of the world were prepared with a reserve of sun dust to repel dark and destructive forces intent on spreading

evil—be it overflowing river banks and the erosion of local landscapes, uprooting shoreline trees that eventually tumble into deep pools to rot, or the damming of bridges with debris until both debris and water destroy the footings and the structures are brought to ruin.

The worst destruction was unthinkable to Ava. She had heard stories of storms which sent homes to the bottoms of rivers after beams and rafters were swallowed like straw is scattered by violent winds. River currents, filled with envy and hate, churned with unrivalled energies and the aftermath was as painful as it was predictable—a homeless family and, at times, death.

Ava knew of one horrific tragedy, that of Annabelle Holmes. Annabelle was sleeping in her bed when *The Storm of Then* tore through the land in the dead of night. Sharp cracks of lightning and rancorous thunder rolled and rumbled and the storm gripped Annabelle with fear. She was scared to the point of immobility. She did not race to the safety of a bed belonging to her mother and father who would have shielded her from natural foes. Given the intensity of the storm, her parents were too far away. Trekking seven ells down the hallway was impossible with voices sounding about her and manifold demons warring in her head.

Poor Annabelle forced herself to scurry off her bed. She hid underneath and far from harm. In her wake, she dragged her blanket and, with all the courage she could muster, as a flash of light and a gust of wind entered a broken window pane, she reached above with a trembling arm to rescue Natalie, a doll made of straw—her only toy.

At the height of the storm, her father rushed into Annabelle's room and saw an empty bed. She was gone. Stricken with grief, he returned to the kitchen and stared at his wife who clung to their three other children. He spoke the unspeakable every mother would dread. With a howl of woe, she pointed and sent him back to the bedroom. She was certain Annabelle was there. Twice and thrice, he went and returned. Never was she found.

Conjecture lives on, especially among children who hear of the disappearance of Annabelle Holmes. Her father entered the bedroom and not once thought to check under the bed. Every time he shouted her name, a bolt of lightning struck or the wind charged harder and silenced his grievous pleas. Or the trusses creaked and holes in the wood siding and windows made so shrill a pitch he was convinced no child would stay. Each time he entered Annabelle's bedroom, he left without a response. Others say Annabelle, who was a mere stretch from her father's shifting boots, was in no state to hear anything. Overcome with desperation, her sense of hearing was entombed in a sound-proof

coffin and she refused to open the lid. She kept her eyes closed. In such a state, the day could have been sunny and calm and she would have been oblivious to either feet or shouts. She was in a state of shock.

The day after The Storm of Then, in a countryside beset by carnage, folks, reeling from their own wreckage, came from near and far and searched for Annabelle. The Holmes' humble cabin was gone. Nested near the river, the storm had shoved the shell into a seething current. The remains of the structure were found at the bottom of a bend adjacent to the Smith homestead. Many a dive was made weeks later when the current was calm. A few valuables resting among silt-covered boulders were retrieved, but Annabelle was not one of them. She was never found.

Ava had a tradition. Each time she went to the creek, she called out, "Annabelle, Annabelle, lady of the sea, Annabelle, Annabelle, come back to me." She invoked good will. She hoped for Annabelle's return. It did not matter that The Storm of Then occurred one hundred years earlier. Ava, perhaps the most optimistic soul in Forkwood, wanted a happy resolution. She wanted to appease a mother's sorrow and exonerate a father's guilt. She wanted to rejoin a child with her siblings and reunite a family. No different than sun dust preventing destruction and death, Ava wanted to rid history of evil. "Sun dust of today, sun dust of tomorrow, soaked in water to drown all sorrow." Ava spoke this eulogy in the name of Annabelle Holmes, a fitting way to christen every visit to the creek.

Ava, as might be expected, was not a fearful child. She accepted the imposition of natural forces. Such forces were, as her father counselled, beyond man's control. However, he also advised there was a best way to respond. Acceptance, then, was an apt way to describe Ava's view of life. Whenever she came to the creek's edge and threw rocks into still waters or sat in shallow rapids to cool herself, she did so with complete harmony. She, too, was a body of water lanced by rays of light. She, too, was permeated with sun dust. She was a vessel of hope when hopelessness deigned to rule. Ava, without fully appreciating such wisdom at so tender a juncture in her philosophical journey, communed with hope. She hoped with an eternal hope so that good would prevail even after the most unimaginable events wrought unwanted destruction and unthinkable death.

The one pressing and unimaginable danger in Ava's life was the likely departure of Gracie. Ava knew the loss of a pet pig was not comparable with the loss of Annabelle Holmes. However, she was distressed by Gracie's trip without the prospect of returning. Each toss of a pebble into the water, declamations the minnows supported,

enforced Ava's resolve. Crafty, but not in a deceitful way, she devised her plan. She ironed out the details as she dipped her cupped hands below the surface and waited patiently for minnows to swim above and into her loving care. Though she had yet to catch one in this fashion, she was eternally hopeful.

Squatting, with elbows resting upon her knees, she lost track of the minnows. She dreamed. She dreamed about Gracie. Ava's plans evolved and solidified without distraction. Her mind, a millstone grinding thought after thought into a refined plan, did not dabble with childish reveries. She had more mature machinations. Gracie deserved no less.

However, the dream ended abruptly. Movement from behind sounded faintly. Except for her feet shifting slightly and stirring the film at the bottom of the creek to a murky cloud, Ava froze. Crickets, which seemed to be out at all times and not just in the evening, stopped chirping. They sensed an intruder and hushed in anticipation of an unfolding drama, a dicey dilemma, even a death-driven end. Ava heard movement again. She knew sun dust did not exist in the air. She was alone and defenseless while something or someone lurked behind her. A twig snapped. She thought of bad things. A bear? A wolf?

Ava reacted quickly, but stood slowly. She looked for resources. Ahead of her and below, she eyed her first mark and then a second, a rock within the rapids and a lone stick upon the opposite bank. Her escape, driven by necessity, was simple enough. She would grab the rock enjoying a never-ending rub down and lunge for the stick bathing in the sun. Then she would circle halfway round and confront the aggressor. Depending upon the capabilities of her foe, she would either attack or retreat into the thicket of brambles beyond the trees. Such was the sagacity of her father. The brambles were the best default when survival was the only option. A nearly impenetrable thicket of thorns would discourage any beast. Her father suggested she would heal from the many cuts and gashes, but would not survive a bear attack.

With a tight chest and a gut strung tighter than dried cowhide stretched across a drum on a sunny day, she breathed rapidly. With as much trepidation as she could summon, she took a step forward and leaned and grabbed the rock. She charged onto the bank. With the stick in hand, she brandished it as she whipped about. She waved her arms haphazardly. "Yahhh!" she screamed. She confronted her opponent. She was ready for battle.

She stopped. She stood. She tilted her head. She dropped her arms. Was it true? Her grimace melted away to a grin and then a full-

blown smile. Ava sighed with joyous relief. "You gave me a fright, you did," she said.

A donkey soaked in sweat and in search of water stood silently. The animal, with a scarf tied to its harness, stepped closer to the creek and drank.

Ava returned to the other side and greeted her new friend. She petted him more out of gratefulness that he was not a wild beast. "I thought ye might have been a bear!"

Beast cast a glance toward her, a calming gesture, reassurance for a child who went from one emotional extreme to another and then back again.

Ava examined the white cloth about his neck and untied it. "What's this for?"

Perfectly timed, Beast raised his head and brayed lightly. Any child would have interpreted this response exactly as she received it.

"A gift for me?" Ava beamed. "A scarf? My very own scarf!" She wrapped the fabric around her neck and draped the ends down the front of her chest. She then tossed the ends over her shoulder. She evaluated each style by looking into wave-filled reflections in the water. She decided the over the shoulder version was better and more practical. "Thank you!" She hesitated. She did not know the animal's name. She bent down, looked underneath, and giggled. "I am going to call you, Tommy-Tom." Amazed by Tommy-Tom's presence, she expressed her enthusiasm. "You are the one! You were the one in my dream last night."

Ava was assured, even if she assured herself. Tommy-Tom was an answer to prayer. He was to become Gracie's husband. Gracie could not sojourn into the world if she had domestic responsibilities. "Gracie will have things to do. She must take care of you!" Ava was far more animated than when she first arrived at the creek. She picked up the pail, filled it with water, and took a hold of Beast's harness. "Tommy-Tom, we have a lot to do and plenty of celebrating afterward."

She climbed the path with Beast in tow. An instant confidante and a newfound friend, Ava imparted intimate family knowledge. Since Tommy-Tom was to be one of the clan, he had to know everything about her mother and father and Gracie. He had to know the schedule, responsibilities, likes and dislikes, and the nuances of his new home. "Mother likes to knit at night. Father enjoys his pipe. Gracie needs plenty of sleep and food and she does not like flies. Father works too much, but he makes time for us. The kitchen belongs to mother and she won't hesitate to remind you of this point. Course, you will not be

in the house anyway.” She laughed at this last notion. She laughed at her remarkable change of fortune—a husband for Gracie. She could be silly for whatever reason. She was relieved. “Can you believe it, Tommy-Tom?” She expected him to rejoice in her good fortune as well.

A moment of silence passed between them as they crested the top of the hill. The hapless sign for Forkwood stood rather ingloriously. Ravaged by hard times, the large wooden plaque, suspended from a crossbeam attached to a post as tall as Beast, had one hook when two were required. The twin hook had long since fallen and was buried and never to be found and unlikely to be replaced. The signage, in a vertical position rather than parallel, gave any stranger a poor impression of the small hamlet. The name of Forkwood was not apparent. The letters were either upside down or backward depending upon how they were viewed. The letters d, o, o, and w were visible with the d at the top. The letters k, r, o and f, hidden by tall grasses, could be seen only when high winds or heavy rains battered the land and the grass relented.

“That’s our sign. You live in Forkwood now, case you ever get lost and need to find your way home.” They crossed the dirt road and turned onto a small lane. “Nearly there, Tommy-Tom.” She quickened her pace and smiled more broadly, if that were even possible. “You’re gonna love Gracie!”

Exhausted after his journey and taxed by fearful emotions caused by the wolves, Beast did not share the same enthusiasm displayed by his new owner. He had but one motive, sleep.

Forward and to the right stood a rustic building, the Blacksmith shop, which sat closer to lane than the Thorton home resting farther away against a treeline and facing an open and sloping field. The shop hosted wide double doors and, because of the heat from several fires, they remained open most of the time. Sounds of metal striking metal clanged sharply and abruptly into the air.

“Now,” she said as she pointed, “that’s where father works.” She leaned close to Beast’s head and a whispered a friendly warning. “It’s not a good idea to visit him, ‘specially when he has a customer. Of course,” she concluded, “you have no cause to be in his shop.” She laughed lightly and continued their journey home.

XXIII

Ava slowed to stop and pointed to the Thorton homestead. “And there, Tommy-Tom, is Captain Crowley!”

Beast appeared to acknowledge the nearly royal pronouncement by looking in the direction his guide gestured.

Ava wasted no time explaining the importance of Captain Crowley. "He's an old mariner. He sailed the seas and came here to retire. Father says he has more wisdom collected from his travels than the three wise men combined." Ava was emphatic. "Now you know he's wise! 'Cause that's a lot of wisdom." If only because her father was a wise man as well, she laughed with a knowing sort of laugh.

From a distance, the face of the famous sailor could not be denied. Aged eyes represented by two weather-battered windows stared down and kept watch. The sagging roof was the seaman's cap and the titling rock chimney, a wind-torn feather. The ridge of a small roof abutting the front of the house and positioned between the two eyes covered a tiny porch and served as the Captain's nose. His mouth, outlined by neglected railings sloping down one side and up the other was a scowl, as if the weary captain argued with greedy pirates, or attempted to warn unwanted trespassers and the twinkle in his eye foretold pending peril. The posts to the railings stood tall and marked the Captain's laugh lines. He laughed often and heartily. His teeth, depicted by pickets, were either crooked or lost. This was the only blemish to his handsome face. The stoop, forever cracked, formed his bottom lip. Two small steps along the ground formed his broad chin which remained largely hidden by whiskers from uncut grasses and weeds flowing with the contour of the front yard.

Ava explained to Tommy-Tom how Captain Crowley entered her life as a matter of necessity. However, Ava knew the Captain's presence was borne of convenience.

"Let me tell you 'bout Captain Crowley." She sighed one of those sighs which underscored the importance of the words she was about to speak. "When father went on a trip two years ago, I was awful scared. You see, father never left home before then. He went to a show to learn of new products and ways to do his work. I refused to let him go." She nodded as if she had the authority to control her father's comings and goings. Then she qualified her last statement. "Course, I wasn't against him learning. Learning is good, you see. I just didn't want him to leave, that's all. I kept asking him why the learning could not come to his shop. He tried to explain that it was easier for men to gather in one place rather than have a teacher go to many places. Well, that made perfect sense, but I just didn't like it."

Ava petted Beast and continued. "You know what I did? I ran away." Ava chuckled at her own antics. Even at her age, she knew it was irrational to protest her father's leaving by going on her own trip.

“Mind ye, I did not go far. I went to the creek and stayed there for an hour. Of course, father came looking. When he found me, I hugged him and cried most sorrowful like. Sounds silly, huh? But I have to say, Tommy-Tom, love is real.”

Ava assumed an admonishing air. “Tommy-Tom, you’ll find out when you meet Gracie. You’ll fall in love and never ever want to leave her, that is, unless you have to travel to learn about ways to do your work.” She quieted for a moment and added while nodding her head, “And Gracie will not want you to leave.”

Convinced that Beast understood her brief aside, she continued the story. “Anyhow, as we walked up the path and back home, father said he had a surprise for me. And did he ever! When we reached this spot, he pointed to our home. He said, ‘I want you to meet someone very special, a man who is loving and bold, a man who has fought the meanest pirates on the wide-open seas, a wise man who navigated the roughest oceans, a man who agreed to protect you and your mother when I go on my trip.’”

Ava wondered if Beast was listening. “Pay attention, because this is part of your family history.” She placed added emphasis on her next words. “Your new family.” With a calming sigh, she reassured Beast with confidence. “Tommy-Tom, Captain Crowley will be there for you too.”

Ava pointed in the same manner her father did the day she met Captain Crowley. “Father showed me the Captain’s eyes first. Father says you can tell a lot about a person from his eyes, because they are windows to their soul. Then he showed me the Captain’s hat, nose, mouth, his crooked teeth, and his long beard.

“At first I didn’t believe him. I said he was just describing the house and I thought he was being silly.” Ava wagged her finger for emphasis. “Tommy-Tom, we have to care for the people we love, even if that means we have to be firm when the world’s falling apart. My world crumbled at the thought of father leaving and I didn’t want to be tricked. More important,” she stalled and then admitted a truth. “I did not want to believe father. I didn’t believe Captain Crowley was in our home. I asked him if he was just foolin’ me because he didn’t want me to be sad.

“Well, father got really serious. He knelt on his knee and looked me in the eyes and spoke with an I-will-never-lie-to-you tone. ‘Punkin,’ he said, ‘Captain Crowley is as real as you and me.’ And just then the wind blew. ‘See?’ father asked. ‘You hear the wind?’”

When Beast moved his head away in obvious protest, Ava wagged her finger to emphasize the significance of that particular

wind-blowing development. “The wind did blow! It did!” She had to make Beast a believer. “The wind blew once and it blew hard and then it disappeared. That doesn’t happen without good reason.”

Beast did not appear entirely convinced. “Tommy-Tom, I am telling you the truth!” She patted her donkey reassuringly. She sought to somehow transmute doubt into certainty for a donkey on the verge of full conversion. “Father said Captain Crowley is an old soul, a spirit who sails the oceans way up in the heavens and settles wherever he is needed.”

Ava was at the critical part of her explanation. “Let me share something you have to understand, Tommy-Tom. Father knew I needed Captain Crowley. And I did. I needed him. Truth is, so did father and mother.”

She wrapped her arms around Beast’s neck, a sure sign he was as integral to the family as Captain Crowley. “Tommy-Tom, you have to know you are needed and wanted. Anyway, when father returned from his trip, I asked him if the Captain could stay forever. Well, he thought and he thought and he just didn’t know. He said he would have to ask Captain Crowley. This made sense to me, you know. You’ve got to give a man the respect he deserves. He has to control his own life. He has to make his own choices, right, Tommy-Tom?

“Well, anyhow, every day for a week, I would ask father if Captain Crowley replied. ‘No ma’am,’ he would say. ‘The Captain has not answered your request. And punkin, he may want to leave. We must be grateful for the time he was here. And we must love him and this means we have to let him go without a fuss.’

“Well, now, I understood what father told me. I did. And I did not get in the way. But hear me, Tommy-Tom. One afternoon I was in the barnyard playing with Gracie and a strong wind blew. Father came out of the shop and ran to the front porch. He yelled for me. ‘Ava, hurry! Come quick!’ Well, I up and ran to him not knowing what happened. He met me on the stoop and pointed to a cloudless sky. The tops of the tree swayed this way and that. The wind was somethin’ fierce.

“I held my father’s hand and squeezed tight. I was scared. He said, ‘Punkin, it’s good news. Captain Crowley is staying. He’s gonna live with us.’ I couldn’t believe it. I jumped up and down. I was so happy. Then I asked father if he was certain. I had to be sure that father was sure.” Ava stood in front of Beast and placed her hands on either side of his face. She spoke with a seriousness beyond her years. “When you become a father, you’ll get the wisdom needed to teach your little ones.”

Ava grabbed the harness and walked slowly toward the house. “Father said Captain Crowley had three conditions if he was going to live with us. One, he would leave and return when and as needed. Two, he would share his famous stories which he wanted us to learn by heart and pass on to other families. And three, we were not allowed to trim his beard.” Ava paused in the front yard. With her hands on her hips, she assumed another serious posture. “Tommy-Tom, you can never graze here.” She directed Beast’s attention to the thick grass. “This area is off limits.”

She approached the porch and pointed to three wooden stools aligned with the smallest placed in the middle. “That’s where we sit in the evening. Father tells me and mother about Captain Crowley’s adventures.” She swung one arm in the air and around her head before she placed it on the reins again. “Oh, the tales I could tell you, the tales I will tell, Tommy-Tom. There is Captain Crowley’s battle with The Farthing Pirate. Then there is his capture of the Blue Velvet, a ship stolen from the Queen’s fleet. And the raid of Hornet’s Cove where the Spanish outlaws hid their gold.” Ava paused for dramatic effect. “I will tell you these stories. I have to. It’s one of the Captain’s conditions. You will have to tell your children these stories too, Tommy-Tom.”

There it was. Ava made the adoption official. She grafted Tommy-Tom into the family. She was certain he would have children and, in the future, those little ones would be spellbound by Captain Crowley’s tales.

Under the banner of familial bonds, they walked to the barnyard. “Oh, Tommy-Tom, I can’t believe it. You and Gracie are going to meet. Love always finds a way. This is what mother tells me all the time.”

Ava raced ahead and opened a squeaky gate with rusted hinges and led her new pet into an empty stall. Beast followed. He rested his weary body close to roughhewn wooden boards which separated him from the fattest pig he had ever seen. If he were able to speak, he would have found some polite way to express his disapproval for arranged marriages. But, he could not and, if anything, he was too exhausted to register any stern objection. Suffice it to say, he did not share Ava’s enthusiasm.

As Beast’s belly touched the ground, his new master mounted the spot where she had placed the ten flowers earlier. Wilting under the sun, a concern lost on Ava, the assortment took on greater significance, as if they were more real than before she found Gracie’s future husband, as if their beauty was an omen to a fairy tale ending, a connection from nature to a dream and back to nature. Gracie was

nature; Ava dreamed of a husband; Tommy-Tom was nature. The flowers wove all three like a wish binds a sincere heart to a seeming impossibility. The impossible disappeared and hope flourished. She was ecstatic about this new union, this new beginning.

Ava grinned from ear to ear and made the momentous introduction. “Gracie, this is Tommy-Tom. He will become your husband later today!”

Ava looked down at the water pail and suddenly realized time had slipped away. She had become distracted and was on the verge of disgracing herself and shunning her most beloved father. Without further delay, she adjusted her agenda. “Now listen Tommy-Tom and Gracie, I have to take the water pail to father. Spend some time and get to know each other.”

Ava descended from her roost and shared some needed encouragement. “This is no time to be bashful, Gracie. You’re gettin’ married soon!”

XXIV

Overflowing with excitement, Ava bucket-stepped her way to her father’s shop. As water splashed over the rim, clanging sounds spilled out of the large doors. Fire, tongs, hammers, pots, chisels, and bellows, the cavernous bay housed all things blacksmith. Metal scraps filled large wooden bays. To the left of the fire, a steel table stood for a simple and important purpose, to support buckets of water. One bucket was for drinking; one was for washing; two large buckets were reserved for fires which might start from rebellious sparks. Ava had an important chore, keep the drinking pail full.

The creek was fed by a spring and the finished product was clean and cold. Brett Thorton was assured of refreshing water and Ava loved the idea that she satisfied his thirst. Of all her chores, Ava coveted this task the most and, from doing so daily, she gained valuable insight. Providing him with water was no different than Brett Thorton providing for his family. She did not shirk this awesome responsibility. Once she had failed to do so, and the sorrow she felt was more than she could bear. She vowed that she would never forget the lesson.

Once Ava lost her rag doll, Beatrice. Overcome with fear, she searched to the point of distraction and forgot her chores. Only after

she found Beatrice did she attempt to fill her father's pail. The hour was late and when she arrived, she discovered the job had been done. She asked her father if he had completed her chore. He replied in his typically good-natured way that he had taken a much-needed break and went to the creek himself. Not only was Ava humbled, she was sad. She genuinely grieved. She felt in her heart of hearts that her father believed he was no longer loved by his only child.

"Father, I failed you. I can't believe it. I just can't!" She flung herself upon him and gushed emotional pleadings. She begged him for a forgiveness she knew was necessary.

Brett was amused. "Princess, it was nothing at all. I knew ye were likely caught up in this or that."

She refused to listen. "But, father! Fetchin' your water is my only chore to do for you all day." Her love for him soaked her being and the excess soaked into him. "A child doesn't get side-tracked for a lost ragdoll especially when her father depends upon his daughter to get water he needs to survive." She looked up briefly and said, "If she was a good daughter, she would not do so poor a job." She cried sincere tears. Those tears became a waterfall of remorse. Her face told of a lament like none other.

Understanding and compassionate to a fault, Brett Thorton assured his daughter he did not suffer the slightest injury by filling his own pail.

Ava refused his gentle reply. As far as she was concerned, she did not deserve his understanding. He was kind to a fault when he needed to be harsh. He should not absolve her of liability and her position was definitive. "But father! That is my chore. I am to care for you. I am to get your water." She was the witness, prosecutor, and judge of her own trial.

Brett thought about the situation. She was his daughter first and foremost. She was forever optimistic. He knew this about her and he would not allow an endless reservoir of optimism to be tainted by so small a mistake. Brett had large arms and a barrel chest. He was a mountain of a man and, not unexpectedly, he had a tender side. Most big men do. He was not unaffected by his daughter's heartfelt regret. Flummoxed, he did not know what to do. He faced a rare moment. He questioned how he should proceed. Curiously, he did not know how to settle what did not need to be settled. He thought of an idea and took an approach he believed was worthy of so grieving a soul. He knelt, looked into eyes filled with tears, and spoke solemnly. "Ava, do I get ye a birthday gift every year?"

Ava nodded through light sobs and eyed him inquisitively.

“Do I ever forget?”

She shook her head while she sobbed a little less.

“Would I be devastated if I forgot ye birthday?”

Again, she nodded and allowed a grin to show, but only briefly.

He paused for what he hoped would be an end to this challenge. “Well, I know how ye feel right now. If I forgot your birthday, I would be crushed. I would not forgive myself. And I know ye would try to calm me and say it’s fine, and explain that sometimes people get distracted. But I would not feel any better.” He looked solemnly at her and made an offer. “Your birthday is next week, aye?”

Ava released a smile through calming breaths and nodded.

“Tell ye what I’ll do. I’ll forget your birthday and your gift and I’ll suffer as ye do now. I’ll be painfully sorrowful. I won’t like it. No ma’am. I won’t sleep and eat for the whole day, most likely. But I’m gonna do just that. I’m gonna forget ye birthday. I’m gonna forget to buy you a present. Yes ma’am, ‘tis only fair. This way, I’ll feel exactly as you do right now.” The big man gave a lengthy justification that was uncharacteristic for a giant who relied upon simple words and actions for simple solutions. Nearly satisfied, he went quiet and waited and allowed Ava to grasp the extent of his proposal.

Ava looked at her father and then at the ground. She looked up again and around the shop. She twiddled her fingers. She bit her tongue. A minute passed before she spoke. “Father?”

“Yes, Princess.”

“I don’t want you to feel the way I do.” With batting eyelids, the corners of her mouth rose slightly. “I would never want you to feel as bad as I do right now. What I felt because I forgot to fill your pail was awful, just awful, I tell you. How could I ask you to feel this way? And you want know somethin’?”

“Yes, Princess. Please tell me.”

“I understand. I do. And you are correct. I want to do right by you and... and... and... you want to do right by me and sometimes things get in the way and... well... and those things that get in the way have got nothing to do with what’s right. And the things that get in the way didn’t do the wrong. And ... and... well, as you say, the wrong is not a wrong when it is not a wrong.”

“I agree, Princess.”

“And your sayin’ I got upset because of nothin’ really. Right?”

“Yes, Princess.”

Ava hugged her father again and stepped back. She stood for the longest second and searched for words which were needed.

Brett watched her and was more than a little relieved. He hoped this lesson would take hold and for good.

Without saying another word, Ava walked away. But then she stopped. She looked at him over her shoulder. She continued to bite her tongue. She wanted to speak, but then she didn't. That not wanting to speak lost the battle. She said rather meekly, "Father, I won't forget your water ever again." She thought of her next words carefully. "Father, you won't forget my birthday next week, will ye? Father?"

Brett Thornton let out a howl that shook the building. He stepped forward and scooped his daughter into his arms and kissed her.

Ava laughed, but she did not relent. "Father! A child can't buy herself a birthday gift. But... well... you can go to the creek and fetch water. Right? You did it today. Right?" She looked quizzically at him and waited. Without receiving a satisfactory response, she added. "Father! 'Specially on account of not having any money, I can't buy myself a birthday gift." She stared at him with absolute sincerity. "And it just wouldn't be right if I did have money and I bought myself a gift." She considered the idea. "When a person buys herself a gift, does she say, 'Ava this is for you, Happy Birthday!' And does she then go to the other side of the gift and reply, 'Why thank ye, Ava, for the gift.'" She looked at her father quite seriously and said, "That just can't happen. It's against the law anyhow." She frowned, looked down, and bit her lower lip.

Brett could not contain his amazement at his child's legal argument. "Oh, how I adore you, Ava! And I can assure you I will not ever forget your birthday."

The table supporting the several water pails was appropriately named, The Birthday Spot, where father and daughter grew together and separately and became broader and deeper human beings. From that day forward, the worst elements or the direst of distractions did not prevent Ava from fetching his water. She was beholden to the man who could do no wrong. She was grateful to be of service to him, to be his supplier of life-giving water.

The day she found Beast was no different. She lugged the pail and smiled with a white scarf about her neck. The pail was heavy. Her arms taut with sinewy muscles, she heaved the bucket up and onto the metal slab, The Birthday Spot.

"Father, here is your water!"

Brett wiped his brow with his forearm.

“Thank you, Princess.”

She looked at the towering man laboring over the hot fire.

Shirtless and sweaty, he stopped hammering. He wiped his brow.

“Welcome, father,” she said as she smiled. She walked around the counter and stood before him quietly. She shifted her hips left and right with more than a hint of a tease, the kind of gesture which reveals that a child knows an answer, but needs to ask the question anyway. She asked coyly, “Father? Notice anything different?”

Brett knew the line he was to speak, a line in every father’s script, a line a father offers in response to a child who poses such a query. He looked around the shop and searched for something out of the ordinary. “Well, let me see.” He tried and tried, but he did not notice anything. “No. I don’t see anything.”

“Gotta look closer.” Ava beamed.

Brett came from behind his workbench and stood before Ava. He examined the roof, the building, and then gave her tough scrutiny. “What do we have here? Two eyes, one nose, two feet, ten toes.” He paused for effect. “I only see what is the usual.”

“Come now, father.” Ava closed her eyes and tensed with joy. She was certain he was about to note the obvious.

He studied her face and came upon the answer. “A freckle! You have a new freckle. Correct?”

Ava opened her eyes.

“Nope! That’s not it!” She bubbled with excitement and could contain herself no longer. “Look!” She pointed to her new scarf.

“Well, well, well. What is this?”

“It’s my new scarf!”

“Ye sure look pretty.”

“My new friend gave it to me. His name is Tommy-Tom.”

“We should all have such friends.”

“Do you want to meet him?”

Brett glanced at the fire. “Sweet Pea, I’ve got to finish this job. I will meet Tommy later.”

“Father, his name is Tommy-Tom.” She stomped her foot to emphasize this point.

“Okay, Tommy-Tom.”

Satisfied with this commitment, Ava kissed her father and skipped to the door.

Brett walked back to the fire and picked up his hammer. He struck a metal object twice and stopped. He laughed. “Tommy-Tom! Where does she get her imagination?”

XXV

The sun cannot expose hidden crevices or shrouded arenas just as light is unable to pierce wicked palls of nature. The heart of the forest fell quickly to a darkening venue of evil, an impenetrable bubble, an insulated realm much different than open spaces. Legions of sentries, tall trees almost as old as dirt stood guard with standing orders to deny passage to whom and what lacked credentials or those who had the audacity to enter the wild. This included the sun. These rigid soldiers even barred light from entering the deep wood. By contrast, below, in the village of Willington, as children played in the public square or finished their chores, the torch lighting the unfolding day remained afire before being snuffed by an always present and expectant horizon.

Sebastian noted disdainfully how the forest created dusk before the dusk of the world was due to descend. He had miscalculated the amount of daylight that would be available by early evening. Another foolish expectation was defeated by a brutally honest reality. A dense curtain dropped slowly upon a tragedy seen by a limited audience, those playing the protagonists and antagonists, the cast members alone.

Hidden within diminishing shadows, the rogue contingent of wolves marched tentatively along the perimeter. Sebastian watched them as he reached into his pocket and produced a packet of matches and more bullets. He looked into his palm briefly and then patted his pockets urgently a second time. He stared at his hand again and counted. He pointed to each bullet with sharp jabs with his index finger. What he saw, or did not see, angered him.

Anger gave way to action. At Sebastian's behest, Victor ferried long runs of fabric from the base of the knoll to the tree. Against the damp and barely moving air, they added more material to the fire. Flames flickered feebly and, as if sensing their importance, searched for oxygen and struggled to survive. Victor tossed sticks onto the fire. Sebastian took two long branches and wrapped fabric around the ends of each, ignited both, and asked the boy to post each on either side of the tree.

Sebastian took an inventory of their supplies. They had a pistol and knife, limited ammunition, a walking staff, and a rapidly diminishing amount of daylight. They had bolts of fabric, but far less than what was needed to sustain a fire throughout the night. They had water that would not last the rest of the day. There were planks of wood

at a distance too far for Victor to retrieve by himself. Sebastian paused and then added an old and injured man. He was forced to make a choice, a choice he had to make with clear intent. Since his leg was no longer anesthetized by shock and the pain had become unbearable, he had to act without delay. He motioned for Victor to draw nigh. "You have experience in the woods," he stated as if he knew the answer.

The boy nodded.

"What ideas do you have for an escape?"

Victor was struck by the question. He did not know this query reflected tremendous humility for a man who wielded authority and opinions as a matter of course. Victor thought and said, "Our options are limited." He glanced at Sebastian's leg and continued. "We must see to your wound. You have to stop moving." The boy did not want to presume to instruct his hero. "Sebby, ye 'ave lost a lot of blood. Ye must save your strength. Without help, you will be much weaker in the coming hours."

Victor paused to consider how he might save a man who was on a mission to save him. After Sebastian braced himself from pain surging in his calf, the boy resumed. "If only because of your bravery, we have some supplies to guard against the wolves, but," the boy hesitated. "I don't think we can escape." He offered several options. "We could dig a hole at the base of the knoll which will take hours and a lot of effort. We could reach the busted wagon for shelter, but that would be difficult." He then suggested the worst option, one which would bring almost certain death for both of them. "Finally, we can burn the remaining fabric and any nearby wood. We can fight against any attack with the pistol, knife, and sticks, and hope a search party comes in time."

Sebastian was not surprised by the answers. Victor proved his depth of character. Not only did he express the need to care for the injured, the boy never suggested they were anything but a team. Humbled, Sebastian sat in silence.

With few supplies and an exhaustible amount of cloth, he surveyed the terrain. He noted that the bottom of the ravine had sparse vegetation and was populated with an occasional tree. The distance from the tree in front of the knoll to the bottom of the ravine was approximately four chains and another two chains across where a gentle slope rose on the other side. Unfortunately, as if a fish bowl, the ravine was nothing but a container. The ravine was a trap. They could not escape.

Sebastian felt a gnawing within his soul. An internal revolution swelled to a crescendo. He could not deny destiny. No longer deceived,

he dropped his head and drew his arms and knees toward his gut. His rage surged. He ruptured out of a standing fetal position, thrust his fists skyward, and strained to the heavens in a fit of mania. “Nooooooo!” he yelled.

As if doused by life-giving water that should have nourished him two score earlier, Sebastian felt spiritually renewed as if his old ways of being decayed in a rich soil filled with tremendous failures, tough lessons, and sorrowful regrets. He saw illusions for what they were, the means to expose and know truth. Now anchored with a firm foundation, he took root and breached the terrain and grew anew. Though tyranny tried to control him in every way, Sebastian fought and he fought hard. For the moment, tyranny submitted to his calling. As if one with a purpose that would ring true no matter the cost, he honored that calling.

At Sebastian’s request, Victor brought him the pistol and bolts of cloth. Sebastian took the weapon and fired a round at the leader of the pack. Duty called. His intention was driven with purpose. If he could unsettle the wolves and slow their aggression, he would delay an attack. The bullet missed its target, but the lead wolf stood less confidently. The pack paced and circled with greater weariness.

Sebastian stuck the firearm in his waistline and tied the bolts of fabric into a long run measuring sixteen chains. He cut shorter strips measuring three ells. He retrieved the pistol, reloaded, and, though increased darkness veiled his view, he fired another round at the wolves.

He fought beyond the constraints of his injury and stepped weakly and deliberately. As with any soldier on the frontlines, he had a mission. The mission mattered; there was nothing else. He motioned for Victor to come close. With the aid of his walking staff and the boy, he hobbled to the knoll. He pointed to the long run of fabric waiting like a coiled snake and commanded, “Bring me the end!”

Sebastian took the cloth, tied it to his walking staff, and handed it to his fellow warrior. He tapped Victor on the shoulder and pointed to a tree sitting atop the knoll where a large branch extended over and beyond their encampment. “Climb the knoll and throw this staff over the branch!”

Victor glanced upward and saw the outline of a large limb twenty feet above them. He glanced back in the direction of the pack. He hesitated and dropped his gaze to the ground.

Sebastian would not tolerate further needless delays. “Victor, ye will be fine. You have to do it, lad!”

Victor nodded and moved swiftly to the left and scrambled up the knoll.

Sebastian knew the wolves would anticipate any weakness. He raised the pistol and fired into the forest. He grabbed the cloth some two chains below the spear. He knew his role. If Victor did not succeed, Sebastian, with a hold of the run, would pull it back and hand it to the child for another attempt.

With his feet firmly planted, Victor leaned, cocked his right arm, and threw. The spear hit the underside of the branch and fell.

Sebastian was furious. He pulled the cloth, took hold of spear, and raised it to the boy. "Step back further and throw it higher and harder!" He spoke harshly to Victor. "Damn it, lad! You must throw it harder!" Whether the boy lived or died depended upon his own success.

The scene was tense.

The pack rustled.

Sebastian fired another round.

Like a javelin thrown by a Greek Olympian, Victor cast the spear a second time. The spear sailed up and over the branch. The excess cloth fell and became taut and the spear swung freely until it swung no more. Excited, Victor scampered down. He did not know the plan, but he was pleased to have made a contribution.

"Son," Sebastian directed, "put more fabric into the fire and bring the bundle of food."

The child's face changed. Against mounting pressure, he smiled.

With most of his weight on his right leg, Sebastian hopped forward and reached for the staff and pulled the entire run down the right side of the branch until fifteen ells of fabric remained on the left.

Victor looked at the stream of white fabric ascending into the heavens. "Sebby, you have a plan."

Sebastian nodded in agreement. "Yes, we have a solution." He rested his thick hand upon his young friend's bony shoulder and said, "Victor, we are going to be fine."

Sebastian peered into the forest and assessed the pack's presence. The remaining bullets were extremely valuable. He pointed to the base of the knoll and directed Victor to retrieve the short strips of cloth. Sebastian leaned against the tree and caught his breath. When Victor returned, Sebastian explained, "These strips of fabric are ten ells in length more than one ell wide when expanded." He handed Victor his walking staff. "Hold this parallel to the ground." Sebastian took one of the strips and demonstrated. "Pretend this staff is the branch. We

will take each strip and extend the ends above the branch and tie a double knot. Do ye understand?”

Victor nodded.

“Watch closely,” Sebastian added. “We will spread the cloth open and lay ourselves across the strips much like we would in a hammock. With ten strips in a row, we will have plenty of room and support.”

Victor smiled broadly. “And be out of danger!” he exclaimed. “Yes, we will be safe.”

Sebastian tensed from a surge of pain in his leg. Grimacing, he looked at the boy and said, “The next time I encounter a pack of wolves, I will not be mauled.”

Victor acknowledged him reverently. “I don’t think even my father has met anyone as brave as you, Sir.”

Sebastian stumbled to the ground. He was weaker than he looked. He knew he had to execute the balance of his plan without further delay. Like anything that might impair a mission, pain could not be an obstacle. Purpose does not wait for the slow and indecisive or those distracted by extreme discomfort. He was neither slow nor indecisive. He crawled forward and seized the length of cloth hanging on the left side of the branch. With the end in one hand, he pulled the cloth through and gathered six more ells. “Victor, do you have experience with knots?”

“I can do them in my sleep.”

“I am not surprised. Create a knot where my hand is located and then take the end of the run and tie it above that same knot. Make sure the second knot does not slide down over the first one.” As the boy reached for the fabric, Sebastian looked at him and said sternly, “Hear me, lad. Be sure the bind will hold.” He could not risk the knot loosening and the cloth unravelling when hoisted off the ground.

“I understand, Sebby.” Victor nodded confidently.

By the time Sebastian added more material and wood to the fire, he heard, “Sebby, it’s done.”

Sebastian turned and saw the finished product. He hopped forward and pulled the newly formed loop toward him. He examined the knot. The link was solid. He smiled weakly. “This is going to work.”

They had created a large loop tall enough to hold a grown man in a sitting position with a bottom that would spread more than one ell in width. With the weight of the body in the middle of the loop, both sides would envelop the occupant.

Sebastian pulled the loop downward and placed it on the ground. He directed Victor to sit in the center. He tied the bundle of strips above and to the right of the boy's head. He tied the bundle of food and water jug to the left. He tied a strip of fabric to the end of a stout branch two ells long and handed it to the boy. Pointing to the new weapon he said, "When we reach the top, we must tie this stick to the limb and use it defensively if needed." He surveyed their work and said, "Young man, we are going to put this device to good use."

The loop, no less than a cocoon, would guard against what was wild and dangerous. During a trying night forty years earlier, a cocoon within Sebastian's bed prevented him from entering what was wild and dangerous—an unknown he had longed to explore. Now he hoped to protect another boy from an unknown of no one's choosing.

Sebastian draped a final strip of cloth around Victor's neck and said, "When we reach the branch, wrap this fabric around both the top and branch and tie a double knot. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sebby." The boy thought for a moment. As if to clarify the man's last order he said, "I must secure the loop to the branch to prevent us from falling."

"Exactly! Be sure to use a double knot!"

Victor became perplexed and he knew why. Logic clashed with what was illogical. He had followed orders believing they were executing a plan which ensured their joint survival. Sebastian's last instruction hinted of their separation. Pointing above, Victor asked, "Sebby, how will both of us get to the limb?"

A deep and sustained growl bellowed from a chorus of sinister characters directly in front of the tree. Large and lean figures stalked imperceptibly. The fire no longer thrived and the wolves drew near.

Startled like never before, Sebastian whipped about and fired a bullet at nothing in particular.

Yammering yelps, cries of the wounded, filled the forest. Sebastian had hit one of the wolves. Madness boiled along the perimeter. The wolves reacted angrily. They smelled blood belonging to the wrong species. They fired back with snarls. Long red tongues licked rows of white teeth searching for satisfaction. The wolves danced lightly; their paws kicked leaves hither and thither. As if to collect their energy and finalize their attack before exploding beyond the tree, the wolves appeared to huddle in a loose knot

Sebastian did not doubt the coalescing of sundry circumstances into a furious climax. "Victor! Get ready!"

Scared into a stupor, the boy froze.

“Victor!” Sebastian yelled again. The child did not respond. Under excruciating pain, Sebastian hopped to the loop and shook him.

Victor relented and turned. “Sebby?” he asked.

The wolves advanced. All was ominous.

Sebastian raised the pistol and fired another round.

The wolves halted, but they did not flee. They circled again amongst themselves; that loose knot became tighter.

Sebastian tucked the weapon at the small of his back and risked the entire plan when he stepped forward and gripped the lad’s shoulders. When he had Victor’s undivided attention, he spoke with authority without knowing the source of the inspiration. “Victor, life is to be lived with purpose. We must honor that purpose.”

Victor heard this simple truth, but understood nothing.

The words had to be spoken, if not for the boy, then for Sebastian, who, now with enough knowledge and experience, understood his own advice and rejected any manifestation of a faux existence.

XXVI

A state of urgency is intoxicating as much as it is clarifying. Inebriated to the point of prescience, Sebastian no longer battled fronts he knew were needless wars of rage, contests he once fought unconsciously until they became patterns which sapped his soul and stole his time and effort. He no longer fought against the tide. His energy was better spent with deliberate intent on matters of worth. To his relief, he drifted with a force that carried him to where he needed to go.

As the wolves reached mass rebellion and Sebastian’s strength weakened, he, strangely enough, relished a mayhem which tipped the scales against him. He sensed a rare touchstone—a beginning within an end. As he faced a true fight, one that was worthy, he knew he was willing to die and, by doing so, that he might win the war. The aftermath? Victor would breathe; his heart would beat; he would smell, touch, taste, see, and hear. Over the coming years, he would gain greater knowledge, experience, understanding, intuition, and wisdom. In a word, he would fulfill his own calling.

Sebastian was nothing like the empty shell of a man negotiating Consumption Junction hours earlier. Forever altered by a life-defining event that reconfigures all priorities to one, he cared for nothing but the survival of another soul. He did not care for his wife and children. He cared nothing for his home, profession, or employees.

He did not care for himself. He was immersed in a truth which dispelled the need for worldly attachments. No longer a victim of doubt, defeat without a fight was no longer possible. To the contrary, he fought. He acted. He loved. His purpose would not suffer delay or denial.

As if a conductor of a symphony, Sebastian harnessed the cacophony of senseless noise into harmonious splendor and directed a moving score evoking the strongest passions of life and death. He was neither a pawn nor a reactionary agent to pessimism in any form. He stood afar while in the fray and summoned an outcome from nothing. He needed only to speak the word into existence, tame the wild, and bathe the innocent into a royal priesthood clothed with a resplendent robe of truth. For, truth was transparent; truth was gilded scripture; truth would lead the lost to logos, reason which travelled none other than the narrow path to liberation. He hoped the first steps of his journey would end triumphantly with an impact of eternal significance. Dutifully, urgently, Sebastian led the way.

Urgency is no respecter of time. Urgency knows only the here and now. After a fifty-six-year trek through what man calls life, Sebastian understood time to be an illusion. Time was not real. Time, a contrived concept to measure a fiction, fomented man's flawed perceptions of the glorified clock. Sebastian was no closer to the future than he was the past. The present was here. The present was now. What a mockery to endure thousands of sunrises and sunsets and not once challenge the perceived significance of an hour, which, in reality, was a measurement of no import.

Sebastian had but the very moment he breathed. He was present and he beheld truth. The present was a forever advancing non measurement, never fixed, never faltering. Every successive breath was wealth beyond measure and he would own each and every inhalation and exhalation until he owned no more. What power! With the selfless acquisition and bequeathing of wealth second by second, he understood a context which girds a sentient man into a final act, a testament, a destiny worthy of inscription onto the hearts of followers and would-be-heroes who, themselves, would be inspired by what was possible without paying the least homage to time.

Urgency is the irrepressible stamped into the immediate that a thousand winds can neither slow nor quicken. Urgency had stamped Sebastian when it mattered most. Notwithstanding physical pain and mental and emotional fatigue, he was lucid in ways he had never been. Had he possessed such right thinking and a sense of urgency in his youth, had his judgment not been clouded, he would have rebelled against his father. He would have ridden winds of change and erected

a hope of hopes measured by foundations, substructures, and superstructures tied together with abutments, piles, girders, and arches. He would have spent a lifetime making bridges, not clothes sewn seam by seam, with each seam sounding the ticks and tocks of the clock even louder than they deserved, since each seam was as insignificant as those tick and tocks. Sebastian had counted seams as if they were seconds and the seconds became minutes and then hours until he could count no more. Countless seams had blurred his past and clouded his future and the effect was clear. His present was blinded to purpose. He became the tick; he was the tock. His life was a string of seams serving as the measurement of time until he served no purpose at all.

However, now, in the present and under unimaginable conditions, as Sebastian stood within the fracas, he was free from the bondage of the clock and those damn ticks and tocks. He saw time as one of the greatest attachments, a hoax. The supposed relevance of time as the means to forecast profit and loss statements for business, family, wife, and children dripped away like wax melted by the burning wick of purpose. He no longer saw events defined by the beginning and end of a schedule. There was no middle when a man dined with his wife, played with his son, or read a book with his daughter. Glances at clocks and calendars and thoughts of tomorrow did not preoccupy a husband who loved his lady within the sanctity of their home. Minutes were irrelevant when burdened with a sickly child. Is time more precious than shouldering inconceivable grief until that grief dissolves and the one hurting is made whole?

That Sebastian could and would be driven by urgency with absolute clarity in the present was paramount. Purpose was everything. Does the execution of a plan depend upon timing? Yes. However, time is merely a component of purpose. If wolves attacked in the present, Sebastian had to act regardless. That he could or should have acted earlier is of no consequence when the regrettable attack occurs. Moreover, if he acted with urgency and clarity throughout the ordeal, conjecture of a possible attack would be weighed as a natural extension of purpose.

Is this any different than villagers upon seeing Sebastian's frantic donkey running through the public square acting with urgency or not? Do they immediately form a search party and climb the Southern Bypass with torches and resources, or do they form a committee and discuss the merits and demerits of the venture? Would the second option be unfortunate? Would not both options be better than doing nothing? Is not the first option ideal? Otherwise, the villagers would not know of any pending tragedy. Yet, if they acted

with urgency and clarity in the present as if a tragedy were unfolding, purpose would prevail and time would remain secondary or tertiary. If the village elders did not act at all, would they not lack urgency and clarity? Would they not tread in an ocean of time and blindly navigate temporal attachments and shallow perceptions to the exclusion of purpose? Would the exclusion of purpose not be the main cause for their failure to act? What, then, is time?

If life is for the living, what does it mean to be alive if life is quantified primarily by the movement of the sun and rotation of the moon? The answer must be truthful. Is life an anything-goes-approach simply because of the duration of that particular anything? If so, does cowardice equal bravery? Is ignorance on par with wisdom? Pessimism to optimism? Does hate match love? These questions challenge whether a worthy life is distinguishable from an unworthy life misspent to the point of shame and neglect.

Virtue must be superior to vice. Is life as a drunkard equivalent to an industrious man? Both men mark time by two prominent celestial stars. To live must mean to be or to do the exemplary in the present regardless of the concept of time. It is not enough to conform to the mandates of a circle outlined by twelve Roman numerals with four hashmarks between each. It is not enough to follow sixty bondservants racing around the circumference of the clock, as if both man and bondservants were beholden to every spur of the moment whim. A wealthy man who lives off the interest of his capital so that he may collect seashells does not manifest a worthy life. However, a laborer who drives spikes into rough-hewn beams used to build homes so that families may survive and thrive, he embodies what is good, what is just, and what is true. Purpose is superior to the fallacy of the clock.

Virtue. The instant Sebastian sensed a beginning within the end, virtue consumed him. Sebastian could erase forty years of regret with a single act of bravery in the present. The act is the means of measurement. The act is everything. The act is bravery quantified and qualified. The act is truth exposed. The act is love because love is the essence of life and, let it be said, love is the essence of death. Love is expressed by acts. Love cannot be measured otherwise. Love is the most poignant means of measuring purpose, especially when love is all encompassing within the final of stage of a man's being.

Sages have noted that man is most alive when he faces death. Oh, the sweetness of irony. Fundamentals resurface to prominence when least expected, not because they have been forgotten and buried under years of events and schedules, but for the truth these key precepts possess. If man is most alive when he breathes his last, are the merging

of purpose, urgency, and clarity not opportune? Does one weigh the idea that his life was misspent and unfulfilled, or does he reject this notion? If it were possible to make amends for 30,000 sunrises and sunsets which, in retrospect, were incongruent with purpose, those with discernment would seize the truth in the present and be truly alive with unparalleled urgency and absolute clarity. They would fulfill their purpose. They would embrace wisdom and be in and with truth and fulfill their calling. They would manifest an eternal testament and know all else is for naught, mere vanity chasing after the wind.

Oh, but let the gale-force winds blow! For, in that precious moment, in the ever occurring present, though Sebastian's body languished and his gait was unsteady, he leveraged untapped resolve into greater courage. He loved with a profound love. He acted. He acted in love and for love when it mattered most, in the here and now, as he breathed a warrior's breath and maybe his last breath unto death and a new beginning.

The situation Sebastian confronted was dire. Only a small amount of fabric remained to sustain the fire. He had but a few bullets. Darkness filled the forest faster than the sun lowered itself. The embers of an equally languishing fire glowed but little light.

Victor remained frozen in a state of fear. The boy held the sides of the loop in a death-grip. He was petrified in a lotus posture.

With a singular goal in mind, Sebastian reached for the run of cloth hanging from the right side of the branch and, in doing so, he saw space. Space in the air, space between objects and beings, space within objects and beings. Space was everywhere and in everything. Space was in and around matter. Matter existed in space, between objects and beings, and within objects and beings. He glanced at his wounded leg and blistered hands. He was made of matter and space. An entire universe existed within everything. From gross matter to the invisible, he was but a part of the whole. Yet, he and nature were one and the same.

Never did Sebastian entertain, much less accept, that the elementary constructs of a tree were equal to the makeup of man. To express such an idea inwardly would spark reflexive disbelief and to do so in public would invite general ridicule. Disbelief, perhaps second only to pessimism, is the common discourse among recalcitrant souls unwilling to inspire optimism and create new possibilities. Most people are negative, ignorantly so. However, does not truth remain nonetheless?

Miraculously, Sebastian viewed the physical world of invisible constructs as a divine design of space and matter animated by

frequency. All matter emitted frequencies resonating ceaselessly in all directions, just as striking a piano key emits a sound and the underlying frequency connects with and through space and matter. He intuited the ability of using and influencing space and matter to create positive frequencies for good, because good is true. With such power, he would defeat negative frequencies for the furtherance of his purpose in life and death.

Alas, since most of humanity are predominantly pessimistic and attached to what ails them, detractors abound. Negative frequencies affect the five senses and distort what actually is and should be. Most subsequent perceptions are numberless and their impact is enormous. The mind and heart misperceive and render the soul confused and man is far removed from truth. Negative frequencies have a reach and strength surpassing the force of the four winds combined and the repercussions upon self, others, and life in general are incalculable and tragic.

False perceptions obscure the proper understanding of space, matter, and frequency for one reason. False perceptions are easy to accept. Even if they are fervently believed to be true or close to truth, no one perception is any truer than another. One hundred souls may have one hundred distinct perceptions of the general or specific, be it an object, event, or concept, and be no nearer the truth than the rest. Even more disconcerting, the majority of those one hundred vigorously defend their perceptions as accurate. Such is the allure of lies. The result is telling. People assert that they are right equal to the belief they cannot be wrong.

Failure to recognize perceptions as traps prohibits an understanding that space, matter, and frequency are more than mere props. Those who perform certain characters upon life's stage provoke what is false because perceptions are not placed in proper context. Let it be said plainly. People perform their roles within a contrived reality without true context of space, matter, and frequency. Few abstain from the unreal. Few allow for what simply is.

Sebastian reached a profound generalization which he had to accept as true. Flawed perceptions are a plague and most people perform their tiresome roles only to serve as catalysts for more of the same. Consequently, humanity discerns little. A woman who pursues a perceived love to avoid emotional pain from failed relationships will not recognize the pathological nature of the man she beds. She beds evil and perceives falsely that she loves and is loved. She wants so desperately to have what she lacks. Sadly, she believes in something which does not exist. This perceived love, sadly, is her true reality. She

is no different than the man who defends a false religion in order to avoid his own inadequacies. Then there is the father who basks in the perceived glory of a family empire all the while relegating himself and his children to defeat. Misery, once the size of a mustard seed, is watered by falsehoods and morphs into an irreconcilable failure. The seedling takes root and grows into a monstrous lie.

False perceptions pitted against equally false perceptions coveted by others end in dissension with little possibility of resolution. People blindly defend their tainted outlooks. They adhere to vantage points which are but empty claims that one belief is better than another. Perceptions are employed to advance lies. Why? Perceptions are lies in need of a defense for base reasons like greed and fear of loss. Only a truthful knowing and willing disbelief of false perceptions will break this senseless cycle and enable one to begin anew.

Are there true perceptions? There is truth. Why is truth not readily or easily known? Consider the idea that a man performs a certain character upon the stage of life from birth until death because he knows no differently than the lies he believes. He does not know to be other than what is not complementary to space, matter, and frequency. He exists into smallness of thinking, feeling, and being by default. He knows of no other alternative. He lives a false life. He does not know that perceptions are nothing more than either his intentional avoidance of what must be confronted or the unintentional obscuring of truth.

Sebastian had been a grand purveyor of false perceptions. He sold lies and, tragically, bought into his lies as readily as he bought the lies pedaled by others. Enmeshed within flawed perceptions, he played the role of victim with perfection during his entire performance. He had demonized those he believed were culpable for his demise. He made himself right and, therefore, perceived that he was entitled to judge. He exercised dubious power to rationalize his perceived unhappiness. He furthered his perception of what was right in order to justify his failure to correct a wrong. He proved others wrong because he refused to be or do right. If he had committed one definitive failure, if he had advanced one cardinal sin—and he did—he had refused to act in love with purpose in and with truth. He had lacked truth. When one lacks truth, he fails to love. Consequently, all he can do is perceive and do so falsely and without ever truly loving.

Consider an example. Sebastian may have become the best clothier in the land, but this did not make him a clothier. Without the desire, the love for his work, he was unfulfilled. Yet, as so often occurs with humanity, he acted as if he were satisfied. He regarded his

perception as true. He was no different than the liars to his left and right. He was equal to the self-deceived to his front and rear. Cowards all, each was either ignorant or fearful of truth, a contemptible truth which, according to all liars, could be no more than a lie.

Sebastian encouraged false perceptions and encouraged others to accept them as well. In the end, most everyone believed he was happy and successful. Rather emphatically, artfully even, he convinced everyone to believe that their false perceptions of his lies were true. Most did not see his misery. The deceived are rarely open to alternatives—especially truth. The few who discerned truth, those who knew the extent of Sebastian’s pathetic existence, especially when compared to his former dreams, they remained silent. The majority of Willington citizens, however, marveled at his life. As Sebastian endured what he wanted least, what he hated most, he was the envy of nearly all. What sorcery!

Double, double toil and trouble,
he’s in a fix, yet cannot stumble.
Steadfast so others may perceive,
he has denied doom unseen.

The hex prevailed because Sebastian refused to relinquish falsehoods which he coveted above all else. How dastardly deceitful webs are woven within vicious routines executed in defiance or absence of truth. Ironically, with the exception of the extraordinary soul, the masses follow and they follow gladly.

Is there a solution? Is there a means to defeat lies sourced within and from untrue perceptions? May one transcend into and beyond the supremacy of the dominant lie and acquire a true understanding of space, matter, and frequency? Is there an antidote to man’s propensity to distort, especially since distortion is the knowing or unknowing means to mask truth?

There is an answer. Loss. Man must lose if he is to shed errant perceptions and arrive at truth. However, isn’t loss what man avoids, often at all costs? No one willingly loses fortune, fame, love, or advantage, all of which are perceived falsely no less! Man has no cause to willingly relinquish assets, arguments, and illusions, those tangibles and intangibles which do nothing more than justify his existence.

And this is what man calls life? This manner of being is living life? No wonder man avoids death as the worst of plagues. Rare is the man who hears and accepts the indisputable wisdom of Roger Smith, the maverick who said, “Live your life as if you were to be killed.” The

likes of Smith are but fools to a world of cowards who believe death is the end of everything perceived to be true. Just as egregious, those cowards believe life is the ultimate goal worthy to be glorified while death is the ultimate thief. What foolishness!

Most souls covet what they believe to be true without ever knowing those beliefs are false. They are incapable and unwilling of being without their flawed perceptions in the here and now, within space, matter, and frequency—even, and especially, at death. If a man were to lose all he held dear, only then might he shun his false beliefs, only then might he realize his life was but a lie and, before his last breath, gain absolute truth. This scenario would be intolerable to most. Such naysayers would not fathom losing some or all flawed perceptions in order to be alone with absolute truth during their final moments. To them, this would be a most fearful prospect. Thus, they continue to misperceive. They must. What else could they do? What remains? What else would they possess? Nothing of significance. Without truth, true context is unattainable and they would hold nothing but falsehoods. Alas, false perceptions prevail unrebuted.

For one to relinquish his hold of perceived truth only to realize his truth was a lie and his life was a fraud would be a fate worse than death. No one would want to know his lease on life was based upon an endless stream of lies. Are not flawed perceptions the reason many reject the possibility to be fully alive? Yes. Any sane man would ask why. The answer is immediately available for those willing to understand. People refuse what is true simply to maintain homeostasis, what is convenient, and the status quo—what is known. And what is known is comfortable even if it manifests a life of misery. In the context of what is known, loss is unacceptable, intolerable, and rejected outright.

Sebastian no longer coveted false perceptions. More importantly, he had no desire to hide from truth. He knew he had deceived himself and others. He knew his life had been sourced in lies which erupted into fault lines of major lies and fractured even further as fine fissures of countless lies which covered the landscape of his being.

With true context, Sebastian had clarity. From the macro to the micro and from the micro to the macro, all lies became irrelevant. A master clothier *desires* to be a master clothier. Sebastian never held such a desire and he refused to perform this role henceforth as if he did. He knew. No one knew better. No one else could know better. He had failed to pursue his dreams. He was not an architect. He was not a husband or father if he did not sacrifice himself volitionally and with

purpose and perform these roles with true intent. He had been a man who went through the motions, dreaded motions spurred by false perceptions marked by the clock and those deceitful ticks and tocks. He had long endured drudgery. He had never been his true self. That he was not as he should have been was unacceptable in the immediate here and now. He would follow the common route no more. He would take the narrow path. He would seek and possess truth. This was his life after all and he would have his own death.

At this juncture in his journey Sebastian had an epiphany. He paused. He was gravely struck by what he could not and would not deny. He muttered an admission which shook his soul. "Dear God, how empty and vain my life has been."

In the present, in the face of raw danger, he transformed beyond space and matter and into a new frequency. He went from dull and deadened to peace and love. He was vibrant and alive. Amidst the fog of war, he was a willing foot soldier in the trenches where warriors fight with clarity and purpose. He orchestrated words and actions in that very present. A humble servant, he would lose everything. At the threshold of eternity, with upraised arms and baton in hand, he conducted his magnum opus.

Did the angels hold their collective ethereal breath? Did God sit in glory and marvel at the performance of truth upon His stage with a cast of one? Was there any doubt Sebastian would act? He would act. Girded with truth, he had to act.

Mr. Lorne fell silent and I was glad for it. He stared at me. He knew my mind was numb. He knew my heart was heavy. What I had heard for the last ten minutes was more than a bit overwhelming. I did not know where to begin. Words and concepts tore through me mind.

"Mr. Lorne, really?" I rattled off a list of observations. "Urgency. Willingness to die. Cared for nothing but Victor. Speak into existence. Time is an illusion. There is no past and no future. The present. Virtue superior to vice. Love is the essence of life and death. Acts of love. Space, matter, and frequency. False perceptions." I looked at Mr. Lorne and said, "Need I go on?"

I thought for a minute and answered my own rhetorical question. "Yes, I must. I must go on, as this was too much, far too much." I began to count with my fingers. "Few allow for what simply is. Lies. Truth. Performance of characters. Need to be right and refused to be wrong. Loss." Then, as if to make the most important observation

of all, I said, "And who would have thought that one should live life as if he were to be killed?"

I could not reconcile the enormity of what I heard. As if shouting, I asked, "Knowing one's life was a lie before one's last breath was a fearful prospect worse than death? And then Sebastian concluded how empty and vain his life had been?" I dopped my arms to my lap for emphasis.

Mr. Lorne was silent still. He waited for me to embrace as much as I could. I finally stated what I could not deny. "Mr. Lorne, I don't rightly know why you shared what you did. It is too much for anyone." I sat there. I simply sat and despaired. But I had to admit one point. Mr. Lorne's story was good, really good. "You have me thinking. But, why the avalanche of thoughts and emotions? You caused me more confusion than I ever expected."

Mr. Lorne stirred a little and sighed. He looked to the sky and asked a question I did not expect. "Lad, have you ever been through something arduous, like learning how to use a tool or how to apply a concept and you could not get it right? Try as you might, it just did not work out?"

"Yes," I answered. "And it was frustrating."

"Exactly."

"Well, imagine grappling with the most challenging concept of all..."

I interrupted and asked a question. "Like life and death?"

Mr. Lorne nodded and continued. "Imagine doing so when you are, for all intents and purposes, in the wrong place and at the wrong time and not sure you understand anything. Imagine being in the dark and without strength to endure, but you must, even if your mind is defeated and your heart is broken. Imagine the doubts and pessimism churning within your soul. Now, imagine doing all of this when death is the easy solution." Mr. Lorne was serious.

"That is tough to put into context, Mr. Lorne."

"Exactly. Now imagine doing what I suggested while trying to save someone's life!"

I did not say a word and then I joined two thoughts. Sebastian faced the unimaginable and he did so with the added burden of saving Victor. But then that was the point. Saving Victor was suddenly the impetus to Sebastian's life. The motivation to save the child somehow compelled Sebastian to arrive at a place he needed to be in order to live life. But would he get there?

Mr. Lorne was not finished.

“Lad, you must understand an important consideration. Sebastian contended with an even greater complication. He did not know that he battled anything more than saving the child.”

“What?” This made no sense to me.

“Sebastian battled against all odds without knowing what he was enduring personally. He did not realize the onslaught of thoughts and emotions that were changing his perspective.”

I began to understand. “So, you are saying that, while he attempted to save the child, Sebastian was and would be blindsided?”

“Yes. And I must add that wave upon wave of new insight will pummel him. He may accept greater insight or he may reject it; he may understand or not; he may prevail or not as each wave descends. But know this for certain, these waves will come, waves comprised of the most incredible and he is not ready.”

“If Sebastian does not know what is coming and he does not handle it well, both he and the boy might die in the end.”

“Yes, lad. Now listen to me, please. What I about to share is for your benefit. Since Sebastian does not know what he will endure, he will cycle through thoughts and emotions. This repetition itself is troubling enough. Thus, be prepared for the ups and downs and ins and outs of a man who may be transformed in ways never imagined because he is in the right place and the right time for this to occur. And, you must weather the journey as well. You must recognize that Sebastian’s transformation through the greatest challenge of all will not be easy or direct. You must observe the man in the thick of battle and watch not only how he accepts and rejects, but how he progresses and regresses, all the while encountering the physical realm on his path to the spiritual. If what I shared in the last ten minutes was overwhelming to you, imagine Sebastian learning and experiencing all of this alone, reasoning alone, in the dark, and scared to hell of failing to save the child.”

XXVII

The evening air stilled to a restless calm. Irksome noises disclosed the scrambling of wolves stopping here and there as they clawed fertile soil. They sensed the end of the hunt and panted in short, heavy breaths. Their anticipation served as an appetizer.

The sun dropped out of view with indifference. An increased foreboding filled the forest. No less than a vivid painting, the wolves appeared to be menacing statues standing before a weak fire burning

without desire. Stirred by slight, shifting breezes, small flames rose and fell erratically and flashed against a black background. In an immediate foreground painted with yellow-orange flicks and flashes, the wolves seemed to sway in a haltingly hypnotic motion. Marking time and territory, their fur upright and ears drawn back with thick and ready paws, the pack waited to attack.

Nothing could have more effectively portrayed this fear-filled scene. As if marionettes pulled by strings, each wolf gave the impression of lightly touching the ground with a leftward bob only to instantaneously return to a rightward weave. The collage of bobs and weaves, accented by a morbid silence, captured the nightmarish theme and made the eight wolves appear to be eighty. Both man and boy stared at a portrait of hell.

Sebastian knew. A convergence of primal forces foreshadowed what no wise man would spurn. Death drew nigh and he rejoiced at the possibilities. Notably, false perceptions were nowhere to be found. Truth alone was there for the taking. Sebastian's blood surged. His seven energy nodes channeled upward and into providence. His spine powered into sublime cognition. His heart and mind were one with a force he had never known and still did not know. No longer a misguided vessel traveling within an uncharted plane, he was a spiritual warrior directed by the divine. His life-force, the very essence of his being, melded into what was beyond his ability to describe, much less comprehend.

Sebastian discharged one of two remaining bullets into the pack and struck a wolf.

The animal's cries filled a forest expecting a climax.

Victor dropped the knife and grabbed the sides of the loop again. He stared at the prostrate foe kicking and writhing in pain.

The wounded wolf's demise was Sebastian's cue. He placed the pistol at the small of his back. He turned and pulled the run and yanked it downward. With tension at the top of the loop, he wrapped the material around his forearm and grasped it firmly. He fed the run around his waist and into his other hand and hobbled backward toward the edge of the ravine. The lag in the run tightened instantly and the loop swallowed Victor as gently and securely as a mother wraps a blanket around a sleeping babe.

Sebastian made his way down the side of the hill and into what lay hidden by angles and objects and a part of the forest forever famished for light. When he found his first destination, a tree directly behind and beneath him, he glanced at the boy. Victor, still captivated

by scurrying wolves, was unaware that he was alone. Unnoticed by either friend or foe, Sebastian belayed into the abyss.

The clothier turned woodsman was nothing more than a clod of clay shaped and molded into purpose. He descended and scrambled to the tree that became his cornerstone. Scooting behind the trunk, he shot a look upward. The run of material stretched an ell off the ground and disappeared toward the branch serving as the axle for a pulley. He placed his foot against the base of the oak. “Huh! Ah! Huh! Mmmm, Uhhh! Huh!” With pulls, grunts, and groans, he chugged to a cadence as out of rhythm as it was effective.

As if a snake resting before uncoiling and slithering away, the balance of the run sat a short distance from Victor. Slowly, Sebastian secured enough material with each pull. Within minutes, the bottom of the loop lifted off the ground and swayed slightly. The immediate sense of instability unsettled Victor. He bolted upright and discovered that Sebastian was gone. The situation only worsened when a wolf darted over the fire. The pack knew the boy was alone as well.

Though he could no longer see the child, Sebastian knew his efforts would bring Victor into view. He drove his healthy foot against the tree trunk and pulled. The strain was incredible. Each heave brought little success. As the teardrop-shaped loop climbed higher, gravity became a greater nemesis than the wolves. Though tedious, the work was not a routine mired in drudgery. Sebastian slid his arm past precious gains which he escorted to his rear and advanced around his back. He secured each minor victory to the other side of his body before those critical gains fell to the ground like drops of liquid gold counted and recounted for their inestimable worth.

Victor searched for Sebastian. He felt abandoned. He believed he was helpless and perceived nothing but hopelessness. The lie took hold. He did not know what Sebastian knew. He did not know anything beyond the obvious. Not knowing overwhelmed Victor.

A lone wolf crept closer and the rest of the pack followed.

Victor did not delay. He thrust his arm through the opening of the cocoon and picked the limb off the ground.

The advancing wolf seized his chance and attacked.

With the knife in his right hand, Victor lashed out and slashed the wolf’s hip.

The wolf dropped back in a fit of rage and, with a pronounced limp, marched ferociously toward the boy.

“Sebby!”

Sebastian froze. He did not know if he should come to the boy’s aid or continue to pull. If he stopped, he reasoned all he had

achieved would be lost. Instinct took precedence and overpowered him. Purpose prevailed. He pulled with renewed vigor. With each heave, the loop rose higher. He leaned and pulled and pulled and leaned. He grunted and groaned. Spit and sweat covered his face. Decorum did not govern his actions. In this most unlikely of venues, politeness was a weakness and protocol a vice. Acts of survival required no pretense.

Sebastian paused momentarily and spied into the night. He saw the upper half of the loop and Victor's head and shoulders above the lip of the ravine. The boy's arms flew up and fell down fitfully.

The wolves jumped and snapped at the child's flailing arms. With pointed reprisal, he jabbed them with the stick. "No! Stay away! Yah! Sebby! Help me!"

"God damn it!" Sebastian shouted in a muffled voice. He grimaced. Raw anger revealed insane determination. Deformed by forces overpowering him, grotesque was his face. No one could mistake his intention. There was nothing unstated in his soul. His thoughts and emotions were fully exposed to a less than candid world. He did not give a damn about false perceptions imposed by those watching from the sidelines, those who were volitionally blind. He was liberated and, by God, he knew it.

In the thick of battle, Victor cried out again. "Sebby, they're attacking! Help me!"

Sebastian's heart sank. His gut seized. His mind blanked. Then he reacted. He reached behind and retrieved the pistol. The weapon housed a single bullet with his name on it. He hesitated. Then he raised it and pointed the end of the barrel against his temple. He closed his eyes and paused. He looked up and saw a silhouette, the outline of a boy and wolves flying and falling. He could not tolerate the image and he would see it no more.

Sebastian pointed the barrel upward and aimed directly at Victor. He paused again. Sweat poured from his scalp. He tensed. He wiped his eyes. He rubbed spit from his chin. He tried to rid himself of all distractions. His shot had to be true. He adjusted his aim carefully and moved the barrel to the left of the boy. When he was sure, he pulled the trigger. The explosion rang and the pack scampered. Victor had a reprieve. Sebastian was relieved.

That singular bullet was meant for an entirely different target. Sebastian knew his pending death would be violent. He did not want to be eaten alive. He did not want so tragic an end. He did not want the pain. He had planned a painless exit from this world. He had no intention of killing anyone but himself. However, the possibility of

Victor being attacked or killed by the wolves unnerved a man on a suicide mission. Sebastian threw the weapon to the side and resumed his furious tug-of-war with gravity.

Grinding away, grunts and groans drove Sebastian no differently than galley slaves in the underbelly of warships toiling to the constant count of the loom and the pain never ceased. Repetition, mind-numbing repetition, was a one-ingredient recipe for success. Such arduous work was the ultimate taskmaster. Sebastian labored. The groans he spoke into existence equaled a small measure of cloth secured from the distant run. He lost any sense of perspective. He was a crazed despot over everything he controlled and he controlled all within his domain.

The wolves wasted no time. They reconverged upon their quarry. A barrage of bass sounds droned on and on from their throats. Growls linked to empty guts were as frightening as they were indecipherable.

Amidst the chaos, a lone soprano cry sang out, a terrifying sound if only for its innocence, a sound that was out of place—it did not belong—a voice of a boy who longed for maturation and a tenor presence later in life.

Sebastian stole a glance as he pulled. The loop had risen significantly. He saw the boy in full.

Victor whipped the stick back and forth, side to side, and underneath the loop. His arms moved in constant, erratic motion. He screamed denials to relentless predators.

The wolves tried to invade what was not theirs. They leaped through the air, but failed to gain entry. Successive attempts to devour innocence were still an exercise in futility. If Sebastian succeeded, the lamb would not be sacrificed.

Not to be denied, the leader of the pack raced to the top of the knoll. He dug his paws into the ground, reared back, and launched himself forward and onto the loop. He clenched the top of the run with his jaws. He buried his hind paws into the bottom and scrambled for additional support. As if Victor had not endured enough, the wolf scratched the fabric with his front paws like a dog buries a bone. He, too, had a plan. He would shred the cloth.

“No!” Victor yelled. He rolled to his back and curled himself into a ball and pressed against the side of the loop. Unable to retreat any further, he studied the invader. Each detail foretold oncoming action and Victor had but seconds to accept that fate. He heard a foe’s constant snarl rise and fall between erratic breaths. He watched fixed eyes. He saw paws wider than his own hands. He smelled warm and

moist exhales and, if only for a second, imagined rows of teeth ripping his body apart. The pain. He imagined unimaginable pain until thinking and feeling were lost to an unexpected and indescribable state.

Victor tapped what few men ever touch, a kind of presence without being present. Some unknown force stole his consciousness, as if he moved beyond pure fear, pure hate, a state beyond pure despair, when utter despair would be a feeling worthy of experiencing. The wolf was a hound from hell and as savage as sin. Trapped and only a breath away from the wolf's black and red gums glistening under a layer of drool, with coarse hair that could not hide protruding ribs and an underbelly hollowed by weeks of famine, Victor became soulless, which was the only way to describe his condition. How else could such a state be named? He tapped evil and lost his sense of humanity.

When the largest wolf landed atop the loop, Sebastian slammed into the tree. The blow concussed him. He lost his bearings. His right arm jutted forward. The fabric, momentarily loosed from his grip, sent the loop downward. But for Sebastian's left shoulder lodging against the tree and the intentional wrapping of the cloth around his right arm, the child would have free-fallen to certain death.

The barbarian's scheme worked. The rest of the pack, as if their mouths and tongues were flames broiling the choicest of meats, lapped and licked with hearty expectation. However, their leader's success came with a disadvantage; the cocoon stayed in a sporadic, swinging motion and guaranteed the boy's safety.

Sebastian came through to a foggy state. As soon as he noticed his prone position, he grieved the loss of those precious drops of liquid gold. He thought of Victor. The leader was the largest of the pack, a fact which assured Sebastian would lose the tug-of-war contest. Given his fatigue, the added weight of the wolf, along with the never-changing law of gravity, his immediate efforts proved ineffective. He had to seize some chance advantage. He closed his fingers around the run and held fast to nothing but an intuitive calculation. He had but seconds to make a choice, the right choice, the only choice, or he would lose his grip of the run and the boy would be eaten alive. Unsteady, straining, he knelt and then with great difficulty, he came to a standing position and confirmed his keen insight. His right leg would keep the boy suspended.

Victor did not suffer that indescribable state for long. A raw realness brought him back to all-things-human. He recoiled and felt and thought quite naturally. He was desperate and he was grateful to feel this way. "Sebby! Where are you?" Now that he faced imminent death, he feared and hated and despaired all at once. He willed himself

to survive. His heart swelled beyond the pressure amassed before the birth of a new star. He exploded and became fully alive. Energy surged in all directions and broadcasted a frequency of hope, even if a fleeting hope. He fought. He attacked. He slammed his feet against the loop and into the wolf's belly. He kicked his attacker's hind legs. The boy was vicious, violent, maniacal.

The wolf scrambled to a new position. His front paws continued to scratch.

Sebastian heard that distant battle. His mind no longer bound to reason, he became the antithesis of an emerging star. He withdrew. He was impervious to everything but the mission. If he failed, he would implode into an emotionally grievous loss.

Relying upon innate engineering instincts, having sensed the imbalance of his physical position, knowing one mistake would send the entire run up the ravine with the loop crashing down to the ground with the precious cargo landing in a thicket of thieves, Sebastian cranked his neck and placed the right side of his head against the left side of the tree. He pressed his right cheek against the trunk and created a precarious pressure-hold. He choreographed his next moves carefully. He leaned his body to the left. He wrapped his left arm around the tree and then raised and pressed the inside of his injured leg against the base.

While pulling against opposing forces high above the ravine, he hopped on his right foot ever so briefly, raised it high, and thrust it to the right, forward, and down to the ground and fell. He landed on his arse and quickly staked his claim. He leaned back and, without releasing tension in the run, raised his legs and pressed his feet against the trunk. He drilled his feet forward and exerted his energy for one reason, to lock his knees. Fully braced, he resumed the fight. He grunted and groaned. He pulled mightily.

The scene was nonsensical at one end of the run and wholly sound at the other. From what he had ordered, Sebastian defeated disorder where chaos had reigned. If only temporarily, he had secured Victor and the loop.

Victor dodged up, down, and around. He screamed out of pure defiance. "No! No! No!" Too scared to cry, he kicked and punched and swatted. His actions were ineffectual.

The wolf continued to claw and chew his way through the cloth. With a rip at the right spot, the pack's meal would tumble out and down. Intense growls bellowed from below to a deranged clamor. The wolves knew victory was close. The tension could not be measured. Hell would never match such fury.

Victor's eyes widened. He rolled to his knees and searched frantically. He found what he had misplaced. He seized the knife and with his back to the wolf, he rotated his torso and spied the attacker over his shoulder. Like a coil twisted tight and then released, he whipped about and thrust the blade behind him. Blindly, he perforated the loop and struck the unsuspecting. Then came a sucking sound followed by a bright red which christened the white material before the leader fell into a leaderless throng. Having lanced the wolf's heart, the enemy died as soon as he hit the ground. Victor collapsed and began to cry.

The loss of weight from the loop created a jolt in the run. Not only did Sebastian regain the lost drops of liquid gold, he secured more. Renewed hope brought renewed energy. He gasped and heaved hungrily. His appetite had never been so insatiable.

The loop stabilized. The wolves did not. The leader's carcass lay in the middle of a confused mob. The pack paced. It was a ritual. They searched for what was needed. Competitors would vie for the position of dictator and lead the others. Might makes right. The wolves did not suffer illusions. Right would prevail some point soon and the pack would search no more.

But for a constant and barely perceptible sound in the distance, Victor heard relative silence. He peered into the darkness. Had it been daylight, he would have seen Sebastian. The constant tug of the run hinted of his hero's location. Surprised, the child stood awkwardly. From his lofty position, Victor was humbled by the man's mighty undertaking only a stone's throw away. Instantly mesmerized, he fell forward to his knees. Alas, the boy understood Sebastian's plan. Yet, decades would pass before Victor would comprehend the import of this man's sacrifice.

Sebastian took advantage of the lull in activity and lag in the run. He looked upward and, though the fire had all but disappeared, a full moon searched for ingress through dense trees. Lunar beams landed upon bleached fabric blotched with the stain of death. He confirmed that the loop was just below the branch and knew the boy was out of harm's way.

Relieved, Sebastian fought to secure the run. Though he had hoped Victor would remember to tie the loop to the branch, he could not count on a bewildered boy executing this precautionary measure. Sebastian had surveyed the ravine earlier and forecasted a network of trees that would serve as an anchor. A series of twists and turns would lock the entire run in place. He would ensure the loop did not drop.

To his sheer relief, Sebastian had remained undetected by the pack. His scent had dissipated above the ravine and, since the air was cooler and heavier below, the lure of his flesh had been subdued. With this fortuitous circumstance, he hastened his next move. Perhaps, if fate were so inclined, he would crawl into the expanse and save himself. Just as he had not forecasted the wolf attack, he had not projected his escape.

Sebastian sat upright and rotated his body. He placed his back against the tree. He readied himself and found his next target. Yet, the unexpected surfaced again. His leg surged with pain. From his ankle to his hip, a shock ran through a network of nerves and he doubled over and grabbed his pulsating calf. He lost his hold of the run. Worse yet, his heels no longer had traction. He slipped downward and the run pulled Sebastian to the right side of the tree. He knew the consequences. The run retreated up the hill a second time and the jolt sent the contents of the loop asunder.

Victor fell back and down with the momentum of the unsettled orb only to rock forward with the counterflow. The boy fell to his knees and held nothing. Gravity took over and pulled him down. The opening of the loop, as if the entrance to Satan's lair, welcomed the boy to eternal damnation.

Sebastian splayed himself upon the ground. Thrusting his hands into the dirt, he plowed through what lay beneath. Roots, sticks, leaves, he burrowed and furrowed for depth. Oblivious to the pain in his calf, he dragged his feet and raised himself to his knees and dug for anchor-holds. He had to stay the pull of the cloth. His body muscled into a knot. The physical tension bested his emotional upheaval. He feared the carnage at the top of the ravine and saw the efforts of the last half hour disappear yet again. He imagined what he sought to prevent, the end of innocence, the death of a child.

Victor flew toward and then out of the opening. He was helpless save an instinctive reaction. He threw his arms forward and down as anyone would in a free fall and caught the insides of the loop. His shoulders slid to the bottom. His head dangled out and hanged within a fist of the wolves. He eyed them. They eyed him. They barked ferociously. He gulped down any sound before being uttered. The wolves leapt over and onto each other like a mass of earthworms wriggling amongst themselves. There was no beginning or end, just a ball of frenzied, furred flesh. With the loop nearly stilled, Victor struggled to keep his head away from rows of teeth desperately striking for anything solid.

With his arms spread wide and the weight of his body forcing his shoulders down, Victor tried to raise himself. He could move, but barely. Exhausted, he rolled to one side. He bent an elbow and, out of absolute necessity, dropped his arm down and into snapping, searching jaws. He never allowed his arm to still. He raised his other arm up and brought it inside the loop and pressed his palm against the side and gripped the fabric. His knuckles deathly white, the hold was not stable and his arm wavered and buckled with the unsteadiness of the loop. Stability. This is what he needed. He pulled his knees forward and pushed his torso backward and assumed a fetal position. He drilled his feet into the base of the loop and brought his exposed arm up and inside. He spread both hands wide and his knees even wider while lowering his chest to his stomach. With a final look at fourteen moving and focused eyes, he lifted his head up and brought it back over the edge and into the cocoon. He collapsed in a sweaty ball and laughed hysterically. The end had drawn nigh and he refused the invitation. He laughed with righteous scorn.

Sebastian knew the child was still inside the loop. He maintained his sanity by ordering facts which had to be true. The weight and tension on the run had not changed; he heard no ferocious finale from the hunters to a despised agenda; there were no first and last screams from a boy who had not reached the age of majority. Sebastian clenched his teeth and shuddered at the thought. He vowed then and there that he would not permit another mishap. He would pay attention to every detail and avoid the hapless. He demanded perfection.

He sat upright, rotated his body, and placed his back against the tree for the third time. With a secure hold of the run, he shifted his arse to the right and, with strained effort, heaved himself up the hill. He forced his injured leg around the trunk and scooted to the opposite side. He descended down and past the tree and, by doing so, wrapped the run around the trunk. Though the run was partially fixed, he went farther into the ravine.

He looked below and found his next target. He moved to the left and rolled to his destination and wrapped the run around a second tree. Onward and downward, he made his way to the bottom where a series of trees waited. Sebastian wrapped the run around a third and fourth tree.

Though negotiating the ravine was less taxing than pulling the loop into the air, he found no physical relief. Worse still, and unbeknownst to him, and solely attributable to his acrobatic endeavors, his tourniquet had loosened. His leg bled profusely.

XXVIII

Ava lay on the floor of her bedroom in the late afternoon and scribbled letters along the edge of the white scarf. She planned for Tommy-Tom to offer this gift to Gracie after the ceremony. The words, *I love you*, were now the sentiment of a donkey for his bride.

To the extent any seven-year-old makes wedding plans for a donkey and her pet pig, with gifts as one component, Ava set the scarf aside and finalized the official agenda. In her world, arriving at an essential thing or two would give Gracie's pending marriage legitimacy. Otherwise, the intricacies of budgets, resources, personnel, and schedules were needless distractions. Ava, as might be expected, knew what she wanted and she would have it sooner rather than later. Thus, essentials mattered most. Was she not a young child on an earnest mission? There was no reason to delay a goal which, for a one-child operation, was nothing more than Ava conducting the ceremony at the appointed time and venue of her choosing. Gracie and her husband-to-be were already at the appointed location. The flowers, though not in prime condition, had been picked and arranged at the altar. If Gracie was to be yoked to a mate, someone had to be the functionary, a burden which Ava accepted gladly.

Writing a wedding ceremony with words of love is serious work, no different than toil that comes with clinking and clanging of metal against metal, sounds which echoed within the cave of the blacksmith shop and bounced stridently into the fields and sky beyond the Thorton homestead. In the confines of her tiny bedroom, Ava listened to those metallic noises and plied her trade as aggressively as her father shaped molten ore into rigid angles and sleek curves. As a self-appointed minister, for there was no one else to fulfill this responsibility, her parents were too busy, Ava scribbled and crossed out and added words to paper. The script for the vows, the essential glue that would seal a union as securely as those shared by her mother and father, had to be perfect. Ava knew her finished work would precipitate agreement and a bond of wedded bliss. Her efforts had to capture the essence of love. Tommy-Tom and Gracie were in love, after all.

Ava had not been a minister, at least not a real one. Once she performed the role for her ragdoll, Beatrice, and her potential husband, Pine Cone Man, a doll made of pine cones with each cone tied to the

next by single strands from a burlap sack. However, the wedding was never completed. Pine Cone Man was a gangly and awkward fellow who lacked a spine, a feature any good man needs if he is to function in the world and withstand the responsibilities of marriage. Pine Cone Man was spineless to a literal and figurative fault so much so that, upon his birth, he could not be and, therefore, was not named.

He was a nameless soul. Pine Cone Baby became Pine Cone Boy and then Pine Cone Man and this was and would be his only reference. After all, one who is spineless is unable to carry the burden of a real name in any societal setting. A man's name represents his character and reputation in the sense that to know a man's name is to know his integrity and essence. Be he sound or sinister at the core, a man's appellation is telling and usually his most prized possession, at least it should be. A good and wise man knows his worth and will not tarnish himself or his reputation lest his name be sullied. A careless man disregards his name equal to an old newspaper tossed by shifting winds to land wherever, whenever, and in whatever state. The lesson is clear. Even a disreputable man needs a spine to carry the burden of the heavy load associated with his poor public persona, especially if he hopes to resurrect his stature and make amends for past transgressions.

Pine Cone Man had a cone for a head affixed with a strand of burlap which, itself, was tied to a pine cone of a torso connected with two other strands and two pine cones for his left and right arms. From the lower portion of his torso, two more strands supported pine cones for each of his legs. His existence was, in a word, problematic. Pine Cone Man could not sit, much less stand to accept his bride. The only way for him to participate in the wedding to Beatrice, who at least had a semblance of a spine with knots at her hips and neck, was to be held in the air by the minister.

With the minister's firm grasp of a long strand tied at his hips, Pine Cone Man dangled in the air like a mobile above a crib. He was anything but a manly image. He drooped and swayed in a most pathetic state. The mere sight of him hanging near the altar posed a problem for Beatrice. The most committed woman would have become uninspired and reluctant to walk down the aisle. To whom, or more to the point, to what was she walking? But she walked nonetheless.

Ava took her role as minister seriously in this make-believe scenario. As such, she was troubled with not knowing which pine cone was the head amidst the torso, arms, and legs. In the middle of the ceremony, when Ava asked Pine Cone Man if he would take Beatrice to be his wife, she realized she may have been looking at his left leg. Sure, his head had a face, but his head faced due south like all the other

cones. In order to clarify which cone was which, Ava had to raise him upward and look underneath at swinging cones bouncing off each other like a wind chime shimmering before they stilled to silence.

This inescapable reality made kissing Pine Cone Man almost out of the question and even painful to consider. What else could he not do? As a practical matter, the tasks he could not accomplish outside of marriage, much less within a marital union, posed a problem. If he was incapable of holding a knife, which had a spine, he certainly would not be able to insert the knife into a stick of butter warmed by the sun. The fact was that, without a spine, Pine Cone Man could hold nothing substantial. He would be incapable of doing the simplest chores for his wife. This dispiriting consideration was enough for Beatrice to decouple her hope of a man and a woman who could not be coupled in all ways and for every reason in the name of love.

Humbled in a flash of brilliance, Beatrice could not believe the effort she had expended to find a husband. With Pine Cone Man high in the air and the minister searching for his face, Beatrice imagined herself snuggling with her husband-to-be at night and the inevitable tangle of cones and strands wrapped around her body. She imagined the crisscrossing of limbs over limbs and Pine Cone Man pressing her into the mattress without escape. She imagined laying for hours in a tangled mess with nothing to do until someone brought scissors and freed her from a man at a loss to do anything to help himself and his wife. Pine Cone Man could not hold a pair of scissors to ensure her escape or any other device that could be used to her advantage. Pine Cone Man could nor hold a hammer in order to nail a picture to the wall. He could not clear the dishes from the table. He could not hold that very knife and butter her bread or refill her coffee cup.

Overcome by the most unexpected revelation, Beatrice lost all restraint and fell upon the floor in a fit of laughter. She did not laugh at the minister. She did not laugh at Pine Cone Man. She laughed at the extremes of a world often unseen by those who are and will remain forever blind. Until then and there, Beatrice had been unable to discern the degree to which she, too, had been part of a ridiculously contrived scheme called life. She had been one of the volitionally blind. She so desperately wanted a husband, any husband, that is, before she saw Pine Cone Man hanging high above the altar spinning in a state of perpetual uncertainty and certain incompetence.

Beatrice's laughter became infectious. The minister, as much as she attempted to maintain decorum of ceremony and self, learned a valuable lesson. Both minister and bride rolled in front of the altar and laughed. They laughed hard. Tears streamed down their faces and their

guts tightened until they could not breathe. They gasped and rolled all the while hoping Pine Cone Man understood. They wanted him to laugh as well. But he was spineless and, as such, laughter less. Uncontrolled laughter would turn Pine Cone Man into a tornado of sorts. Thankfully, for the lack of a backbone, he was incapable of being either offended or a party to the heightened levity. So, Ava and Beatrice laughed. They laughed at life. They laughed at the illusion of life. They laughed at themselves within the illusion.

When Beatrice regained some self-control, she hugged Pine Cone Man carefully and quickly—a dangerous proposition—and thanked him for the marriage offer, but she deferred. She thanked the minister for her forbearance to withstand an unexpected and rather obvious impediment to a successful ceremony. Beatrice resigned herself to be a spinster and made her way out of the church and entered a world changed for the better. She possessed a clear and crisp vision. Details of her life, which had been ignored or forgotten, became apparent. Now she knew why a husband had been such an imperative; now she knew that that belief was a false perception, a lie which no longer existed. Now she knew that she was whole and complete.

Beatrice looked back and into the church briefly and saw the minister place Pine Cone Man in a heap in the corner. She smiled to herself and noted how much happier he would be without a wife who vexed him in ways he would not be able to withstand. With this reassuring thought and before the thought disappeared, she vowed to visit him. Besides, Pine Cone Man could not be blamed. This she knew with certainty.

Concerning the marriage of Tommy-Tom and Gracie and with her prior experience, Ava could argue that she was fully qualified to officiate a wedding. She had had the best kind of experience. She did not conduct a run of the mill ceremony completed without a hitch. She had been involved with the total disintegration of the event. In the aftermath of Beatrice's dashed hopes, Ava had to summon her utmost political and social skills to manage the resulting havoc within the community and squelch the gossip and rumors which might impugn Pine Cone Man's never-established name. As such, today's wedding would be a simple and enjoyable affair. This was Ava's attitude as she raced to the barnyard with her speech secured tightly between a pinch of her thumb and index finger. With each step, the wedding vows whipped and waved behind her as if the scribbled words announced the pending union of the donkey and pig to the community-at-large.

"Tommy-Tom! Gracie!" she shouted gleefully. She flew through the air. "Are you ready to be married?" She did not wait for a

reply. She climbed the fence boards, petted Beast, and smiled at the bride. “Hi, Gracie!” This was the last greeting she would extend to her unwedded pet pig. Minutes from then, Gracie would be in marital euphoria.

“Ahem!” Ava said as she gazed upward and spread her arms. Then she looked down at the betrothed and spoke as if she were the most earnest minister. “Dearly be lofted. We are gathered here to celebrate the love of two special animals.” With perfect poise, she turned to Gracie. “Gracie, do you take Tommy-Tom to be your husband?”

Gracie did not respond.

“Gracie,” Ava whispered, “grunt once for ‘Yes’ or twice for ‘No.’”

Gracie remained silent. This minister wondered if the bride was having second thoughts. Ava was certain Tommy-Tom had a spine. She inserted her foot through the fence boards and nudged the pig. Gracie, not at all pleased, grunted and only once.

Ava giggled. “Very good, Gracie!”

The minister turned to the husband-to-be. “Tommy-Tom, do you accept Gracie as your wife? If so, nod your head.”

Beast stared without blinking. Ava, not one to have the moment cool with doubt a second time in a second wedding ceremony, leaned over the top fence board and reached for the donkey to encourage his waning confidence. Tommy-Tom avoided her hand and, by doing so, lowered his head. Ava rejoiced. “That’s it!” But she lectured the groom. “Now Tommy-Tom, as the husband, you must be confident like father.”

After tendering this advice, Mrs. Thornton yelled from the front porch.

“Ava?”

“Yes, mother?”

“Supper is ready. Tell your father.”

“Okay.”

Ava was not one to dawdle. She respected her parents and responded accordingly. She shimmied down the fence and darted to the shop, but quickly returned to the barnyard and spoke with absolute authority. “By the power infested in me,” she looked briefly at her notes, “I produce you husband and wife.” With a nod of the head, she said, “Congratulations Mr. and Mrs. Tommy-Tom!” She bolted toward the shop, yet stopped suddenly to issue a final decree. “I almost forgot. Tommy-Tom, you can kiss the bride.”

Ava entered the blacksmith shop with more force than usual. “Father, supper is ready!”

“Good! I could eat a horse!”

Ava gasped. “Oh, father! please don’t say such a thing!”

Brett bellowed one of his boisterous laughs. “Okay Princess, whatever you say.”

Brett washed his hands in the water pail and dried himself. After he put on his shirt, he scooped his daughter off the ground. “Let’s go eat a pig!”

“Father! Not a pig neither!

Brett tickled her as they left the shop. “Well then, I’ll gobble you up!”

Held captive by a man she admired, Ava patted his back. While Brett Thornton made his way across the yard, she bounced upon his shoulder and waved to the newlyweds, who, from her perspective, celebrated their joyful union. By then Tommy-Tom and Gracie had lain upon the ground along the adjoining fence board. Donkey and pig, husband and wife, discussed their joy and a future ripe with possibility. Ava was pleased.

Lauren had prepared a feast. The stew, simmering in a pot fashioned by her husband’s skillful hands, rested on a woodstove located conveniently next to the table. Ava sat the farthest away from the kitchen and nearest the front door. She preferred to be within reach of Captain Crowley. Brett sat opposite her and near the living room. Lauren sat in the middle so she could ferry food with ease from kitchen to table.

Brett descended to a full rest. He waited eagerly to feed a famished stomach. “Sweet Lauren, it smells wonderful.”

“I hope you enjoy the taste as well.”

Ava leaned forward and smiled. Her father stretched his arms to his wife and daughter. Both of them clasped his hands and Brett prayed. “God, we thank you for the food and our family. Amen.” He was a simple man and he spoke simply, even in his prayers.

Ava, who rarely intruded upon her father’s authority, offered her own prayer of thankfulness. “And, God, thank you for Tommy-Tom and Gracie. Please bless the new husband and wife.”

The family of three closed with the obligatory, “Amen.” Mother and father exchanged quick glances. For all they knew, Ava’s fantastical morning adventures, often involving Captain Crowley, had been more bountiful than usual. Brett smiled and looked at Ava draping her scarf over the back of the chair lest she soil it with juice from the stew.

“Ava, now remind me, please. Where did you find your scarf?”

“I told you, father. Tommy-Tom gave it to me. And Tommy-Tom is gonna give it to Gracie as a wedding gift.”

“How does an imaginary friend give a real scarf to a real girl?”

“He’s real!” she exclaimed with delight. “Tommy-Tom is real!”

Brett eyed Lauren with a healthy dose of cynicism. Lauren, who could not keep pace with Ava’s imagination, shrugged her shoulders.

Ava sensed their disbelief. “Mother, Tommy-Tom is my pet donkey. I told father about him this morning. I found Tommy-Tom at the creek when I was fetchin’ water.”

“Really?” Lauren turned to her husband and said, “Seems like a reasonable explanation.”

Brett asked an obvious question. “And did Tommy-Tom’s owner give you the scarf?”

“Father, there was no owner. Tommy-Tom was alone.”

Brett and Lauren looked at each other again with greater intensity.

Ava realized their confusion and offered an adult-like explanation. “Here’s what happened. During my prayers last night, I asked God to send Gracie a husband.”

Lauren smiled softly. She knew of Ava’s concern for Gracie and her upcoming trip.

Ava continued. “Today, just as I was about to fill the pail with water, Tommy-Tom came to the creek. He snuck up and scared the dickens outa me.”

Brett was a bit concerned at this point. He listened intently and asked, “Where is Tommy-Tom now?”

“He’s in the stall next to Gracie, father!” She smiled. “Father, they are married.” She was emphatic. “I held the wedding ceremony before supper. Gracie has to stay home. She cannot travel. She will do good deeds for her husband just like mother does for you.” She smiled sweetly.

Brett pushed his chair away from the table and walked to the window. He turned and nodded to his wife. “Yep. Gracie does have a husband.” He sat down and, with an edge of seriousness to his voice, broached the issue softly, but firmly. “Princess, Tommy-Tom belongs to somebody. We ‘ave to find the owner.”

“But father, me prayers.” Ava looked at him pleadingly.

Brett tilted his head forward in a manner requiring no further words. Ava knew her father and his resolve. However, he wanted to

teach her a gentle and valuable lesson. “He is not our donkey, punkin. A family probably needs him to help farm the land so they can survive. Without Tommy, I mean Tommy-Tom, they might not have a decent crop.”

Ava sulked, but without earnestness. She could not overlook the truth. The donkey was not hers. Tommy-Tom belonged to someone else. And the donkey probably fulfilled a life-sustaining obligation. “Okay, father.” She offered her customary and trusting smile.

Ever mindful of his daughter’s heart, he lessened the blow. “Here’s what we’ll do. In the morning, we will go to the constable. He’ll know if a donkey has gone missing.”

Ava was relieved. “At least Gracie will have a husband for the night. They will have a nice honeymoon.”

Lauren blushed and restrained the urge to laugh. Brett could have cared less. He howled at the notion. “Yes, Princess, she will have a husband for tonight.”

After the cherry cobbler, Lauren busied herself with the aftermath of dinner. “Now, both of you go about your business and I will see to mine,” Lauren said.

Brett grabbed his pipe and walked to the front door. He looked over his shoulder and beckoned Ava. “Punkin, when ye clear the dishes, come visit me and Captain Crowley.”

Ava nodded and moved quickly. This was her favorite part of the day. She would sit with her father and the captain. They would embrace the evening calm and watch the sun paint the clouds with a coal-burning red. If the sun was hidden, they would feel the weight of the clouds smothering the lower heavens with a coolness that would lull the world to sleep. If the sky was clear and darkening to deeper blues, they would watch the moon rise and the sun set. They would wonder whether the lone star of the day chased the lone star of the night, or if the reverse was true. Ava and her father pondered this riddle with the help of Captain Crowley. The captain opined—one of his favorite words—that the question of the sun chasing the moon or the moon chasing the sun was one of the greatest and never resolved conundrums.

Captain Crowley had his opinion. He believed the moon chased the sun and his reasoning was rather sensible. “The current moon,” he said, “which is as naked as a newborn babe, was the original fiery star and the current sun, which was appointed by God to govern the night sky, was jealous and devised a deceitful ploy and snookered the old sun out of its fiery garment.” Crowley cleared his throat. “Lore

has it,” he said, “the moon, as cunning as the devil, suggested that the sun consider a subtle argument which no wise judge would deny.”

Ava, who sat in her father’s lap, looked at him and smiled.

Crowley continued. “This was the moon’s argument. ‘Sun, you are alone. No one can or will associate with a star that emits such intense heat. You have no friends. I, on the other hand, as the esteemed orb of the night sky, have an endless parade of friends seeking my company and light, especially the mariners who navigate the dark and endless seas.’” Crowley waited until he was certain his audience understood the genesis of the moon’s deceitful ploy. “Well, the sun believed the argument, for the sun trusted the moon’s wisdom and honesty. Tragically, the sun asked for a complete explanation and the cunning night star gladly obliged.”

Crowley told the story this way. “The moon smiled deviously. The sun, with hopes to experience the same companionship, beckoned the moon to disclose everything. With a greedy sense the ruse would succeed, the moon presented a foundational claim. ‘The night sky is filled with jewels embedded in the black velvet heavens which are available for the taking. As the moon, I have riches far exceeding famed pharaohs and kings of entire continents. Some have suggested my riches are nigh equal to the treasures of the Creator Himself.’ The moon paused. The pause was another ploy designed to entice the sun further, a simple delay to allow envy and greed to take root inside the sun’s heart.

“‘With such vast wealth, I am able to buy gifts and share my bounty with countless people and have done so for eons.’ The moon shamed itself by stooping to a level no heavenly star should have descended. ‘Honestly, I must confess, I am tired of my wealth and endless joy received from giving gifts to more friends than I can number.’ Another pause fell into the monologue before the moon continued. ‘You, oh great sun, know from your endless joy lighting and heating the heavens in perfect solitude that even the best of things gets old. Yes, sometimes,’ the moon revealed with a hint of mourning, ‘I wish to be alone.’” Crowley was a master storyteller. He waited for his audience to digest the tale.

“Father?” Ava asked. “What do you think?”

Brett took a long drag from his pipe, looked at his daughter, and nodded once to direct their attention back to Captain Crowley. “Let’s listen, child.”

Crowley took leave to finish his yarn. “The sun considered its plight. It was alone in the universe without companionship and mercilessly hot without any cooling. However, the sun could not ignore

a nagging thought. When God tasked the sun to light the day, warm the world, and foster growth, He encouraged His favorite star to cherish one immutable truth. ‘As the sun,’ God said, ‘you are the very source which makes life possible. You are the beginning to all and for all. Relish your noble and holy calling.’”

Ava tapped her father on the chest. “Father? Is that what God told the sun?”

Brett smiled. “Well, I don’t know, but it makes sense, punkin.”

Crowley explained what happened. “The sun pondered the moon’s argument and, in the end, ignored God’s wisdom. As if it could not believe otherwise, as if it wished for the moon’s argument to be valid, the sun accepted the undeniable thesis. Overcome with jealousy, the sun proffered what was rather simple. ‘Moon, your reputation is unblemished and I have heeded your words. I beseech you to grant a deep desire.’ The moon, not willing to allow the sun’s enthusiasm to dwindle in the least, bade the sun to release its proposal. The sun said, ‘I desire one rotation around the earth as the moon. I want to experience your unfathomable riches and bountiful friendship. Are you willing to oblige?’

“The moon reflected a moment and conceded openly that even one rotation would afford something new and exciting. The moon played its role to perfection and thanked the sun for its offer, ‘Sun, you are most gracious to assume my burden and allow me to have a period of silence, to enjoy never experienced solitude. I, quite honestly, would like to get away, far, far away. And rest assured, both riches and friendship will bless you in the awaiting coolness of night.’”

Ava was mystified. “Father? Is this true? Did the moon say such things?”

Again, Brett nodded and redirected a child on the cusp of disbelief. “Let’s wait to hear the whole story.”

Crowley, more than understanding of human nature, enjoyed Ava’s appetite for intrigue. He smiled knowingly and continued. “The two stars finalized their agreement which included exchanging orbits and divine clothing. At the appointed time, when both stars were nearest and directly across from each other, the sun flung its glorious apparel with such force the fiery cloak unraveled in an extended stream of golden glory and touched the evening star. Harnessing its gravitational pull, the moon took hold and wound itself into its new raiment. The sun, still holding the other end of the fiery cloak, intended to pull the moon into its new orbit. This would allow both stars to switch places.”

Ava could not contain her angst. “Father, the sun got tricked, I know it! I know it!”

“However,” Crowley admitted, “not all went according to the agreement.”

Ava gripped her father’s arm and hugged him tightly.

“You see,” Crowley explained, “when the moon was clothed in unmatched magnificence, the excitement was overwhelming. With zeal and newfound energy, from its nadir, the moon hurled itself into formerly unreachable heights. A flash of fire crossed the heavens, a meteor rising and never to fall. Meanwhile, the sun, which was ready to assume the moon’s orbit, idled in the sky and watched with bewilderment. Then quite suddenly and unexpectedly, the sun dropped from the heavens and closer to the earth shouting, ‘Moon! Where are you going? What are you doing?’ Realizing the moon had stolen its glory, the once brightest star cried out. ‘Moon, come back! Come back, you serpent! You stole my birthright! You absconded with my spiritual glory.’ The sun despaired and called out to the throne of heaven. ‘God, are you there? Will you not help me?’ God did not so much as whisper a response.”

Ava was silent. Worse still, she was sad. Tears blurred her vision. She had a touch of the sniffles.

Crowley continued. “The sun, as the new moon, cried until its many seas emptied. The Sea of Tranquility captured the sentiment of the sun’s loss and was so named. For, contrary to the moon’s artful argument, none of it was true. As the new moon, the sun was cold all the time and had neither riches nor friends. The untold wealth, supposedly dazzling jewels bedecked in the black heavens, were but stars and only stars at a distance too far to reach. Furthermore, humanity could not hear the moon and the night star could not hear humanity’s many petitions. Sadly, the sun had been fooled by its envious counterpart. The sun allowed itself to be infected with greed and lost its divine essence forever.”

Ava cradled herself into a ball on her father’s lap and closed her eyes.

Captain Crowley paused with purpose. He intended to convey the moral of the story. “Now, let there be no doubt, this is the reason the moon forever chases the sun. For the moon has an unceasing hope to retrieve its fiery garment and its rightful and prominent place in the heavens. For ages, and still to this hour, the current moon, once the mighty sun, rotates the earth and repeats a never forgotten moral: ‘Do not give away God’s gift to you.’”

When Crowley finished his fable, Brett and Ava soaked in the heavy silence without appreciating the irony that the moon's light shone upon them from on high as a reflection of the sun's former grandeur.

Crowley gave his opinion and he did so with certainty, but, first, he asked a question. "Ava? What would you do if you were the moon?" He waited for an answer. Ava remained quiet. Crowley was not surprised and spoke softly, "This is why I believe the moon chases the sun. The moon did not regain its former glory or divinely bestowed responsibilities. Hoping to redeem its God-given birthright, the moon will forever chase the opposing fiery star."

Crowley's stories drew Ava into rapturous spells. As might be expected, she never wavered with clearing the table. That night was no different, especially since Ava was able to tell Captain Crowley about the marriage bond between Tommy-Tom and Gracie.

XXIX

Not long into the evening, one of Brett's customers came up the lane on horseback. He yelled modestly, "Hello there, Brett!"

Ava jumped off her father's lap and rushed to the cracked stoop.

Brett stood and stretched. He tapped his pipe against the railing. The contents fell upon tiny tepees stretching along the foundation of the porch. "Ah, there is Mr. Garst. He was to come tomorrow."

"Who's 'e, father?"

"Customer, probably my best customer."

Brett eased his way down the stoop and walked toward the familiar voice.

Ava reinforced her father's shadow.

"Brett, I am sorry to trouble you." Mr. Garst said.

"Why 'tis no trouble at all, Mr. Garst. Always good to see you, Sir." Brett shook his customer's hand and gestured toward his daughter. "You remember Ava?"

"Yes, and hello young lass."

Ava smiled daintily and leaned against her father.

"Brett, I was wondering if you completed the stirrups?"

"Oh, yes Sir. All finished, as of this afternoon, in fact."

At Brett's leading, the men walked toward the blacksmith shop.

Ava took her leave and headed to the barnyard.

“Mr. Garst, I think you will be pleased with the results.”

“I always am, Brett. You do excellent work.”

“I thank ye, Sir. I extended the length as you requested and strengthened the corners. As I recall, you wanted more room for a new pair of riding boots?”

“Exactly so, Brett.”

Brett released the latch to the shop doors and swung the left panel wide. Released at its apex, the momentum carried the door slowly and quietly. The oversized hinges did not suffer strain and no squeak was heard, which was a sure sign Brett was the craftsman. Mr. Garst guided his horse to a standstill and followed the owner inside. Embers in the deep metal tumbler cooled gracefully. The reddish glow accented the ceiling with enough light for Brett to access the stirrups hanging where all finished products mingled. He reached and muted the jingle and jangle of others products with his broad hands. He walked back to the entrance and handed the item to Mr. Garst.

More concerned about Brett than the finished work, Mr. Garst examined the reshaped metal. “Brett, I must say, you are the finest at your craft.”

“Well, you are mighty kind, Mr. Garst, mighty kind. And I do thank ye for your confidence. I love my trade, but any man can lug a hammer and whack molten steel.”

“No, Sir, I could not disagree more. You are the best and this is exactly what I needed.” He walked to his horse and compared the new stirrups with the old brand. “Yes, I’d say these are perfect.” Mr. Garst withdrew several coins and handed them to the blacksmith. “This should settle the account and pay for the intrusion into your family time.”

“’Twas no intrusion, Sir, and I thank ye again.” Brett dropped the coins into his pocket and stood with Mr. Garst in the stillness of a growing eve.

“These stirrups will come in handy tonight.”

“Aye? Goin’ on a trip, aye?”

“No.” Mr. Garst offered a sobering revelation. “The banker’s grandson is missing. He left early this morning on a hike in the North Wood and hasn’t returned.”

“Ye don’t say.”

Mr. Garst nodded thoughtfully. “I am going to search for the lad.” He was puzzled by the development and eyed Brett squarely. “I just don’t get it. The boy’s father is a woodsman. The young lad should know his way in the forest. Makes no sense for him to be gone all day.”

“I know of a woodsman,” Brett said. “He lives in these parts.” He pointed in the general direction. “Much farther into the forest.”

The dialogue stalled. Unless serious in nature, conversations, often referred to as polite talk, start and delay only to recommence to conclusions of little significance. Mr. Garst and Brett were no different. The blacksmith had yet to take a vested role in the search for the lost boy. So, the two men talked politely. It could be said they validated their relationship with formal words shared within formal roles. They afforded each other the time and respect each was due for what each spoke without arriving at any purposeful conclusion. Such is the intention of polite discourse generally.

Unless a party intends to connect two seemingly unrelated thoughts and, thereby, add value to the dialogue, he offers nothing substantive. Shallow words are spoken and then fall from one’s lips like water discharged with indifference from a cliff. However, when a substantive thought connects to a second and then to a third and yet another and the conversation manifests the full extent of a significant problem and a possible and equally significant solution, polite conversation falls off that same cliff, but not without cause and relevance. At a point certain, the exchange becomes meaningful. It matters little how the transition from a polite talk to a serious conversation occurs, the transformation is credible.

The mind, which is an imponderable and wondrous thing, often operates independently of a man’s direct engagement. Simply because a man hears a thought does not motivate him to give that particular thought mindful effort. He may choose to ignore the thought, but the mind carries the burden nonetheless. Yet, curiously enough, absent conscious effort, if a man comes to any poignant realization, he will take credit. He may never know that his mind did the heavy lifting. As far as he is concerned, he is his mind and his mind is none other than himself. Most men would neither conceive nor grant a distinction between the two. Most would agree that a man and his mind cannot be separated. As such, man and mind must be one, one in mind as one in body, so to speak.

There was no question about the union of Mr. Garst’s mind and body concerning the lost boy. His intention was evident. Both he and his mind worked overtime. He wondered with acute particularity as to how the son of a woodsman could be lost in the woods and how to find him.

Not so with Brett Thorton. There was no question about his intention or, better stated, lack of intention. He offered polite conversation with no other purpose than to relate with his customer.

But then it happened. A transformation. Brett's mind, operating slyly in the background, weighed the thought that a woodsman lived in Forkwood. Then, his mind connected this fact with Mr. Garst's thought that the son of a woodsman should not be lost. Brett's mind and, therefore, the man, proceeded to filter a slew of ideas which surfaced as a result of events that had occurred throughout the day, events otherwise unrelated to Mr. Garst's intention. There was the pig, the donkey, and the scarf.

Suddenly, Mr. Garst's serious intentions, which had been received and discussed respectfully by a fairly disinterested party, became contextually substantial. The mixing and blending of thoughts, as if inserted in a hot oven, were baked and browned into a crucial dialogue. It was at this juncture that a life and death conference began.

Brett latched on to a critical, mind-generated thought and the man that was Brett Thorton became as serious as Mr. Garst. "Now just wait a moment!" Brett blurted out in a manner not customary for his stolid disposition. He reached over and grasped Mr. Garst's shoulder, an action he would not have taken as a matter of course.

Mr. Garst was landed gentry, a gentleman, a man of education, means, and titles. He was a commander in the Queen's Royal Forces. Rumors rumbled among wide circles that he was to be knighted for his heroism during the last war.

A humble blacksmith did not deign to breach formal societal barriers. A commoner did not casually touch a nobleman. However, Brett's mind thought differently. His mind motivated the man to unknowingly reach for a gentleman in an otherwise untoward manner.

Thankfully, Mr. Garst's mind perceived the sudden outburst and gesture appropriately. Without offense, Mr. Garst, the man, ignored the act outright. Their serious conversation got underway.

"Come with me, Sir!" Brett said. Inspired, Brett raced forward. He veered to the right and forward of the blacksmith shop and beyond the side yard. "Ava!" he yelled. "Lauren!" His tone was unmistakable. He spoke boldly. His words were clear. He was authoritative. He was serious. Lauren and Ava would be serious as well.

Ava tore away from the newlyweds and arrived with startled breathing. "Yes, father?" She stared at the two men with trepidation.

Brett knelt and said, "Punkin, let me look at ye new scarf."

Ava untied the fabric without delay and handed it to her father. Brett noticed the end was torn, not cut.

Brett stood and showed the material to Mr. Garst. They eyed each other with an unstated knowing. They were certain of the cloth's

potential significance. Brett asked, “Ava, where was this scarf when you found the donkey?”

“It was tied to Tommy-Tom’s harness, father.”

The men conferred and Brett offered greater insight. “Ava found a donkey at the creek this morn’. I planned to tell the constable tomorrow.” Brett mulled the thought. “Mr. Garst, there’s trouble in the North Wood.”

Mr. Garst pointed toward the mountain as if to express irresolution. “The donkey must have come down the Southern Bypass. It’s the only way into Forkwood and Willington, correct?”

“Yes, Sir. Such is the case.”

“And there is no road through Forkwood?”

“Ye are correct again, Sir.” Brett thought for a second and added, “And I know of only two families with a donkey in the area.”

Mr. Garst referred to the cloth. “I don’t get it. The material makes no sense.”

The friction within the conversation intensified. Ava felt the pressure and was frightened by it. Brett and his mind coalesced with the deliberate efforts of Mr. Garst and his mind. Intellectual and emotional energy bonded. They battled uncertainty and forced ideas to the fore. Their combined efforts were not without fruit.

Suddenly, Mr. Garst lifted his head. His large frame froze for an instant. With a thrust of his hand forward, he grabbed Brett, a startling breach of his protocol. He spoke with a force that jarred Brett and Ava. “By Jiminy!” His tone conveyed confidence. “Yes, by Jiminy! That must be it!”

Mr. Garst forgot himself. The intensity he showed would have been deemed beneath a refined gentleman and would have elicited some degree of public and private disbelief. However, Mr. Garst’s usual expressions, a hallmark of his personality, his magical way of being, crossed all boundaries and underscored his revered reputation. He was a social chameleon. He understood a universal truth: all men, at the core, are men and, more importantly, he knew he was no more and no less a man than those with whom he related. He treated high and low society in the same manner. He elevated or lowered himself as needed and gave a true account that he was equal to all men—nobles to paupers—all of them souls of worth. He did not presume his own importance. As a practical matter, because he adapted to any environment, he was the most important person of all. Whenever and wherever Mr. Reid Garst found himself, those with whom he interacted believed he or she was truly valued.

Compassionate to a fault, Mr. Garst knew his thoughts, emotions, and actions affected not men within a caste system, but the well-being of souls bestowed life from God. If a commoner shared his views on the king's new decree, a deep sadness with the death of his wife, or that he needed a shilling, Mr. Garst deemed each want or need as the currency of that man's life. Mr. Garst gave the pauper's perspective on the newest law two ears, not just one. He listened with his heart and grieved with a widower who recounted the memories of his precious Susan. When Mr. Garst left a man without means, he did not leave a shilling, he left five with a request that the man buy flowers for his wife's grave. Mr. Garst knew the pauper could not purchase a single petal with two children to feed; so, he gave more. He knew thoughts and emotions and actions were central to meaningful relationships. They were the adhesive which bound soul to soul. He was a master gluer. People were richer for knowing him. Yet, he was certain he had the better part of every greeting and farewell. This made Mr. Garst special, if not exceptional.

In the company of Brett and Ava, Mr. Garst discerned what may have occurred in the North Wood. He crossed firm boundaries once more and enveloped those who were with him into the fold. He came to Brett and Ava as much as he allowed them to come to him. They commingled their currencies into a soul-blending union. They breathed together; their hearts formed a united bass beat; the unstated was evident to each—they were equal and loved. They were alive together in a singular spirit. Though Mr. Garst led the way, Brett and Ava would never have known. They were with him and he with them and that is what mattered most.

“Mr. Chiffon! That's it!” Mr. Garst revealed the connection of the cloth with the North Wood. “Mr. Chiffon!” he declared. “Mr. Chiffon!”

Though Brett and Ava snapped closer to him, they were unaffected by the name.

“Brett, I am speaking of the clothier.” Mr. Garst said.

Brett's confusion worsened.

“My good man, the maker of clothes!”

Brett nodded slowly and then aggressively. “Yes.”

Mr. Garst continued. “He is on a trip and is to return tonight or on the morrow!” He looked at Ava's scarf, which was the only reason she stood nearby. “Fabric!” Mr. Garst yelled. “Fabric!”

“Of course!” Brett replied. The credible possibility became apparent to a man who acknowledged the observation with a sedate whisper. “Of course, Mr. Chiffon must be the source of the scarf.” Brett

understood the relevance of the fabric and sought to match Mr. Garst's intellect, who, of course, afforded Brett the chance. "A signal! The cloth is a signal!" Brett declared.

Now that they knew Mr. Chiffon may have signaled the plight of the banker's grandson, for there was no other logical reason for the white material in Brett's grasp, Mr. Garst led the conjectural charge with his as second-in-command by his side. "Brett, I will notify the constable and gather a search party."

Brett anted his contribution. "I'll get the woodsman and meet ye along the Bypass."

Mr. Garst placed his refurbished stirrups into his leather pouch, mounted his horse, and issued a resounding, "Hah!" Three clouds of dust kicked up by the horse's hooves were an ellipsis signifying Mr. Garst's farewell when words were superfluous given the context of the crisis and unnecessary given their reunion not more than an hour from his departure.

Lauren made an untimely arrival and sensed the urgency of an unknown situation. "Brett?"

"A boy's gone missing." His eyes foretold a fearful scenario that would grieve any mother. "Fetch my jacket and bring some water." He tried to avoid saying his next words. "I'll get my rifle."

Lauren did not linger.

Ava was worried. However, since her eyes rarely left the scarf and she only listened to the two men occasionally, her worry was not equal to a father invested in a conversation and the search for a son of another father. She had a much greater concern.

"Father?"

Brett was deep in thought.

"Father?"

Distracted still, he heard his name, but only partially. "Yes... Yes, Ava?"

"Father? Tommy-Tom is gonna spend the night, right?"

Brett was in deep thought.

"Father? Can he?" She tugged at his shirt.

"What?" Brett realized the importance of her question. Moreover, he knew he could not be slowed with a donkey in tow. He gave a simple answer. "Yes, yes, of course. Of course, 'e can." Brett rejoined his mind's efforts and considered options.

Ava was relieved. She tugged her father's shirt again. She slowed her speech deliberately. "Father? Can I keep the scarf?" She was afraid of his answer. She heard enough of his talk with Mr. Garst

to know the cloth belonged to someone else. She did not want another lesson about keeping things that were not hers.

The value of a torn piece of material was nothing compared to the life of a boy separated from his father and grandparents. Brett understood this. He also knew the cloth was more important to his daughter than he could possibly appreciate. He was not a girl of seven years. He was not a lass who owned but one dress—that Sunday best and Thursday worst. He was not a daughter who thought herself to be the prettiest princess in the land with the scarf garlanded around her neck because her father declared as much.

Brett had the presence of mind and heart to stay his departure for the briefest minute. He knelt like the king he was and brought Ava close. He looked into her blue eyes. She was not lost in the woods. She was not secluded in the dark where scary things lurked with the intent to do the unthinkable to those who were innocent, alone, and scared. Ava was there, standing before him, and he had her to himself. She was safe. He was, in that blessed union, so eternally and humbly grateful. He hugged her slowly. He hugged her befitting their special bond. He recalled incidentals which had sprouted throughout the day, events involving her and distracting him from what was less important. He hugged Ava and savored something special, that which is so often unseen, but known. He then handed Ava the scarf. “Yes, Princess. Keep the scarf.”

Ava sensed her father’s powerful presence. Slowly, lest he change his mind, she took hold of the scarf and wrapped it around her neck as elegantly as her youthfulness would permit. If her father was on a mission, she was as well. She kissed him sweetly and skipped to the barnyard shouting, “Mr. and Mrs. Tommy-Tom!”

Then the inexplicable occurred. Ava stopped dead in her tracks, turned, and raced back to her father. She unwrapped the scarf, handed it to him, and said, “Father, this isn’t mine. Please return it to the owner.”

Brett Thorton, a tall man by any standard, grew taller. He beamed with pride as his daughter skip away for the second time. He had no doubt he was the wealthiest man in the world.

XXX

Sebastian lay motionless at the base of the ravine. With dulled sensations in his legs and arms, his body numbed by trauma, he assumed a life-sustaining posture. He was not troubled in the least.

Troubles did not exist. His mind and heart were at peace. A lone soul untethered from time, attachments, and false perceptions, and most assuredly indifferent to life, he waited to reconcile something, anything. He was not disappointed. He felt a strange phenomenon. Alive and on the brink of death, he did not see an end, but a beginning.

The taste of death was not unpleasant. Unlike the dark and gloomy sermons of overly pious priests, death was not bitter at all. How wrong Father Smythe had been. How wrong the purveyors of errant interpretations of scripture, those who knew nothing of the end of life. Sebastian could defy their false teachings.

Death had no sting. Death was as soft as cotton, as fine as a warm spring breeze, as cool as the morning mist, as satisfying as honeysuckle was sweet. He confirmed this understanding within the one, true church nestled among a cathedral of trees. He partook of the sweet aroma wafting from the burning sacrifice of one soul for that of another and marveled at a simple truth. He had been begotten into a life of beginnings without end. Since he acted in love for truth, he would die into that beginning for truth.

Sebastian did not stumble upon the meaning of life and death, he discovered it. He rejected the notion of happiness and unhappiness. Rather, he knew the possibility of eternal joy through struggle and triumph. Happiness, he discerned, was a perception based upon happenings, events which do nothing more than condition humanity time and again and man relies upon those very happenings as a measurement of a life believed to be meaningful. Oh, the deceit and the consuming conceit which serves as a motivation for even more happenings! In so conditioned a state, one rarely appreciates that his journey reflects regression, not progress. As far as most are concerned, if one is happy, he is good; if one is unhappy, he is not. In either case, man falls far short of his peak potential and he certainly does not know his true self.

Is the ultimate goal to be happy or to avoid being unhappy? What is beyond the happening? What is beyond the thoughts and emotions concerning that very happening? Is life so limited? Is life confined to mere minutes when one is either satisfied or not? If so, do people surrender to the less than ideal as if rocked back and forth like ships upon the open sea with no firm direction and destination, and no other purpose than to experience the waves which produce highs and lows that are perceived as either good or bad?

Sebastian did not doubt the context of his current experience. He did not see good or bad, pleasure or pain. He did not endure an event filled with random circumstances, with wolves and gun shots and

blood and terror—a happening he would have considered unimaginable and unwanted. He did not experience a series of tragic conditions ending in the greatest obstacle he would have avoided like a wagon-stopping rock resting in the middle of the road. The wolves were not just another happening or reflective of another nuisance of an ill-fated existence.

Tragedies abound. Good times as well. Of this Sebastian was certain. He discovered that, whether good or bad, how he received each proved significant. The birth of a child or the failure of an enterprise were not a means to bliss or sorrow. The ebb and flow of life were one and the same—the path to discernment, possibility, and truth. Upon this premise man could act—the circumstances and subsequent repercussions be damned. He could then be eternally joyful for the experience and know the measure of his worth by securing the substance behind every event regardless of every evanescent thought and emotion.

If Sebastian had possessed such wisdom in the past, both his father and that unwanted dinner-table-decree would have brought him joy. The taunts of Justin and other bullies would have brought him along the path of enlightenment, not ignorance. He would have become a temple worthy not of the Word of God, but of God Himself. As he lay dying, Sebastian followed his true Father not to the top of the mountain, but to the lowest ravine, to sacrifice himself for his brother, a child who, one day, might know the joy of sweat and brawn, the sweetness of suffering, and the undeniable contrast that makes life meaningful and death a worthy transformation.

Though Sebastian was free of worldly encumbrances, this did not mean he was ready to die or should die. The opposite was true. He willed himself to prevail in life so that death would vie for the honor of taking so bold a warrior. Though he was willing to die saving Victor, he would not advance such an end. This was not his role. He was not the final arbiter. The time of his death was within God's rightful jurisdiction alone.

Sebastian had a mandate to fight. He would persevere in life. Death would conquer nobly and justly and timely. He received and accepted a calling from his Maker to strive unceasingly to what is eternal. Sebastian would not die as most men, prematurely and never building or finishing a bridge from life to death, a bridge from the temporal to the everlasting, a bridge from ignorance to discerned truth. Death deserves what should not be cheapened. Lest man be deceived, death frowns upon a life surrendered needlessly and without divine appointment. Death despises a hollow victory. Death seeks a

meritorious triumph over each and every soul and despises anyone who resigns in defeat. Just as death deserves to wage a battle worthy of a conquering hero, Sebastian knew a victorious death spoke to a victorious life.

From this spiritual understanding, Sebastian squinted and saw a tree on the opposite hill. Undetected by the wolves at this late stage, he held firm to an everlasting hope, a timeless joy. Though in pain and barely able to move, he willed himself onward. He rolled to his stomach and dug his feet into the soil and crawled across the bottom and to the other side.

The incline was not as steep as the one he descended and the obstructions were fewer. In a quarter of an hour, he was under a tree with a branch seven ells high. He reclined on his back and rested before he ripped a strip of fabric measuring the length of a chain from the end of the run. He tied both the end of this strip and the run to his walking staff. With a secure hold of the strip, he used the staff to stand and took inordinate care to remain as quiet as possible. He mustered some stability and strength and threw the staff skyward and watched it fall short. Frustrated, weary, he pulled the strip. The staff bounced and jerked toward him.

Anger, a friend as well as a foe, swelled within Sebastian's chest. He harnessed the fortitude of this ally and heaved the staff a second time. If success were the smallest distance away, it may as well have been further. He pulled the strip toward him a second time. As if to reinforce a valuable lesson, anger worked its knowing ways. Wary and faint, Sebastian wobbled in place. With staff in hand a third time, he added a necessary ingredient. He had no choice.

He channeled anger through his throat and released a dulled scream. The wolves might hear and come to him that much quicker, but without screaming, he was at a loss. His body needed full expression. He would leave nothing unstated within his soul. Anger had to be vented if his muscles were to exceed their optimum potential. His finest performance required an ejaculatory surge of emotions and energy mixed as one. With his feet separated and arm cocked back, with a muffled yell, he sent the projectile upward. Sebastian crashed to the ground. He braced for sounds and signs of a pending attack. Alas, all was quiet. Silence reigned supreme. To his relief, the spear had sailed high enough to meet its mark.

He crawled forward. Directly underneath the branch, he untied both the strip and run from the staff and paused. He adjusted the strip so that each side was even with the other. Though he still listened for

the pack, all was silent. He would have no need to scream again. Such was his hope.

His next steps were critical to his survival. He made a small loop at the end of the run. He tied the staff a distance of two ells above the loop. He then tore two smaller pieces from the long strip and tied each to both ends of the staff.

Sebastian knelt gingerly and searched for sizeable rocks amongst the leaves. His blurred vision was of little use in a wash of dark greens and browns within blackening greys. He tapped the ground frantically and found a rock. Seconds later, an incidental knock of his knee against an object revealed another of the same size. He stood slowly and returned to the staff. He tied one rock to the end of each small piece of fabric. In no time, two swinging rocks hanged from a wooden staff and teetered up and down like indecisive scales weighing the potential success of his plan. The scales were as uncertain as Sebastian.

Most observers would have deemed Sebastian's efforts as futile, but not him. He moved with confidence. He believed he would succeed. He focused his attention on the long strip hanging behind him. He tied the ends together and pulled it to one side until the knot rose higher and out of the way. The bottom of the strip was one and a half ells off the ground. He turned and faced the run. Standing on his injured leg while supporting himself with the strip, he inserted his right foot through the small loop. He raised one arm and extended it behind his head and wrapped it from the inside of the strip to the outside and held it firmly. He wrapped his other arm the same way and leaned back and into a supine position.

His body and healthy leg were now suspended in the air. His injured leg dangled helplessly, hopelessly. He was too weak to raise it. No matter how hard he tried or the power of his emotions, no matter the surge of energy or deep-throated grunts and groans with the intent to impregnate purpose into a world fertile with possibility, he failed. And, alas, he did not want to scream again. He would not.

After repeated attempts to lift of his left leg, Sebastian was mortally fatigued. His wits were witless. His injured calf, raw to the bone in some spots, with blood dotting leaves into a work of abstract pointillism, would be his undoing. Sebastian closed his eyes in resignation. He could not and would not go on.

Seconds passed. One minute rolled into the next. Time blended seamlessly and without relevance. Triumph and tragedy were woven into a tapestry of history and taught one immutable lesson. Triumph and tragedy are fruit, ripe and juicy and ready for the taking or ignored

and neglected until shriveled and dried and useless. Life is fruit consumed, a beginning; death is the seed falling and taking root, a new beginning. There is no end. The joy of being is the juice. Rightly discerned, every happening between each triumph and tragedy is no different. Lessons rest within each. Joy flows and discerned purpose is seized and the lesson is gleaned and life begins anew. Possibility.

Startled, Sebastian awakened. A sound in the distance quickened his blood. Then, and not coincidentally, he beheld a sight which served as a revelation. He blinked to clear his vision. The moon emphasized the subject. He saw the object. There it was. He had his answer. He knew how to reposition his injured leg. The strip behind him, the one holding his upper body in the air, all but disappeared beyond the lunar light and in its stead hung two suspension wires. He harkened back to the pictures of bridges upon his bedroom walls when he was a child. He saw steel structures with thick cables diving from the heavens and on to depths unknown. Gravity defying. Inspiring. Flexible. Undaunting. Capable. Purposeful. Buttressed from above, anchored below, the wires testified to what netted fruit and juice and joy.

Sebastian's eyes, starry companions to the looming lunar presence, twinkled inspiration. He raised both arms and twice, once on each side, wrapped them around the suspension cables supporting his torso. He held the strips firmly. At the perfect moment, he pulled down harder on the cable to his right and pushed up against the cable on his left. At the right moment, he stayed himself in the air ever so briefly and rolled his body to the right. His injured leg followed and flopped over the healthy one. Nearly facing the ground, Sebastian reversed the coordinated and controlled pull and push of the suspension wires and rolled his body to the left. Exhausted, he rested. The injured leg, hooked and suspended, remained in place. No more than an ornament bent at the knee, his injured leg swung freely until it stilled. He withstood the pain. He did not scream.

Sebastian could not believe his good fortune. He reached his arms forward and, at the same time, drew his right leg toward his gut. His body glided forward and back gently while the rocks swung erratically like pendulums out of synchronicity before the draw of the earth's core brought them into obedience and stability.

Sebastian stretched for the rock to his right. This move unsettled his frame and sent the other rock out of orbit. He slowed himself and began gliding anew. When the second rock returned and swung gently, it was soon in his grasp.

Sebastian worked his hands away from the rocks and fingered his way up the fabric and to both sides of the staff. He twisted the staff clockwise. The tension in the run increased with every rotation, but at a tremendous physical cost. Weaker after each twist, he knew one lapse in judgment would send the staff asunder with the run unraveling wildly.

Sebastian stayed the course. With his legs at a height which could not be matched by leaping wolves, he had to elevate his torso. He leaned his head back and confirmed the distance and location of the suspension cables behind his head. He looked forward and moved his hands away from the sweat and oils coating the staff. If he were to achieve success, he needed a dry hold. Success had a simple definition. He would weave the staff in between and through the suspended cables and then lock the staff in place. Success required an incredible and critical acrobatic feat when Sebastian was at his weakest.

Faced with a practical impossibility, he reawakened his anger with a mental image. He pictured the wolves ripping his flesh apart. He felt the pain. He imagined the humiliation. Emboldened and thrusting his healthy leg forward and arms backward, with a keen eye on the narrow pass between the cables, he sliced one end of the staff through and secured it behind one cable. His arms quivered. His legs bounced. Against all odds, he held his hold ever so briefly and then quickly pushed his feet away before thrusting the other end of the staff behind the second cable. The pressure of the staff bracing against both cables locked the entire apparatus in place. Sebastian dropped his arms. The feat was finished.

He rested in a cradle while Mother Earth blew soft winds in a whisper and rocked him gently. He was joyful, ever so joyful for completing the project. Sebastian lifted his arms to his chest and closed his eyes. The bandage on his wound had come undone. The bleeding had slowed to a trickle and, only infrequently, dripped to the ground. Strangely, he smiled.

XXXI

Everything appeared as a reverie. There was no past. There could be no future. Suddenly, there was no present. There was nothing substantive about Sebastian's life. There was only truth. He was a frequency to which all affirming frequencies ascend. He was one with truth. All else was an illusion. The great lie had been exposed and dethroned.

Sebastian could no sooner articulate the reasons for this phenomenon than comprehend its basic underpinnings. This is no different than sensing truth without the ability to express or prove truth. When one knows truth, but is unable to provide an adequate explanation, is he credible and accountable? Does he know? This was a lesson reinforced by one of Sebastian's former teachers. Professor Davis said the inability to explain what one supposedly understood reflected and validated a lack of understanding.

Sebastian could no longer agree with Davis' premise. In the present, as he waited for his inevitable death, Sebastian knew a truth without the ability to express it. He proved as much by a distant memory as haunting as it was rich in wisdom, the kind of vignette which doesn't make sense until forty years clip by in no time and divine inspiration unexpectedly solves an enigma. Now in possession of this miraculous answer, Sebastian confirmed an instinct he sensed as a child.

When Sebastian was eleven, he witnessed the tragic death of his best friend, Eoin Flynn. Eoin's tiny body was crushed by a horse in a senseless accident. From that loss and as a child, Sebastian knew what was true absent understanding or the words to express that truth. At a minimum, if he had to prove this truth, he could do so by rejecting what was false. This is exactly what he did, but only to himself.

After Eoin died, villagers who did not witness the horse accident offered pointless speculation and thoughtless opinions. They bantered about insensitive theories which only served to elevate their perceived importance. They performed this pedestrian ritual because they lacked a genuine desire to know. They were and would always be volitionally blind.

Now much older and wiser, Sebastian conceded that the willfully ignorant were the target of Professor Davis' admonition. They would not understand and, therefore, lacked the ability to express. As such, they peddled falsehoods.

Ironically, Eoin's death served as a capstone to Sebastian's tenure on earth. Nearly lifeless, he returned to the genesis of that once unreconciled gut instinct. He recalled the final seconds when Eoin drew his last breaths. In particular, Sebastian remembered his friend's curious and bone-chilling, but somehow comforting, smile. The smile was a unique expression, yet perplexing for its unusual and untimely appearance. At that young age and for some strange reason, Sebastian was reassured that this particular expression was not without purpose. If there was a reason for all things, Eoin's grin was part of an

orchestrated riddle in Sebastian's youth that would not be resolved until he confronted his own death.

Eoin had been a horse enthusiast. He was captivated by their strength, speed, and majesty. Fortunately for him, his parents owned a farm and horses. Eoin's world revolved around a passion he possessed before his birth, an in-the-blood enthusiasm. His love of this one animal was as natural to him as breathing. His father fostered Eoin's passion and taught him well. Father and son were a team. They had a relationship envied by many. They were a rare and extraordinary deviation from the Willington norm.

Eoin owned a horse named Bucky. On that fateful day Sebastian went to visit this extraordinary animal without his father's permission. The farm was not far from the Chiffon garment factory. If Sebastian hurried, he would conduct his caper and return within a respectable timeframe to do his chores. No one would be the wiser. The risk was negligible. He had succeeded with this ruse in the past. Otherwise, for fear of his father's wrath, he would not have entertained this adventure.

Sebastian's infrequent trips to Eoin's farm were not simply escapes from a despised drudgery, but mischief that dwells in the hearts of all boys, latent rebellion which unfolds gradually or is released with slingshot force until the unknown from any courageous adventure is seized, harnessed, and driven across pastures untamed, into forests yet to be explored, and up mountains never climbed, a mischief that leads to lessons from unbridled experiences which are known immediately or simmer for years until boiled into nuggets of wisdom and consumed and digested and applied to life. Boys love to dare. Sebastian was deficient, if not deprived, of this one vital, life-forging element. Daring promotes boys through stages of maturation with the hope that they might someday shoulder the mantle of manhood.

Sebastian's daring jaunts to Eoin's farm were no different. These escapes were innate challenges to excessive paternal authority. Most boys, especially those who lacked the resolve to buck a father's tyrannical rule, defy the indefensible and experience raw virility and avoid being steered into a feminine-like way of being.

Eoin was the opposite. He challenged paternal guidance while in tandem with his father. Eoin's father wanted and expected his children to do as much. Robust and respectful contests fostered a healthy respect for self and others. Such challenges proved to be worthy principles and relegated specious edicts where they inherently belonged, nowhere within a man's arsenal.

Sebastian admired Eoin's desire to be like his father as much as his father, a humble man by every measurement, encouraged his son to come into his own. They had a symbiotic union. The Flynn children were raised in an unparalleled philosophy. They were blessed with essential virtues and values deemed worthy for not only surviving, but thriving in a tough and unforgiving world. Sebastian was jealous and, at the same time, overjoyed to witness Eoin and his father relate in ways he would not with his own father. Sebastian sensed that Eoin was truly alive. Sebastian wanted this for himself. He wanted to experience the fullness of life. He wanted to be authentic.

When Sebastian and Eoin crested the hill rolling down and toward the Flynn farm, his friend charged to the bottom. "I'll race you there, Sebby!"

"I am right behind you!"

Eoin reached the corral first and led the way into the barn.

Mr. Simpson, the farmhand, mucked stalls.

High in the loft, Mr. Flynn tossed hay bales to the ground.

"Howdy, Pa!" Eoin yelled.

His father paused and tipped his hat in mutual respect. Eoin grinned from ear to ear. He was home.

Sebastian closed the gap. "Hello, Mr. Flynn."

Mr. Flynn spread his arms wide and said, "Sebby, welcome to Eoin's world."

"Thank you, Mr. Flynn."

The boys gathered in front of a gate hosting a homemade sign. The name *Bucky* was prominently displayed.

"Sebby, isn't he grand?"

"He sure is, Eoin." Sebastian marveled at the size of the horse. "My, he sure is."

Eoin tempered his eagerness and waited patiently for Mr. Simpson to finish. Eoin respected the ways of the farm. Safety was foremost. He minded his place until it was proper to enter. After Mr. Simpson left, Eoin followed procedures his father stressed over and over again. He placed his hand against the side of the horse and walked forward while speaking reassuringly. He stroked Bucky and loved on him. He brushed him. "Sebby? You wanna help?"

"No, I have to get back before my father notices my absence."

"Well, we have to get here earlier next time. Bucky sure does like you and he loves to be brushed."

Eoin patted his horse a final time and walked back to the entrance. Then, for a reason which will forever remain unknown, Bucky jumped. The horse shifted left and bumped into Eoin. It was a

slight bump. But a bump from a horse is enough to send a young boy flying. Unsettled, Eoin flew toward the entrance of the stall. His body bounced off the post and he fell backwards. The horse attempted to reposition his hind legs and stumbled again. There was negligible leeway between the horse and the post. Trapped, Eoin ricocheted off Bucky's massive rump and into the post a second time. His head struck wood and, like flour poured into a bowl of water and mixed, human flesh and bones added with animal flesh and bones blended until Eoin's body tangled with Bucky's hind legs. The predictable followed. The horse stumbled even more. He had to stumble. Bucky could go nowhere but down. Even worse, Eoin could not avoid the disaster. Bucky's massive body landed squarely on the boy's hips, abdomen, and chest.

Sebastian did not delay. "Mr. Flynn!" he yelled.

Eoin's father stretched for the rope descending from a hook tied to the rafters and swung to the ground. He bolted toward the stall.

Bucky attempted to right himself with his front legs. He scratched the soil for some hold, any hold, and leaned back even harder.

Eoin's eyes bulged. He could not breathe.

Mr. Flynn arrived to see his son pinned underneath the horse. A humbling sight, so humbling a man will freeze to inaction, Mr. Flynn did the opposite. He smacked the horse in the rump and yelled, "Hah!" Bucky strained and snorted to an upright position and lunged forward.

Eoin felt no relief. He lay still, an awkward still. In that stillness, Mr. Flynn knew his son's back was broken and his organs were crushed. And, yes, Mr. Flynn was not deceived. He knew his son's precious life was all but over.

Mr. Simpson rushed to the scene. He looked. He knew. He ran to the edge of the barn and yelled without restraint. "Mrs. Flynn, come quick! You must come now!" Mr. Simpson's tone was different and different was not good. The message was unmistakable.

Eoin's mother, who had been milking cows next door, knew she was needed, but not to offer practical help, not to advance the cause of her family. Mr. Simpson's tone revealed another need.

Mrs. Karena Flynn fled from the stool and bucket and cow and rushed to the horse stables. When she saw her son, when she saw a horror of horrors no mother should see, a wall of indecisiveness hit her hard. She could not move forward; she could not go backward. She could do nothing and nothing was best and safe, but excruciatingly painful, as if that very happening stalled for the audience of one, a mother forced to witness the most unthinkable event and confusion at

its worst. Confusion. Damn confusion. She had to contend with wanting what she hated most. A most confounding dilemma, the message became clear. She had to go forth. She had to accept sights, feelings, and thoughts of a seemingly unnatural origin. She had to bear an unbearable grief. She had to say goodbye to a dying son. She had to see him, to hear his last words, to touch and hold and be with him. She had to share her love once more before that once more was no longer. This is what she wanted, the unwanted.

Before her next step, before she surrendered to this numbing choice, she stared at Eoin and, slowly, ever so slowly, she accepted disbelief until it fell away as heavily as she dropped her arms to her gut. She bent forward and gasped and, after a deep inhale, she wailed inconsolably. She knew a truth she understood, but it was one she could not and would not express. She fought that cold, hard truth. “No! Dear God, please no!”

Eoin’s brother, Douglas, and sister, Elsie, came in a hurry. Elsie gasped and cried when she saw Eoin and collapsed to the ground. She buried her face into her hands and drove her grief into the soil. Douglas slowed to a stop and stared. If he did not know disbelief from prior events, he did then and there. He would never believe such sorrow existed. He would defy it forever.

Mr. Flynn fell to his knees and placed his hands upon his thighs. He swung his head from side to side in a blind search for what did not and could not exist, that hope for a different beginning. Alas, he could take hold of nothing.

Onlookers saw thick and gooey blood seep from Eoin’s mouth like molten rock gently flowing over the lip of a volcano vent. Such was the scene, sobering beyond measure.

Eoin cut his eyes slightly to the left to meet his father’s clouded gaze. “Foddder?” he asked. He searched for reassurance that his father would be fine. Eoin wanted to reassure him. “Fowadder?” Unable to nod his head, he could not convey, *I am going to be okay*. He could not say, *You’re the best father ever, now take care of yourself after I am gone*.

Yet, somehow, through his shock and grief, Mr. Flynn understood. He touched his son’s shoulder and briefly closed his eyes and ears to sights and sounds he refused to accept. His son’s final farewell was too great a burden.

But for the effects of a body in shock, Eoin would have been in a lot of pain. If only because of a lack of sensation, he knew he was not long for this world. He possessed a certain knowing. A self-evident realness was in his eyes, an old-soul wisdom reserved for those tested

by the constant grinding of millstones over lifetimes of searches for the divine and the divine only. There are rare times when youngsters are bestowed a wisdom of the old. This was such a time. Eoin was such a soul.

Eoin made eye contact with his father again and beckoned him to come close. He glanced at his mom as if to seek her forgiveness, as if he broke her heart without cause. Douglas and Elsie hovered directly above the tragic scene. What they saw would add incalculable repercussions that would last a lifetime and without resolution. They would ask questions and receive no answers until after they left this world. Transfixed by the ghastly sight, nobody did anything. All watched with hearts that could not weather the toll.

Sebastian was drowning. In what, he did not know, but he could not breathe. His neck went from a fixed posting symbolic of momentary unbelief to a gesticulating outlash. He thrust his head forward as if he needed to vomit something repulsive. He wanted and had to do something, but what? Who was he but a young boy, a witness to the unwanted, an event even adults were unable to handle, a happening rarely experienced? The death of a child was yet another truth which was impossible to express; but it was a truth fully understood.

The convergence of this tragedy in Sebastian's youth proved, lest the truth be ignored, there was no God. None. God was not possible. God was not remotely a credible concept. Not at all. For God would neither take nor allow the taking of so precious a boy. God would not end so beautiful a father and son relationship. God would not deprive so sure a love and respect of a son for his father. God would not end so potent a heaven-sent bond.

Sebastian was certain. God was a fiction and heaven was a fraud. God was real only because people—the desperate, insecure, foolish, and self-deceived—needed a God, just as they needed life to be a perceived reality. To the weak and gullible, life had prominence and death was to be avoided and God would ensure both ends. Even a scant understanding of God and His existence—or that He actually gave a damn—was nothing but pure folly. Sebastian saw Godless pandemonium. No deity governed the cosmos.

As a disquieting silence lassoed the small crowd surrounding Eoin, mental and emotional chaos breached every imaginable human dignity. Mr. Flynn knew death was imminent. He knew the Grim Reaper lurked and was prepared to do death's bidding.

Not to be denied of a final goodbye, the Flynn family reacted. Mr. Flynn crawled closer to his son's side. His mother settled next to

Eoin's head. As if nurturing him back to health, she cupped her calloused but tender hands over his ears. Douglas and Elsie squeezed in and expressed their love and a farewell spoken with speechless gazes and tender tears falling from on high.

Amidst this family gathering, Eoin lifted his eyes and spied Sebastian standing alone in the background.

"Swwebbby," he garbled through a pool of saliva and blood producing more spittle than sound.

Eoin's father and mother realized their son's request and parted like the Red Sea for the chosen to pass. However, Sebastian did not move. He could not.

Eoin's speech slowed even more. "Saawwebby," the dying petitioned in a weakened and uneven whisper a second time.

Only after Sebastian received confirmation from Mr. Flynn, who selflessly raised his arm to bring the self-exiled into the fold, did he walk forward. By the time he knelt between Mr. and Mrs. Flynn, Eoin's face had transformed into a profound smile, a gentle, confident, and knowing smile, an out of place expression given the anguish everyone endured. Eoin smiled and he did so with purpose. Eoin's smile struck Sebastian hard in the gut. It was then that an instinct spoke to him of a truth someone his age could not understand, a truth he sensed had been enshrined within Eoin's soul.

Barely audible, Eoin whispered, "Saawwebby, ids boodaful, dwus booodaful." He struggled to breathe. "Dell awww ids dwuss boootawful." Eoin stared at his friend as if seeking confirmation that his request was received and understood.

Sebastian felt a solemn obligation to acknowledge this heavenly decree. "Okay, Eoin... I... I will."

With the utterance of Eoin's divine maxim and Sebastian's affirmation, Eoin Flynn drifted beyond the temporal and into the eternal.

Mr. Flynn caressed Sebby's shoulder and said, "I am sorry, son."

The grief-stricken father dropped his arm to his legs, leaned forward slowly, placed his head upon Eoin's chest, and wept. Heavy moans from the cellar of a man who was larger than life to a boy who left the world far too early filled the barn. Unspeakable heartache worsened the more he found himself in a state of despair which no one ever imagined he would or could weather.

Unable to cope with the intensity of the experience, not knowing what to do or say, Sebastian pushed off his hands and knees and fell backward. He looked at his lifeless friend one last time and

fled. He did not know where he was going. He ran blindly. He crossed the edge of Willington to a place called Crawford. He ran until he came to the property of a gentleman farmer by the name of Secrist. Sebastian had heard of the Secrist clan from various sources over the years. Under the able stewardship of David, the Secrists had become myth-like in stature.

Sebastian passed through a hayfield and ceased his aimless trek when he chanced upon a narrow strip of grass tracing through more land which disappeared to the left and below and into the unknown.

To the right stood the Secrist home. Neatly nestled behind a row of large oaks, the house showed signs of youthfulness and playfulness, as if made for a loving family and that loving family made the home a testament of love. A road circled close to the side door with a lock that was never used. Friends and neighbors were welcomed without barriers. A massive tan barn with dark brown double-doors stood to the extreme right and accented the farm as a place of industry. In front of the barn, three-rail fencing with the boards painted black enclosed white horses grazing, rolling, and resting as if they existed in a fairy tale land. Behind the house, a willow tree graced an oval-shaped pond bordering yet another hayfield.

To the left of the home stood a second establishment, a small red house with a tall black door and a tiny, fenced yard under a shade tree. This tiny cottage served as the chicken coop. By most standards, this was a small castle which housed royal hens producing wholesome eggs for the royal Secrist family. Within whispering range, a third structure stood in a manner worthy of a pastel rendering. A doll house had been cast under a magical spell and was transformed into a life-sized playhouse large enough for a child, a cozy log cabin measuring 8x6x6. Without a chink, the miniature manor hosted two gable windows inserted within a perfectly pitched, black roof covering a front porch railed with straight, wooden pickets. The cabin stood in full view of the Secrist home and observed how to be larger than life.

To the right of the cabin, a flower and herb garden blossomed. To the left and directly in front of the cabin, a patio placed squarely against the northeastern side of the Secrist abode waited patiently to entertain. The patio was rarely alone. To the side and back of the home, a room built of glass availed everything external to those inside—the morning sun rising, happy children playing, hay waving in the wind, turtles floating, and harvest moons on star-rich nights.

As if the Secrist spread was not idyllic enough, high above the trees, a mountain range crossed the expanse of the horizon. A long and single ridge of separate mountains formed undulating and connecting

angles splotted with shadows where the sun could not reach, which hinted of individual scales belonging to a sleeping dragon stretching for miles and somewhere rested his slumbering head, on the other end a long and pointed tail. Given the goodness of the Secrist homestead, one could reach but one conclusion. The Secrists lived in Eden. Not surprisingly, distracted by what was so naturally unwanted, an indescribable grief which would not disappear any time soon, Sebastian noticed nothing.

As Sebastian curved along and down the narrow path, David Secrist, who sat upon a wagon filled with freshly cut hay, crested over the second field south of the pond. Upon seeing the young boy, he lifted his hat and waved it high and strong, a warm and hearty welcome to a stranger as if he were a king arriving when and where expected. Sebastian could not help but observe this gesture, an unexpected act to a trespasser no less, a gracious and genuine invitation extended gratuitously which only added to the Secrists' deserved reputation.

Sebastian did not return the greeting. His arms were more than bone-heavy. Consumed with apocalyptic despair, a sadness sank his soul to depths never before reached. Void of emotions, he was but a dreary nomad listless upon the land seeking to rest his weary body indefinitely.

David Secrist, as wise as he was accepting, discerned well and allowed, as the erudite say, the water to flow the path of least resistance.

Sebastian disappeared with the path, crossed a wide field waiting for the harvest to be reaped, and came upon a mini-glen running parallel to a quiet river. The North River flowed lazily north, rounded east, and dropped to the south where it joined the South River, at which point, united, the river meandered in all directions.

Where glen and river met, Sycamores towered with thick limbs aloft while an extensive network of exposed roots tapped down and into the bank. Whitish-grey trunks mottled with scaling brown bark climbed to infinity. Some of the trees dared to grow outward and over the river. One such tree had extended itself over and parallel to the water a distance of five feet and arched sharply upward as if laughing all the way for brazenly cheating certain laws of nature. Now a monument, this tree was yet another ledge which lured daring children to walk the plank and drop into the depths below, a possibility lost on a lost boy.

A large flock of geese paddled occasionally up river to remain proximate to the glen before flowing down and bathing in calmer water. However, upon Sebastian's arrival, they raised their webbed feet

and selflessly floated away without a fuss. The trees provided a canopy over the venue. The resulting shade blanketed the water and ensured a crystal-clear view below of lengthy rock ledges deposited one on top of the other and forming irregular steps. Soft winds gently shook the tops of the trees and rappelled down. As if divine spirits, they landed upon the water's surface and sent fractals rolling toward the bank in shimmering brilliance. Only when chance sunlight bounced off the waves were those irregular steps obscured for the briefest of moments.

The field, glen, and river, a natural trifecta, formed a retreat for those who needed to mourn. Powerfully drawn by a magnetic force into an energy field that might make him whole, Sebastian entered this safe haven weakly and collapsed and lay upon the grass and draped his arm over the edge of the river. He stared without seeing minnows searching for food. He did not see algae-covered steps made slippery and treacherous and, therefore, useless. These were details of no significance to a boy not wanting to be found. He sought peace and, to find peace, he needed to cry. He had to unleash internal turmoil. However, with tear ducts as empty as the rock ledges were stricken with an unwanted substance, he closed his eyes and slept.

When he awoke, Sebastian was at home in his bed. He had no remembrance of the journey or how Mr. Secrist pieced together the puzzle of the Flynn tragedy and then networked his way to Willington and arrived at the Chiffon residence. Sebastian never learned of sage advice freely but firmly offered by a mighty David impressing upon Mr. Chiffon, much like a small stone slaying a giant, not to further crush an irreconcilable soul. To Sebastian's surprise, his father did not mention a son's transgression or missed chores. And no one, not even his mother, mentioned Eoin's death.

Over the ensuing days, Sebastian heard disparaging comments about the smile Eoin wore during an open-casket service, a smile he took to his grave. People who were not present at the accident referred to Eoin's smile as confirmation of his stupidity. Some said he was slow in the head and not put together as normal children. A few remarked that Eoin was just plain dimwitted. These comments made no sense. Children relayed observations from home. Their parents said Eoin had but half a brain or was possessed by demons. These were lies, all lies.

Sebastian did not understand how and why people could be so reckless and cruel. Specious chatter further excited human interaction. Words are powerful and the tongue a dishonored weapon. Whether the revolver, knife, club, or spoken words, one has a duty to honor the power of the weapon or defer from its use. More importantly, Sebastian did not know why he failed to defend Eoin or share his friend's divine

revelation. Those who spoke ill of Eoin were blind and, for Sebastian's own weaknesses, he knew he was a coward.

After Eoin was laid to rest, Justin and his gang approached Sebastian on the playground where he stood alone with his sadness. "Hey, Sebastian, I 'ave a question," Justin said. He appeared to be sympathetic.

Sebastian looked toward Justin without making eye contact.

Acting as if bestowed a superior intellect, Justin spoke in a sophisticated manner. "Yeah, such a shame your friend died. But, uh, well, we were wondering how'd it come to be that he wore a smile in his casket?"

Sebastian ignored the question and walked away.

Justin and his gang followed. They waited for an answer. They demanded an answer. Justin ruled the playground and children could not avoid his queries. "Well, just how did this happen? How does a dead body do such a thing?" His crew sneered and sniggered lightly. Their leader was a deceiver and he was good at his craft. Justin raised his hand for silence and then winked and nodded toward expectant faces. He spoke slowly. "Well, just how was this so?" He smiled and raised both arms and spread them wide with his palms facing skyward. "You've no reasonable explanation? None?"

Sebby did not speak. Through blurred vision, he saw nothing but rocks on the ground. He focused on the rocks. The rocks were his distraction from a hurt he did not want to feel and a shame he could not shed. He attempted to leave.

Justin blocked his way. He validated the worth of his own observation by referring to the experts. "Me and my friends were discussing this strange occurrence and I got to thinking and, well, maybe what our parents say is true."

Sebastian winced. He fought the urge to respond to anything foolish and everything Justin spoke was foolishness.

"Yeah, they say that your friend... Eoin, wasn't that his name?" Justin smirked. He knew he was right, but he took the opportunity to involve his sidekick.

"Yeah!" RJ chimed in, "that was his name."

Justin winked to his partner. "Yeah, they say he was dimwitted or filled with demons or he was slow in the head and not put together like normal children. That's what our parents said."

Sebastian could not tolerate these comments; yet, he did not have the guts to fight back and could not escape the inquisition. He circled once to find the easiest exit.

Justin waved his hand in the air and his posse corralled their target. “So, which is it exactly?” Justin asked. “Was the boy stupid or demon possessed?” Justin stepped forward. Both he and Sebastian stood in the center of the ring. Justin talked confidently. He was cocky and he liked being this way. “As I see it, ‘tis no reason for a body to be smilin’ at death.” He pointed at Sebastian for added emphasis. “Unless that body was occupied by an evil spirit or only had half a brain.”

The gang restrained a strong undertow of laughter.

“Yeah,” RJ said. “Justin speaks the truth.”

Justin nodded in appreciation and continued. “So, do you have any good notion why your friend was smilin’ into the everafters?”

Sebastian did not say a word. He wanted to speak truth; he wanted to share with unkind souls exactly what Eoin had said. Sebastian did no such thing. He cried. In front of the boys and a few girls, he shed tears of shame.

“You’ve got no answer, does ye?” Justin was pleased with himself.

“Aw, he doesn’t know nothin’ ‘bout nothin’,” RJ said flexing what little power he possessed. He proved his worth to a leader he followed without question.

Justin issued an ultimatum. “Well, just hear me now. Ye was with that freak when he died. Now, you steer clear. We don’t want any infections. We’s normal and we’s aiming to stay that way. Ye hear me? I’m just giving ye fair warning!” Justin stared at Sebastian. He waited. He demanded. But he was smart enough to accept Sebastian’s silence and compassionate enough not to force the grieving undue harm. “Come on guys, let’s leave before someone catches something evil.”

Sebastian slid to the ground. Like a deer struck in the heart, he had been slain with public mockery. Worse still, he shot himself for his own cowardice.

Sebastian knew what had happened when Eoin died. He was there that fateful day. He heard the last words of a best friend. He did not know what Eoin saw or knew to be beautiful, but Sebastian believed. He was a firm believer. However, he did not honor his friend’s request. Sebastian did not offer a single, powerful word in Eoin’s defense. He rationalized that since he did not know what Eoin knew, he could not express his friend’s intent. He excused his timidity. He created an out. He crafted a lie. He hid truth behind what was false—even if perceived as false because the truth remained unstated and unchallenged.

For decades, Sebastian wrestled with a gut instinct he knew was true. He knew Eoin had conquered the unknown and Sebastian had

anguished over his silence in a marketplace that exchanged cheap talk as the sole currency which rendered his own observations worthless. He was too young and inexperienced to appreciate that it was the measure of a warrior who makes his spoken words valuable.

As if to foreshadow the shell of the man he would become, Sebastian offered no rebuttal. He balked. Small minds and valueless discourse prevailed and another meaningless victory was added to the vast human conversation amounting to nothing more than a rain drop in the ocean. Sebastian hurt. He hurt from his shame to act nobly and for the love of a lost friend. His silence trickled down to a reservoir of shame within his soul. He chose a self-preserving posture over a duty to defend the innocent. This shame remained until the dam broke nearly a half-century later when truth finally pressed to the fore and overflowed into a blessing. Ironically, Sebastian lay dying when the whole truth spilled forth.

As Sebastian waned increasingly in and out of consciousness and closer to death, he, too, smiled. He smiled innocently and peacefully. He smiled knowingly. He confirmed what was no small revelation. Eoin had solved a two-piece puzzle, the union of life and death with eternal truth. This union was not a perception in the least, but a knowing absent a happening filled with fleeting imagery, emotion, or sensation. Eoin knew truth manifested as pure light, the light of reason. Sebastian was not denied. He whispered assuredly, "Life and death are coupled with and to eternal truth." Had he not known this union, Sebastian would die as any soul fights an unwanted death. Whether in desperation or resignation, ignorance rules. Most die without knowing the union of life and death with truth. Sebastian was no longer ignorant. He was enlightened.

He pondered the idea that a soul either clings to or relinquishes his hold on life when life and death are not understood. If one believes life and all of its constituent lies in isolation, be it school, dating, marriage, friends, children, graduation, church, and other such events which define the best and worst of being alive, then one clings to each event as paramount and death is viewed in equal isolation. Death, then, is an event to avoid. Yet, if one believes life and all of its events are connected generally and his being ends at the boundary of nothingness where he relinquishes his life-centered focus, then death is inevitable and just as unwanted. Is there a difference between clinging and relinquishing? Both perceptions render life and death as separate and complete, as if life and death are unrelated to each other and independent. Given these two options, in either scenario, truth would be unattainable.

Sebastian thought of red-hued sunsets, the touch of a warm spring breeze, the sound of water rolling over rocks on its race to the sea. Such scenes evoked thoughts and emotions as powerful as they are ignored, misconstrued, or misunderstood by souls fearful of or resigned to the end, when the end is only the end and nothing more. Experiences viewed upon first impression absent an earnest desire to know what more could be vetted are not appreciated as paths to distinctions. Most people see the beauty in a happening without ever understanding the beauty behind the happening, when the very cause of the event is and remains beyond comprehension. The wonder of wonders is miraculous, yet the purity of the cause within everything is forever unknown.

Most do not search beyond a sleeping babe in a mother's arms or the artful appointment of a crescent moon in a bespeckled night sky. The reason for the glorious in what is either simple or complex is overlooked. The cause of wonder remains unknown when one does not truly search. The cause of pleasure and pain is ignored. The confounding of love and hate is unexplored. Alas, and sadly, seeing only a sleeping babe and a sliced moon are enough for the majority.

This truth hit Sebastian hard. How insensibly he had lived! He did not see saw the babe or the moon. And if he acknowledged either in the least, he failed to probe them to their origins. He could not deny his willful avoidance of chance occurrences and designed orchestrations and the cause of both as the reason for life and death and their natural union with truth. But for Victor entering his life, Sebastian would have remained as unaware as most of humanity. This credible perspective broadened his mindfulness until Sebastian knew that more than what was good was encompassed by this two-piece puzzle. More than what was good was beautiful. What was not good was also beautiful. "Yes, this makes sense," he concluded.

He proved no less. Whether his father's insensitivity, his own contempt for his mother, hate-spewed words of children toward others, wolves stalking an innocent boy, heated arguments and dissent between friends and strangers, loss of crops from drought, or the accidental death of a boyhood friend, the abhorrent produced beauty as well. "What of evil?" he asked. He could not argue against this premise. Murders, mass starvation, robberies, self-condemnation, pestilence, suicides, and addiction were within what was beautiful.

"How?" he asked. "How could this be?"

The teachable soul knows from a position of detachment girded by truth that all within the world is just that, within the world. All is illusory and unable to be separated when man does not reject

prejudice and perceptions and seek the prime cause. The illusory is unable to be sifted and discarded from the world like chaff from the wheat.

When one knows of the union of the two-piece puzzle with truth and all the beauty it represents, he does not view life from jaundiced perspectives. Weakness, sadness, envy, anger, and other base motives are mitigated. He looks beyond misery to discover the source of misery. He knows the beauty of suffering. One who encounters this union is unattached and far removed from any influence which would otherwise impede this knowing. Knowing of the union of life and death with eternal truth underscores a growing awareness equal to God's perspective. One begins to know and love as God knows and loves, thoroughly and unconditionally.

Knowing life and death is coupled with truth brought Sebastian to the term *logos*, that is reason. Reason may not be had just for the having. One has to struggle and prevail into reason. Sebastian smiled weakly and whispered, "Renewal."

He arrived at what could not be denied. The renewing of the mind is the path to reason and eternal truth. What a mind entertains is often distorted or used to destroy unless renewed through reason. Absent renewal, *logos* lays dormant and one flounders in confusion and despair. One does not hope. One is without hope. A perceived hope outside of this union is not hope. It cannot be. Hope is trust; hope is certainty, but only when hope is anchored in truth.

Sebastian weighed his entire existence. Since he had not renewed his mind and heart in the past, hope did not and could not prevail. If not for Victor and a tragedy which brought a distinct renewal and, eventually, compelled reasoning to the fore—the same beauty Eoin realized in his final moments—Sebastian would have died a miserable soul. "Renewing of the mind leads to a knowing that life and death are not stand-alone events, but a union which begins in eternal truth."

Sebastian was satisfied. He was not satisfied equal to a full stomach after a generous meal. He was not satisfied because he was content with his lot in life. No. He was satisfied because he reasoned and, therefore, knew God was good and just and true. If Sebastian had to demonstrate to Professor Davis that he understood the most quizzical and esoteric of mysteries, as if he discovered the essence of the universe, as if he probed from the periphery to the core of the divine, he would share what he spoke the night that he, too, smiled. "Renewing the mind and heart is a perpetual refining of thought and emotions through reason to the point of distilled truth." Hopeful,

Sebastian spoke the word into existence and concluded, "All is good." This is why he was satisfied.

Sebastian whispered, "Eoin, God is glorious. All is beautiful."

"Mr. Lorne! I get it. I think I get it."

Something strange was happening to me. While Mr. Lorne waited for me to finish my thought, I evaluated a certain awareness about myself which I gleaned only after learning about Sebastian's struggles. I was neither pleased nor displeased. But, then again, I was not happy that I realized at my age what appeared to be self-evident. How I had viewed life for some twenty and four years was not wrong, but it was not right, as in the right way, as if the optics by which I viewed myself and people and events was the wrong one. That different optics was better and perhaps there was a best way and viewing through the best depended upon my mind and heart understanding life and death in the context of truth.

"Is life so simple?" I looked at my storyteller and waited for an answer. "Is life and death a two-piece puzzle?"

Mr. Lorne shared an expression of satisfaction, as if he were a teacher and his pupil had bridged a difficult concept and solved a theorem that would change the world.

"Mr. Lorne, if life and death are joined in the context of truth, then man is the cause of his own ordeals."

Mr. Lorne waited like only a wise man does.

"I get it, Mr. Lorne. I think I get it." I repeated this statement for good reason. I was a bit amused. I had a strange sense that I was Sebastian. I was the one working through an ordeal like no other and the subsequent thoughts and emotions drove me to a conclusion. "Details! Life is full of details! Thousands upon thousands of details. Daily, hourly, by the minute, nothing but details. In the context of death, life is but a series of details. And in the context of truth, both life and death are details. How I receive and understand details matters most. I understand that details are mere circumstances. Life is circumstantial. Life and death are circumstantial."

Mr. Lorne did not respond at all.

Part Five

Musings

Ponder and ponder well,
or ponder not at all.

XXXII

Death is not life. This is what Sebastian Chiffon assumed before he met Victor and confronted a pack of wolves. In fact, prior to this experience, assumptions about most everything, especially death, governed him. Assumptions are but reflexive and uninformed conclusions. True beliefs, however, are established after great deliberation and then cured with reason. That life was life and death was not life had been Sebastian's cavalier summation about the finality of his being. He never probed the concept of death as anything more than the end of his existence.

However, with what could be none other than providentially ordained circumstances, Sebastian arrived at a reckoning. He was forced to distinguish between what he knew and truth, for these were not the same. This revelation left him with a distinct choice—either live into truth or exist within a lie. Such a choice is no small challenge. For Sebastian, this was the most difficult.

Did a reckoning with Victor and the wolves resolve his most unremarkable existence? Did this reckoning bless and transform him until he became a more sentient being in life while he confronted death? Did he recognize this reckoning as a catalyst that would end in a pinnacle choice to be in truth and far from lies?

Teachable souls eventually see clear choices and, not unexpectedly, they ask more questions. What is required to be teachable? Even if Sebastian were a teachable soul, would he choose wisely? A reckoning does not necessarily end in the ideal simply for the occurrence of a reckoning. After all, Sebastian could choose to be without purpose or hope in the end. He could remain within unfortunate lies and reject truth.

As with any common staple, hopelessness becomes tolerable. Worse still, repeated consumption of this fare fosters the idea that life offers only what is known. Prior to his current crisis, Sebastian accepted hopelessness as easily as any lie. This is all he had known. Hopelessness was a lie and Sebastian had been a fervent devotee. Given the power of Sebastian's assumption that death was not life, his existence would end unaltered and he would remain oblivious of the unknown. Such would be his lot in life which was tragic at best.

Why dignify Sebastian's reckoning at all? If clutched as a gem as brilliant as the morning sun cresting the horizon over a calm sea reflecting pure light outwardly in a never-ending semi-circle, a gem honored as high praise to the Creator of Truth, one would know that reckonings bridge the human soul from ignominy and onward to glory.

If one sought to honor the Source of Truth, he would honor this reckoning as if it were his destiny. In this context, untruths would be deemed circumstantial and, ultimately, inconsequential. Captured souls would be liberated after escaping a prison of lies. If man is to be liberated, he must reconcile each and every reckoning in a world of illusions. Only then would he no longer question why the path of life and death is narrow and the least travelled.

Similar to manning a boat alone upon a stormy sea, being in and with truth is hard. Contrariwise, just as bathing in the sun while servants cater to every need, existing within lies is easy, particularly when one is unaware that he does so, or if aware, he denies it outright as a matter of convenience. Unless sufficiently wise and incurably humble, one lacks the will to concede that he has lived a day, one year, and especially four score without truth. This unwillingness, an all-too-common trait, and certainly not unexpected, is the internal force which rejects truth, defeats possibility, fosters disbelief, and advances lies.

Sebastian tapped nuances within his soul where the light of reason battles dark clouds for some advantage—those rare distinctions never reached by most of humanity—like the premise that if one is insufficiently dispassionate, he will not discern the wholeness and goodness of what is true. But Sebastian now had grounded context and the reason was simple. If one is not dispassionate, he is prejudiced. If pressed with formidable emotions and hostile thoughts which detract from, rather than contribute to, a healthy regard for truth in life and death, man will not embrace the notion he covets lies.

A man who is neither dispassionate nor discerning by the time he is upon his deathbed is no different. Rather, he is in the worst of all possible circumstances and to be pitied. Of all souls, he is the most desperate. He will reject the claim that his life was a fraud. He will claim that he lived a rich life, that his journey was as it should have been. This is the easy and safe path. This is his final lie which seals his fate, a final deception encapsulating a history of deceit from day one to day none, when he slides into and beyond his last breath and without the capacity to prevail triumphantly over anything. He is one of countless souls who alights that coveted sill and peers into eternity without crossing and he remains alone and lonely, without truth and scared to hell. From the first to the last, whether counted in breaths, minutes, or lies, he ends an existence void of truth and enters death void of truth. Inarguably, only the truly sentient being will conclude that life and death without truth is not life and death.

Death, most often viewed as the soul's greatest burden, is a time of profound fear of a most ominous unknown. For this reason,

Sebastian asked more questions and received answers. Does one usually pause at this most unwanted juncture and assess that his life was nothing more than a deception? Of course not. Yet, if truth is not secured during one's existence, are not his final moments the last chance to do so? Yes. Why, then, is one inhibited from truth? Why does one not question his occluded existence within a complicated lie? Is the reason because he knows nothing beyond the many lies he holds dear? Absolutely.

Since most people merely survive their trek through this temporal plane, an argument could be made that relatively few souls search for and know their essential purpose. Their sole objective is not the attainment of truth. Rather, most rely upon their limited experiences and vouchsafe their flawed perspectives as credible. They rely upon the weakest of conclusions to justify what they believe to be true. However, what is known to them and not subject to rigorous testing must falter in the end—a faltering they may never realize occurs at all. Unfortunately, the self-deceived and deceived will not know the fallacy of their prized beliefs. Out of sheer ignorance, they rely upon false perceptions and, regrettably, fail to fulfill a noble destiny.

Sebastian weighed the role of purpose and arrived at a conclusion. Purpose presupposes a foundation upon which true knowledge rests. If one has an understanding of his purpose, even if secured during his final moments, is this not the noblest of intentions? The contrast is striking. One may know his true purpose regardless of when truth is secured.

The rare soul knows his true purpose before death. The balance of humanity, however, is overwhelmed by an avalanche of frenetic queries which net feverish conclusions amounting to nothing but confusion, the same confusion which spanned a lifetime. Most contend with imminent death by either ignoring or rationalizing their existence. In vain and within moments of leaving all they ever knew, trepid souls seek tepid confirmation from those on the sidelines, bystanders watching with equal ignorance and fear, that all was, is, and will be well. Cheap assurances are traded as freely as cut-rate wine flows within polite circles and swallowed as easily as disingenuous praise is tendered because no one has the courage or, more to the point, the cause to be honest.

Death becomes a most pressing occurrence when those who are insincere play the big con and interject ploys which ineffectually placate the inconsolable. They practice psychological and emotional subterfuge and, not surprisingly, nearly everyone is a professional. Ironically, the open invitation to know truth before souls pass into

eternity is deemed unseemly and offensive. The invitation, if known, is not only undesired, but rejected with sweeping contempt. After all, man will and must defend the indefensible even though death is the final opportunity to jettison lies that should be discarded.

Given the significance of Sebastian's musings, as if seeing something phenomenal for the first time, he received what was undeniable and then pondered what was possible. Was he actually where he found himself? In or near truth? Could he possess nothing but truth? He reconciled that truth would not accompany those who are in a state of willful ignorance and fear, those who force-march themselves off cliffs and into only what is known, those who are irresolute with a never-ending untruth easily solved but for an abject refusal to forswear what should be denied, lies serving no other purpose than to deceive. Sebastian pondered an incontestable premise. Worse than a raccoon grasping a shiny trinket within a small hole, man adheres to flawed perceptions as glossy as they are deceitful—the only possessions he is able to carry to his grave. Both man and raccoon need only release what is inconsequential to gain what is honored above all, perhaps the greatest of gifts, liberation by and into truth.

If one were able to distinguish between lies and truth, he would recognize the multiple paths of deceit he travels day in and day out. He would know of his arrival at destinations which do not bear fruit. His challenge, then, would be to reject deceit and travel the narrow path. Yet, most are motivated by base impulses which discourage the least degree of discernment. They will not deviate from the path they follow. They will take the common route.

Sebastian probed even further. Does man exist within falsehoods simply by knowingly or unknowingly fabricating fiction like a spider weaves its web until man is caught and unable to free himself from his own deceit? If man does not possess truth, he exists within the ignoble and festers until the ignoble becomes familiar, a boil which becomes a secondary inconvenience, never lanced, ever present, an intruder which grows to a monstrosity and subsumes the soul until the lie is believed. Most souls covet lies. The reason is obvious. Embedded within the fabric of life, lies are deeply woven within the ordinary. The lie is the ordinary, a place where truth does not abide. Within the context of the ordinary, one does not know that the narrow path leads to the extraordinary, where truth and purpose prevail throughout life and into what is no longer a daunting unseen and unknown—death itself.

Would it not be preferable to know life is an illusion, a fraud, a sensational play with man performing various roles as a means to

gain truth? Whether one performs role after role or dies playing a final character, would it not be ideal to know life is illusory and the world is a stage upon which truth is gradually or abruptly exposed to the point that man discerns his true purpose within a grand design? If one were to discern what is true with every minor revelation, he might understand the mosaic and majesty of his journey founded in truth. He would not be satisfied performing sundry roles as if these roles were credible and purposeful. Rather, he would perform every character with the deliberate intent to find and know the reason he played any role within a single scene or throughout the entire drama. He would not be as the majority, those who perform without knowing they are tragic characters without any inclination to challenge a litany of lies.

Latent vagaries within human nature form a sordid thread and enable those vested in the banal to become further engrossed in the unsavory. Indeed, the lives of others become sensational plays replete with unwholesome performances watched by family, friends, and strangers—the audience. These unfolding dramas—the pattern of all patterns—portray the pedestrian. Those who are negative will continue to be negative. The judgmental will remain the same. Those who gossip will forever gossip. The slightest deviation from the script that is remotely good will inevitably return to and underscore what has become normal. What is base will, more likely than not, continue unabated. This syndrome is as habitual as it is crazed, an orderly disorder and perpetually repugnant. Time and again, people, unflattering characters upon life's stage, will do as they have always done.

Then there are the members of the audience, a natural component of the theatrical realm, with their varied reactions to the author's script. Some accept and believe what the protagonist and antagonist experience and perceive. Others disagree with the direction of the plot and, as if they know better, form their own false perceptions. They deceive themselves and become deceivers. The cause for this dynamic? Members of the audience perform various flawed characters within their own personal tragedies while watching relatives, friends, and neighbors perform similar roles without accepting what simply is. Plots and subplots ripe with intrigue draw others into sensational and senseless worlds of make-believe. Lies serve as catalysts for those who are unwilling or unable to dispel fiction. Lies beget more lies and foment greater intrigue. Life is a cauldron filled with a brew more effective than Shakespeare's scale of dragon, wolf's tooth, witch's mummified flesh, root of hemlock, goat's bile, and other exotic ingredients.

Do some souls surpass every banality and arrive at truth? Only honest cast members and objective observers conclude the potion is not real. They refuse to drink the poison or practice the ritual. Not unexpectedly, those who are deceived consume the brew, chant the verse, dance around the cauldron. They covet lies, advance flawed perceptions, and become frauds within a fiction. Oh, may they observe and come to know and understand this revelation! For they are the ones who do not live worthy lives and, worse still, they die unworthy deaths. Most flounder within a contrived reality and enter a shallow grave with nothing more than a hollow victory defined by the unappealing and indistinct acts of merely existing and then dying.

Those swayed by a perpetually shifting perception within an entrenched way of being, those who do not look beyond the superficial, those grafted with or obsessed by disingenuous internal and external interactions of like characters, they will not discern. They suffer under a vicious cycle. They take hold of false perceptions as a means of self-preservation and defend those perceptions at all costs. Disavowal of false perceptions would be tantamount to disavowal of one's existence. Since man does not readily discard what is false, he disbelieves or rejects truth. He languishes within a perceived reality made of whole cloth. Without his awareness, life becomes and is farcical and death becomes and is an event to be avoided. Is there no wonder death is not desired, understood, or honored?

Perplexing is why anyone plays a fictional character in the first place. Why play the fiend or hero, friend or fool, athlete or scholar, hermit or spouse? One's title does not matter in the least. The character itself is not important. The character is not real. Of prime concern is the cause for the character. What of value is extracted in the present and for eternity to warrant a particular role? The answer to this question is the pith of life and death.

There is a reason man performs fictional roles within countless one, two, and three-act plays until his time is spent. That reason is to uncover and reject lies and to discover, pursue, and possess truth. Within this context, death should be honored for its relevance and acknowledged as the demarcation to a treasured destination. Lies give rise to the notion that death stings. However, when man solves the riddle and appreciates the various characters he performs as a means to expose lies he would otherwise believe, life becomes meaningful and death is a heralded transition from the profane to utopia, a stinging event which need not be feared, but revered.

If one were to transcend beyond a world of lies and understand that life and death are paths to divine truth, he would avoid a faux

existence. Whether powerfully alive or weakly awaiting death, the discerning soul would be with truth during his final moments at the expense of eighty years of fiction. Quite intuitively, one would know death is life and both life and death serve the same purpose, the manifestation of truth.

Knowing that death is life is a milestone, a revelation which moves the spirit, akin to a providentially sparked fire within every experience until the embers slowly expire and the soul eagerly vacates a cooling body. This truth marks the end of an unfolding and unwanted fiction for a soul thirsting for raw authenticity, a soul yearning for relevance, a deep and abiding yearning for that rare possibility to be uninhibited, vulnerable, and whole in both life and death.

Sebastian accepted the distinction that truth renders life as profoundly relevant because truth renders death as even more relevant. Truth solves the greatest enigma. Within an authentic context, truth, rightly so, bestows death as the most honored of transitions and transformations. Man reconciles why he should not accept the rash philosophical premise that he is in life and is not in death, but that he is who he is, was, and will be eternally—a new beginning without end.

Dual—the separation of life and death or man and God—becomes non dual. Life and death become one. The concept of self ends and the soul melds with providence. No longer bound by life or death, the soul returns to the divine in life and death. The comparison is clear. Lies ensure a lifeless and deathless existence while truth ensures the opposite. Sebastian reconciled that man could make but one of two choices. He may choose truth and be liberated in both life and death or hold fast to the lies he covets. If the first choice is not made, he does not know truth as the ultimate possibility and the greatest of beginnings.

Until Sebastian Chiffon experienced a reckoning of divine proportions, he had existed and no more. Enmeshed within the contrived, he did not and could not discern truth. He believed the lies he had long coveted. Consequently, he failed to be as he had hoped at every point in his journey. He became and was hopeless. He had matured from boy to man with austere inauthenticity. He had performed compliantly and incessantly into what was unfulfilling. Each failure was a disappointment added to the next. Though he had feigned contentment, he was joyless. He had willed himself to believe every lie within the macro lie until he existed without comparison. Let it be stated again and plainly. He had lived without distinction. He had been as ordinary as everyone else. He had lacked understanding. He

did not distinguish between deception and what was inherently true. His spiritless existence was all he knew.

While he did not view the world as a stage or that he was cast to be certain characters as a means to gain truth, Sebastian had played his roles well. Most of the audience believed he was an accomplished and contented man, which is exactly the lie Sebastian had intended to foster. He advanced the fiction he desired. He had deceived others and they believed he was true to himself. Such was the con; such was the con artist. Without doubt, he was very ordinary.

Had he known the extent to which he had been a tragic character, would he have acquired invaluable insight? Alas, likely not. Given his miserable state, such insight was improbable and, therefore, unattainable. Even worse, he was a type-cast character which, within the context of life and death, is the direst of characters. He was fated to suffer defeat with every experience if only because he was pessimistic and purposeless in life and death.

Sebastian had been deeply-seated within consuming lies and could have appreciated nothing more than misery. But for a lack of truth, one could argue Sebastian could not have feared death with the same reverence one should fear God. Rather, death was only an uninspired end to an uninspired existence. Death was nothing more than resignation. He had resigned himself to an end of what he wished had never been started and he did so based upon the belief that death had a sting. Death was that one great known unknown, the end of life, an event which had to be experienced, and this was no different than living according to the dictates of others. Absent a true context of life and death, liberation was but a fleeting possibility. Such are the power of lies.

Sebastian considered even finer distinctions. First, he once believed his future was as futile as his past. As such, he was dispirited before that future unfolded. The future never had a chance to be. Though he feigned otherwise to those who mattered, he had no fight within him. Second, he once apprehended no more than what he knew, which is to say, his existence had not invited profound introspection. Conditioned by patterns which ended in despair, his lack of motivation and resolve was no different than Macbeth's excessive ambition. Sebastian and Macbeth were tragic characters upon a grand stage and none the wiser within the foulness of deceit.

Sebastian was not alone. Most refuse to see themselves in this light. However, to honest brokers, Sebastian's existence was not only undesirable, it was quite common for those who lived in Willington. Most citizens would not cringe with incredulity and deny they had an

unwanted affliction. They would not cry a desperate plea, “That is not me! I am not he!” However, discerning folk would concede that they saw themselves in Sebastian or a little of him within themselves. Such candid appraisals often compel those who are extraordinary to venture away from the common route and down the narrow path. They are the ones who value death and its rightful claim as a bridge from life into eternity in truth.

An essential query, then, is how to rid oneself of the illusion that a life of lies is real. What lengths must be reached before truth is crowned as the only antidote to acknowledged or unacknowledged untruths? What measures must be taken to distinguish truth as the path to a rapturous joy in life and into death? How does one arrive at perpetual bliss?

Did Sebastian’s journey bring him to bliss? Was his choice to save another soul meaningful because he climbed upon that one defining windowsill and crossed over and down to his own purposeful death? Is this when he began to live his life? There is no answer but the affirmative. He had followed a holy reckoning. For this reason alone, he had possession of his life and death.

Mr. Lorne stopped speaking and he did so quite suddenly. I was overwhelmed and he knew as much. With a rather concerned expression upon his face, he asked, “Lad? Shall I continue or not?”

I did not say anything. I could not. Then I recalled that this was Mr. Lorne’s first recounting of the legend of Sebastian Chiffon and I did not want him to end abruptly on my account. This would be an unfortunate new beginning. But there was too much information and it came in a downpour. I wanted to seek cover and revisit key portions, to ask questions, and listen to Mr. Lorne’s answers. I wanted to return to the beginning and understand even more about life and death and truth.

Honestly, I have to admit, I felt embarrassed. I was struggling with the content of the story while Sebastian was contending with what no man would want to endure. Sure, I knew these were mere circumstances for both of us. However, if Sebastian could persevere, if he could withstand the journey, if he could overcome so great a mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical trek, who was I to concede? Who was I to complain? I had to endure until the end. After all, I was only a member of the audience! Yes, in this light, I was embarrassed. I

looked at Mr. Lorne without saying a word still. This is when he shared a very profound point.

“Lad, when a man is confounded by an inexplicable situation that comes not only in a mighty surge, but in many surges, and it is as if he is drowning, his consciousness cannot withstand the tumult. The amount of insight is too great. Worse yet, for decades Sebastian had snuffed out any hope of his future glory and, instead, accepted mediocrity. Every day, he lived nothing more than his misspent youth. Do you know what this does to a man?”

“Let me assure you that when Sebastian was in the thick of battle facing death, he could cope with only so much. As such, his subconscious was working more than usual and the impact was great. As he made choices, as he battled, Sebastian subliminally picked up the pieces of a broken soul while seeking to heal a man who was breathing his last. Think about this!”

“Question upon question rushed forth and Sebastian’s mind and heart could not grasp the full extent of latent thoughts and feelings which surfaced second by second. Imagine! He tried to save Victor and then himself while knowingly and unknowingly attempting to reconcile his entire history and still allow for what could be, that is a world of possibility and before his death! Yes, Sebastian could have it all, if he did not quit, if he continued to strive for an internal and eternal hope. Alas, if only for the fact that he lacked experience and subsequent wisdom, do you not see that his subconscious had to resolve lessons long neglected for decades?”

Mr. Lorne then added, “Sebastian’s last hope for his life may not be reached in such a short a span of time. This is why his subconscious searched and searched and then challenged each search. Time and again, as if connected to the divine, to God Himself, Sebastian intuitively dispensed with what was unworthy before embracing truth whenever it appeared.”

Mr. Lorne sighed. He sighed heavily, as if he was either tired or he believed his explanation had not been adequate enough.

“Mr. Lorne, I think...”

Mr. Lorne interrupted my response and shared a final humbling thought. “Lad, I am sorry, truly. You see, I know the story of Sebastian Chiffon and I know it well. This makes me even more sensitive as I tell it for the first time and with you. I realize the content is overwhelming. This is why I encourage you to understand that even your subconscious, right now, is dealing with questions being asked, questions you do not even know are being posed within your mind and heart, your very soul. You must persevere as well.”

This made sense to me. This was a reasonable request. "Mr. Lorne," I said, "I will."

XXXIII

Sebastian delved into a resurgent faith. He sought what was and would always be organic. This desire came naturally to a man on the verge of losing his temporal identity. Simply stated, he was no longer attached to anything. He was not trapped in a body which, itself, was trapped within a world of fiction. Strangely paradoxical, as he lay dying, he had to be without if he was to be with a force awaiting those who have nothing and are, at the same time, willing to be everything. He had to be a frequency in tune with the divine.

"Nothing matters." He closed his eyes and accepted this proposition. "Nothing matters. The world is empty and meaningless and everything in it is empty and meaningless. All is vanity chasing after the wind." He felt as if he were about to leave nothing for something beyond human comprehension, beyond the trappings of the world, as if he would cross the threshold from life and death and into eternal truth. He accepted what he could no longer deny. He whispered weakly, "Even though one may be on a path to truth, if he is without truth in the end, if he lacks the ability to begin anew, his earthly existence is an exercise of folly. Absent truth, life is but a perception believed to be true." As if fumbling in the dark for answers which had to be immediate, answers which had to be possessed if he were to finish his final race, Sebastian summoned logos again. "Why?" he asked. "Why the exercise of life? Am I here to prove that lies are only lies which must lead to truth?"

Wisdom long deposited within clefts of Sebastian's soul after every abstruse experience flowed freely within him. He reached a pivotal point. He connected a two-piece-puzzle, the most difficult of puzzles. It is not easy to know of the puzzle, much less that it had but two pieces. Ironically, the matching of two pieces provided a knowing a thousand-piece puzzle would not.

"What does wisdom reveal?" Sebastian smiled slightly. "The world is an illusion. The five senses are but a means to experience the illusory. One must know the senses portray life as real when it is not."

He closed his eyes and explored a heightened state of consciousness. The bounty he gained was superlative. Thousands upon thousands of experiences sown throughout his existence encouraged a reaping of wisdom handpicked by timeless and matchless truth that

was and would be forever beyond the toil of planting and harvesting. Logos marched unabated in and out of his soul. “Within a perceived reality man becomes attached. Attachments frame one’s maligned way of being. Since most perceptions are not true, attachments must be false.” He stilled his breath and asked, “Is life credible simply for believing flawed perceptions?” He shook his head. “Or is truth alone credible?” He knew the answer.

Sebastian challenged the very essence and act of creation. “Did creation contain truth? Yes. Most certainly.” He filtered thought after thought through increasingly finer meshes and the final filtrate came forth. “What is true?” Sebastian mulled the answer. “Since illusions are crafted by and with sensations and subsequent random perceptions form attachments, those who are attached are far removed from truth. Man’s incongruity with time, space, matter, and frequency leads to destructive ways of being. His actions and reactions are equally inauthentic and caustic to a truth-based life. Alas,” he said with as much force as he could muster, “all I ever believed was foolishness!”

He accepted what most would reject. “What is perceived as life is a lie.” He searched for what, at the root, was not contrived and confused. “Most exist within the illusory and generate exponential illusions.” Sebastian chuckled lightly. “Do those facing death have such clarity? If people experience life through varying degrees of perceptions, do they ever attain truth? If not, when?”

Such questions unsettled a man who was physically, emotionally, and mentally exhausted. “Any experience and associated thoughts and emotions drive one either toward or away from truth.” Sebastian concentrated. “Those who are attached to errant perceptions are deceived. Those who are not attached are unencumbered and may know truth.” He choked back emotions hellbent on releasing a deep ache if his soul were to be free. “Yes, yes. Those who know truth are liberated.”

Faced with the inevitable and veritable, if he recoiled at the conclusion of this near-death wool-gathering, he would deny himself treasure beyond measure. If he accepted an underlying premise he did not understand and could not explain fully, a premise he knew was credible, he would be humbled by truth still. Liberation would be his for the taking—in and with truth.

He asked another question. “If the universe has existed for over four billion years, what is the span of a man’s lifetime in comparison?” He smirked. “Nothing. Of the one hundred billion people who have lived and died, what is the significance of one man? Nothing.”

Sebastian was humbled by the unimportance of his self-centered nature within a world teeming with souls who ignored their true quests. Whether or not a soul knew of his quest was essential. At long last, Sebastian knew. "I am inconsequential outside of purpose driven by truth." He spoke what could not be refuted. "Within a lie I am nothing." Powerful illusions had filled his life with deceit. "Within a fiction I became attached to what was irrelevant and was, thus, the same."

He became a harsh critic. While he may have held certain concepts as true in the past, be it love, truth, and justice, he knew he had embodied selfish perceptions of each. He loved for selfish reasons. He spoke what he considered truth for his own intentional or unintentional ends. He fought for and achieved justice which, in the end, was tainted for his benefit and was not justice at all. "How pathetic," he said.

He grappled with one common denominator. He had been driven by ego. He realized how and why he had used any and all circumstances to his advantage, just as he had used any and all tools at his disposal to ensure his interests alone. "I never fulfilled raw purpose borne of truth for the good of humanity." This was no small confession. Startled by this inexorable finding, he rejected any pretense to his life. Yet, strangely enough, in the end and not surprising given the nature of man, as if a final and feeble attempt to preserve his perceived self-worth, as if Satan were real and he would tempt the sinner back home, Sebastian argued against newfound truth. "No, this is just another game!" he exclaimed.

Sebastian turned his gaze. He squinted. The image of a boy hanging from a tree and fighting for the possibility to survive and thrive brought Sebastian back to logos. He raced through memories and touched trigger points, key vignettes which had defined his existence. He accepted the idea that he had become and had always been attached to people, experiences, thoughts, emotions, concepts, agendas, and material things as a means to justify what he perceived. Though his past perspectives were not true, he had believed them fervently. In this light, Sebastian proved that attachment never ends.

The alternative was to be completely unattached through discernment and sacrifice. This was the solution which Sebastian neither fully understood nor was able to express moments earlier. The two-piece puzzle, the union of life and death unattached to anything and everything but eternal truth, was the beautiful Eoin saw as absolute.

“One cannot avoid being. Man is and must be. Isn’t this correct?” He then asked, “If one is attached to life in the least, is truth impeded?” He weighed the query and answered, “Yes, and how is one able to be other than who he is?” He had the answer. “He must be who he is not.” Sebastian chuckled. He was delighted with the plainness of the argument. “Candor,” he pondered, “is the precursor of truth.”

The elusive was no longer. He arrived at a major distinction. His interactions with and through space, matter, and frequency had been an illusion and as false as any lie. He had existed into a lie while believing the lie was life itself. He spoke slowly. “Life lived within a lie is a life wasted into death.” Quite appropriately, he was despondent and his words were a weight upon his soul. “Life without truth is not life; death without truth is not death; both life and death without truth denies what the soul wants and needs.”

The immediate became his only concern. He posited a simple query. “Am I?” Sebastian assured himself. “I am. I must be. Even if truth is difficult to accept, given the forces arrayed against me, I am and must be within a truthful context in the present. Otherwise, I am a lie in the present.”

His past experiences had done nothing more than fan the fires of what was flawed, lies forged from a wrong understanding of himself within time, space, and matter. Discordant frequencies aligned with false perceptions are not a reflection of a healthy being. “I became and was lifeless. I was not being in truth. I was not anchored in truth. I was not truth. How could I have been?” This was a pivotal question.

Specific memories surfaced. He revisited interactions with his son and daughter. He had squelched their energy and defeated their hopes. He had prohibited them from being authentic. Why? He was the one with an incongruent soul. He was the main reason his children were not truly alive and would not be alive into a meaningful life and death. He had been an insensitive and stultifying impediment. Like his forbears, he was a progenitor of deceit to his own flesh and blood.

Sebastian recalled a time when Ian answered the door. His friends asked him if he could play. The invitation was unexpected and one he wished to accept. Ian shrugged his agreement and started to leave. Sebastian, however, came upon the scene before Ian crossed the threshold of the door. “Ahem.”

Ian turned. “Yes, father?”

Sebastian pointed to the other room. “Your school work and then sewing.”

“Sewing?” one of the boys blurted.

“Yeah, ‘e’s got sewin’ ‘e does,” said another. The boys laughed.

Dejected, humiliated, Ian dropped his head and without a farewell, closed the door.

Sebastian saw his faults clearly. “I was wrong, Ian.” His chest heaved with a shame any regretful father would want to unload, a shame deserved because it was a shame he created from the smallness of his being. Sebastian petitioned out loud. “Ian, stop reading. Stop sewing. Go play. Hike the woods. Get into trouble like other boys.” He cried. “Forgive me, son.”

Sebastian recalled Lydia leaning out of her bedroom window. She was speaking to a young boy standing in the street. To Lydia’s regret, Sebastian was walking home from the factory. Incensed by her impropriety, he glared without saying a word. Reddened by embarrassment, Lydia shied from the boy and disappeared into her room. Sebastian admonished the would-be-Romeo with stern eye and charged into the house.

Like Ebenezer Scrooge after an overnight trip with a Christmas spirit, Sebastian reckoned the enormity of his guilt. “Lydia, Sam is a fine boy. Spend time with him. Go Lydia, go. I beg you, please go.” Sebastian shed tears of regret. “Forgive me, Lydia.”

Sebastian was overwhelmed. He saw his signature upon his children’s stories. He had co-authored a work he wished to rewrite. Their stories were but reflections of his misdeeds, the misgivings of a man who rarely considered the impact he wielded, an impact lacking equity, and, even more grave a disclosure, an impact lacking love. “My dear children, live your lives! Your lives, not mine! Realize your dreams! Fulfill your hopes!”

Sebastian remembered the day Ian baked with his mother. Flour covered his face and torso. He was a happy. He was in his element. He loved the smells, the creations, the sweet taste of pastry triumphs. His was joyful. But when he saw his father in the doorway, Ian’s expression soured no differently than plumb pudding spoiled by a taxing summer sun. “Become a baker, Ian, if this is your dream. Do what you want, son. Dare to be great.”

These flashbacks became more of a burden than a death by a pack of wolves. That he defeated his children’s hopes proved irreconcilable. Who was he to decree rather than agree with budding aspirations in need of loving, paternal shepherding? Why did he compel his children with scorn and ridicule rather than propel them with reassurance and support?

Once Sebastian saw Lydia dancing like a ballerina in the living room. She twirled in a pirouette and fell against father. He was not impressed and his countenance told her so. She fled to her room and refused dinner. She knew who she was, a stumbling and bumbling girl. She had been foolish enough to entertain foolish intentions. She was not elegant and graceful. She would never become a dancer.

Sebastian had crushed his daughter's hopes and he knew it only then, at the very moment he faced death. "I was blind, Lydia. Become a dancer. Be the best dancer possible. Oh, my dear daughter, dance with destiny."

Sebastian looked across the ravine and whispered, "Victor, thrive. Find your purpose. My dear boy, struggle and become extraordinary."

He recalled the long day they had endured, a day filled with watershed moments. He recalled Victor standing alone facing a pack of nine wolves and the sequence of events which brought them together. He recalled looking at Victor from behind the boulder. He recalled how he had avoided helping the child. He recalled the attack by the lone wolf and firing the last bullet that was to be used to end his own life.

Across the ravine within a loop hanging from a tree was a child he did not know, a child who was not caged, cornered, or conquered by oppressive parents. Victor's soul had not been denied. His parents had encouraged him to seek truth. He and his parents were anomalies to be sure. Their son was ever more mannerly, educated, and respectful than most children. Victor was free, free to be, free to choose, free to learn, love, laugh, free to cry, free to test, free to succeed and fail. Victor had been encouraged by those who lived and loved into truth so that he would be the same in his wildest aspirations. He would live and die into an unfolding and exciting unknown. Victor would cross over and down and into that unknown. By design, he would live his life because he accepted death.

Ironically, though Sebastian had lived a lie, Victor was a being for whom he offered his own life in truth. Yet, even greater an irony, Victor was the child who freed Sebastian from a hellish existence. The son of another father was Sebastian's savior. A boy, once lost and now safely suspended from a tree, was the embodiment of truth and a testament for one Sebastian Chiffon.

"How?" Sebastian asked. "Why?" He attempted to reconcile his own bravery. Never had he faced such evil. Never had he defied and then allied with death. Never would he have entered the fray of any battle, much less a daunting fight against a pack of wolves to his own

detriment. The notion that he sought to save Victor at the cost of his own life would have been imponderable. With this courageous act, he had done more for Victor in three hours than he ever did for his own children in the last sixteen years. This truth held soul-shattering significance, like God renting the veil, Sebastian's relationship with himself and others would never be the same. He was no less than a new man. "Dear God!" he cried out of both despondency and hope. "I am not worthy. Yet, I am the one blessed beyond measure. I am the one redeemed."

Sebastian was a solitary soul standing at death's door as he happened upon the light of truth. He could not help but grieve while rejoicing at the prospect of being wholly alive during his final breaths. He saw the jostling of truth and fiction as the necessary battle to win the war. He had but to choose the narrow path to this final destination, a defining apex. "If a man is authentic at the moment he contends with death, he reasons between lies and truth. He has a choice. If he chooses to reject the lies, he will be in and with truth in life and conquer his fear of death." Sebastian made his choice. "If I am in my right mind and do not suffer from a delirious state, I choose to embrace truth."

However, evil would not tolerate this final victory. Sebastian's mind, as aberrant and fickle as it had always been, encountered hell again. An equivocating soul, he made another effort to deceive. He entertained the idea that he had cheated his way to truth. "The possibility to live in truth before death was handed to me. Most die in less extraordinary circumstances and never know the past is a ruse and that life is unreal." Then he fought. He recoiled against this maligned perception. "Dear God, does it ever end? Does the mind and heart ever still and allow for what is true?"

He sought silence. He tired of the incessant chatter and conflicting emotions. Not unlike how he pulled Victor high and away from the wolves, he would provide himself a sanctuary far from the barrage of the fraudulent. He affirmed that he was neither his thoughts nor emotions. He pondered the lie that his path to truth was a handout and undeserved. He considered that any man in the same situation might not have helped the boy, that their many attachments to the world would have precluded a successful and honorable rescue.

Through renewal, he arrived at a valid premise. "Based upon a man's limited experiences, he will likely do as in the past." Sebastian turned his head and looked into the sky. "What causes someone to boldly cross the formidable threshold of death and race toward the unknown? What drives a man to do and be when such daring seems impossible?"

Sebastian remembered his father's decree that he would become a clothier. Sebastian recalled the depths of his despair. He asked, "Why did I react so selfishly? If I had accepted my father's decision with the same enthusiasm as my hope to become an architect, would my life have been any different or better?" This was an important query and the answer was critical to his final moments. He sighed. "Nothing would have been different. My life would have been no better had I made that choice. In fact, my life may have been worse."

Sebastian had to be honest. He did not know how life would have unfolded had he descended from his bedroom window and landed upon the dark streets of Willington only to run from a future he did not want. If he had escaped at the age of sixteen, he may have been courageous, he may have pursued a hope, but to what end? He might not have lived into truth simply for doing what he desired. Truth is not transparent or availing simply for following a hope. No. If he had left home, his life could have been less fulfilling as an architect. "Oh, how selfish I was! How I deceived myself!"

Sebastian saw his error. He had blamed and he had blamed often. He had blamed everyone and anyone. He had blamed himself. The weight of this truth was too much. He had been unforgiving toward his father and Sebastian would blame him no longer. He cried out, "I was an ungrateful son." With this confession, he viewed his father in a different light. "Father, you did no differently than any other man. You lived with and through illusions and made choices. Who am I to fault you?" This query hurt. "You may have actually known truth and I was none the wiser."

Sebastian pressed his fist into his chest. He looked into the darkness as if searching for someone. He whispered, "Father, I dishonored you. Forgive me. Please forgive me."

If Sebastian had followed a hope just because it was a hope, he would have been no nearer to truth. He had to consider that hopes could be false perceptions or lead to false perceptions. He thought of the four billion years the earth had existed and the one hundred billion souls. "For naught," he proclaimed. "All for naught outside of truth."

He pondered further. "The extraordinary man lives in truth. But how?" The answer came as quickly as the question was asked. "I have clarity of mind and heart because of Victor and my choice to save him. I acted in love with purpose." Sebastian did not stop. "I am able to be in truth because I chose to relinquish all." He thought of his family, business, and possessions. "All of it," he affirmed.

He chided himself. "I wanted everything in life and contributed little, only to understand that out of nothing I have and am everything." He spoke with conviction. "All is nothing save truth."

He stared into the night sky and grieved for humanity. "Man lives in vain." He sighed. "One must be nothing if he is to possess truth." Sebastian thought of life as mere fiction. "Illusions are a means to truth, but I must see the illusion for what it is. Otherwise, I will covet the illusion and be one with the lie. If I know illusions are a means to revelation, illusions become an invaluable tool. In this light, I must reject the concept that I am. I am not an architect just as I am not a clothier, husband, or father."

He thought of Victor and asked, "Who am I now?" He answered, "A mere vessel, chaperoned by love and for love because I am love. I am nothing so that a child might live. I am nothing but an act of love. I am nothing so that love will be glorified in and as truth." He thought of his existence. "If I have been brought to this juncture to sacrifice everything for love, my life has not been for naught, but for gain." He sought deeper truth. "If I am nothing now, who was I before birth? Who will I be after death?"

He cast his gaze up the ravine. Through blurred vision, he looked hard. A tree reached skyward and a thick branch made its way to the right and above the knoll. Another branch on the opposite side of the tree stretched out and over what had been the encampment of the wolves. The two branches formed a cross and the balance of tree stretched for the heavens. Above the knoll and hanging from the tree was an extraordinary sight, an innocent lamb waiting to be redeemed.

Victor, in the present, within space and matter, prayed and hoped with a frequency to be. He hoped to be alive today and tomorrow without any pretense. He was not deceived. His hope was raw and anchored in truth. A man he did not know loved him enough to become a living sacrifice. Victor freely accepted this unconditional act of love. He could do no less.

Sebastian wondered not if, but when Victor would be in truth. Since he had struggled and suffered at such a young age, would he be in truth sooner rather than later? Would his life be a testament to truth? Would he attain a consciousness in tune with a super consciousness and an eventual rare Christ-consciousness?

These questions humbled Sebastian. He was reduced to the meekest of the meek. Sebastian Chiffon had engineered an altar which atoned for innocence over evil, sacrifice over selfishness, hope over hopelessness, and truth over lies. Purpose prevailed. He was alive. He lived his life. He was a life of distinction. He was the chalice filled with

juice squeezed from ripe fruit. He was uninhibited, vulnerable, and from nothing he had everything. From loss, he conquered.

Sebastian reasoned no more. Logos served its purpose. He was soon guided by a supernatural presence. A light appeared in front of him. He tilted his head and saw a door opening above the ground. He summoned the little energy he possessed and raised his right arm. He stretched. With short and shallow breaths, he reached for the door.

XXXIV

Sebastian, Victor, and the wolves, each of whom had performed specific roles within their own stories, were the main thread of a tense plot in need of release. Stitched together in a seamless life and death drama, the characters, by-products of chance and design as much as design and chance, neared a climax.

The forest was full with anticipation. The play, as if reduced to a single impression woven into a fine tapestry, depicted a scene as moving as any heartfelt saga. The marrow of the moral was the noblest sacrifice of a lone protagonist for the greatest good. Whether the drama concluded in what was unwanted and provoked profound sorrow with the audience bereft of consolation or it concluded in what was desired, resolution was essential. Resolution is nature. Nature resolves. Nature lives for resolution and new beginnings. Human nature should be no different.

The audience expects resolution. If deception persists into the final scene and the plot ends with an unexpected twist, or unsavory characters triumph and iconic heroes are defeated, the last scene of the final act must be performed. If the plot is ripe with truth and the ending is unambiguous, the audience expects closure still. No different than a rigorous journey to the summit for a panoramic view, the audience wants the epic to unravel until all is laid bare and the pressure dissipates. The unknown must be known and confirmed for those willing to accept what is and what will be.

The reverse is true. The drama must end even if members of the audience perceive the plot wrongly. Although people rarely alter the dramas within their own lives—for the ordinary is expected—they become vested in the characters of other plays at the expense of objectivity. They project what could be and defer to preferred slants. Their hearts and minds are grafted within fictional plights. Thus, when a true plot is exposed in its purest state, sundry elements are

discomfiting and shunned and unwanted equal to the death of a childhood friend. The audience rejects the denouement.

Worse yet, members of the audience see themselves as the protagonist. They want the hero to take a different path because they would. Yes, they would save the child; yet, they would find an escape as well. The main character's purpose—the entire moral component of the drama—is dismissed, in part, for selfish expectations. The conclusion is unwanted. “Don't die!” is the battle cry.

Conversely, the audience seeks to minimize the antagonist's impact. Without completely understanding the villain's motives, they want him to suffer more. They reject what is and fabricates what was never the author's intent. Do observers perceive falsely? Do they deceive themselves? Of course. Is this a surprise? No. After all, those watching the action assume the role of playwright. Such is the arrogance of humanity. People exercise creative license to finagle deviations to unwanted endings. They become attached to both the characters and plot and this precludes dispassion.

Dispassion, alone, precludes preferred slants, those false perceptions. Dispassion enables one to watch and accept what is. The moral of the story exists for a reason; there is a purpose for the plot; there is truth. The author scripted the drama by design, did he not? Dispassion is objective. Objectivity neutralizes strongly held thoughts and emotions which, invariably, are used to craft alternative conclusions.

A passionate audience turns hard-won truth into fiction. What folly! Even when the plot is transparent, conjecture leads to the what ifs and should have been. When the plot is not transparent, conjecture is even more oppressive. To whatever extent, the moral of the story is marginalized. Extreme preferences taint a playwright's mission. Mania ensues when the audience vaunts victorious characters to even loftier and unmerited statures, or disbelief reigns when the audience rejects those same victors as too incredible. What the play reveals is either not good enough or too good to be true. The audience is right; the author is wrong. Those watching the drama will correct the playwright's errors until the extraordinary is reduced to the ordinary. Folly, folly, and more folly as the audience seeks what is normal, what is so damn ordinary. Elevating the hero is normal. Failure to appreciate the villain's struggles is normal. Whatever the preferred slant, rewriting the play is normal. Damn fools! An audience full of fools.

Shouldn't the audience accept that Sebastian dies and Victor lives? Or should the audience be allowed to project another outcome? Perhaps the good citizens of Wellington respond promptly to Beast's

unexpected return and they form a search party and Sebastian and Victor are saved. Maybe Sebastian rolls himself to a small cave located on the other side of the ravine and hides from danger and certain death. Maybe Victor climbs down from the loop and lures the wolves away from his hero. Maybe. Just maybe. Ah, but here is the rub. Perhaps a certain maybe does not happen, or a certain maybe is nothing more than a happening, an event, around which random thoughts and emotions swirl and blur only to discredit what is and will be.

The deceit. The conceit. The audience yearns for a reprieve. Sebastian deserves a second chance. They believe this unlikely hero wants to make amends with his children. He will love his wife passionately. He will sell his garment business and become an architect. He will not be ordinary. He will bridge pessimism to optimism. He will not be as he was in the past. He will not return to the ordinary. Sebastian will become an icon; he will be extraordinary. "Oh, but he must! He must!" Such are the demands the audience attached to the ordinary!

A list of alternative endings serves as a means of deception for souls watching and waiting for what will never materialize. Is the reason for this dynamic in doubt? Death, at least according to how death is known to ordinary souls, is unwanted when the protagonist surpasses every expectation. The hero must survive. The hero must thrive. The spectators' reactions are duplicitous and dripping with irony. Those watching the play are unremarkable. They live unremarkably and will die unremarkably. They do not live as heroes. They cannot see the obvious. They do not see truth. They refuse to accept that Sebastian lives his life by living into death—that he has possession of his life and lives life because death is a new beginning. The spectators lie to themselves and this is all rather ordinary.

Why does humanity not realize that pondering countless permutations to a tragedy is a trap? Why does the mind misperceive and the heart deceive without fail? Why is the audience not amenable to the denouement? Why is the didactic intent of the play lost on those who rebuff what is painful, but truthful? This may be the most harmful aspect to the most damning lie that life is supreme, that life alone is relevant, which means that how one perceives life is paramount. Somehow and in some way, most believe that life alone matters and death is the end of life. The contriving mind and heart want what is not and will not be. Man will not appreciate what simply is when death is feared and life is revered far more than each deserves. Such wisdom is not appreciated because such wisdom is far too difficult to accept. It is easier to believe the lie.

Absent understanding, the end of any staged performance is no different than an ordinary death to an ordinary life. In either case, the outcome is known. Man lives and man dies. Who would argue against this point? In the wake of life and death, truth and lies hang in the balance and, all too often, the lies prevail. The audience cannot accept both. Moreover, only those who are extraordinary find truth. If a man conjures what will never be, he obscures the highest wisdom, while the wise attest to the rare unknown that truth in life and into death is the coveted prize.

If the hero performs, perseveres, and possesses truth in the end, death is gain. If he lacks truth, death cannot be prized just as life cannot be deemed fulfilling. Was not a Jewish carpenter the quintessential expression of this truth? Did he not achieve Christ-consciousness? An innocent lamb who became a hero, he died the death of a heathen while anchored in truth. He sacrificed all and for all by honoring the Father of Truth. Did he want the ending? No. Did he accept the ending? Yes. He manifested a worthy life because he accepted death and, consequently, secured a new beginning. His death was gain. Should not ordinary souls who travel ordinary journeys manifest truth with so singular an intent? Death and life and life and death await all. When man avoids death, a false premise is underscored—death becomes insignificant and life becomes a deception. In this light, life is meaningless and death is a lost possibility. Sadly, man is none the wiser.

No different than running a race, is death not the finish line? Every soul enters the race. No soul is granted a pass. Whatever the effort exerted, each soul must finish. The crowds will cheer or jeer; fellow racers will help or hinder; fate and chance will affect the outcome, but the finish line must be crossed. Characters will finish their performances. The play will close with the final curtain. There will be no encore. Death will occur and life will cease.

The path and pace for each soul, although important, are secondary to the maxim that death begets life. Life is the means; death is the high mark. Wherever and whenever it occurs, victors are crowned and triumph is celebrated by the cosmos. Death is a beginning that is begotten when God whispered a holy secret into each soul before birth, "Fight and finish the race faithfully." This secret is oft forgotten when one confronts a world riddled with the alluring lie. All is obscured with and by the fantastic. Oh, how man is deceived!

If not valued as life's purpose and a core component of life's denouement, death is discounted. No wonder death is rejected. Death becomes as repugnant as any undesirable ending to a three-act tragedy

wrongly perceived and not embraced as a promise fulfilled. Death is no longer a glorious beginning in the here and now and hereafter. If death is deemed reprehensible as opposed to essential, man wanders without dead reckoning toward this cherished goal. He does not discern through countless experiences for that ultimate good; rather, he travels aimlessly and becomes mired in vexing quandaries.

Infrequently weighed is the false notion that a life without true purpose is somehow noble. Yet, this notion is easily defeated. If one does not know life cannot be noble without possessing a true purpose into a glorious death, he never challenges the false premise. He does not know that if his life is purposeless, his death will be equally purposeless. He does not know that if his death is not honored, his life will be dishonored. Where is truth? Where is the search for and the fulfillment of purpose? Without purpose in truth, man fails a divine mandate—to be with purpose in the present and to fulfill a calling into death and beyond. If life is discounted with every rejection of a subplot that is consistent with a larger plot of a yet-to-be-fulfilled-truth, man's performance within his own play is diluted, cheapened, cheated. The essence of death and life is lost. He is lifeless and deathless. He does not live his life.

When death is not a salutary transition and does not blend with a never-ending truth, life becomes the most formidable foe. Man becomes enmeshed within various circumstances to the exclusion of a prized and sobering detachment. If one lacks dispassion, the soul is and will remain attached to whatever and forever. He will not know it is best not to be tempted by sensationalized fiction. In such a state, truth will not triumph. Those ubiquitous and sordid lies will defeat a meritorious life and death; life will wither without fruit; death will be as predictable as life is ordinary.

History and literature reveal one regrettable lesson time and again. Man exists until he exists no more. Only when truth is attained does he realize a life filled with countless circumstances was the very means to attain and convey that very truth. Is the loss of a child the means to truth by those who mourn? If not, why not? The alternative is obvious. If false perceptions are given more import than what truly is, the lie is not dethroned. One question must be asked. If what is trivial becomes paramount and the important is diminished, in a year, a decade, or a century, what will matter other than truth that was and is rejected?

Though Sebastian was at a crossroads, he did not have to choose the direction he would follow. The choice had already been made when he discovered truth. He knew his destination. The narrow

path, similar to the Southern Bypass, would bring him to the extraordinary. He had but to persevere.

Victor's life would be altered by a hero's choice to travel the narrow path. Undoubtedly, the boy would have preferred other endings to this life and death drama. However, Sebastian would not. He did not.

There comes a time at the zenith of battle when a worthy warrior conveys his spirit in absolute resignation. Such resignation is the fulfillment of a calling that is beyond contestation, when attachments—all of them—are shunned. The physical realm, which is so often defined and limited by the sensory, is seen as secondary to a primary goal that is finely sewn within the soul. From the depths of an enshrined spirit, as if living-water tapped deep in the earth, the warrior cries aloud, "If willing, take this burden from me; yet, not my will, but Your will be done." This spiritual message is translated as, "If willing, end this for me; yet, let not my will prevail; rather, may You create a new beginning." Words spoken with agreement from an inner voice to an eternal beacon—the providential portrayal of the two-piece puzzle—reflect an innate yearning to be one, to be whole and true, to be with truth. Resignation is nothing less than a sacrificial duty—an act of love—and a return to the One Great Spirit.

Part Six

Conclusion

Is it ever over? Is it ever done?
Has the victor done his due?
Or has he just begun?

XXXV

Victor tied the strip to the branch and secured the loop. Safely stowed for a long and weary night, he would not sleep. Though he squinted and listened, he could not determine the whereabouts of his hero. Worst of all, the child did not know of the storm brewing, a torrent of fury that would unleash the unimaginable within his already vanquished soul. He faced a reckoning beyond his years and he was not ready.

The pack of wolves was restless. One wolf raised his head and howled. The remainder roamed in an idle search. The two largest wolves circled and eyed each other in an instinctive dance. One would dominate and become the new leader. Without the formality of a civilized duel, they stalked and, without warning, clashed with a violent thud. Egos and muscle commingled in an instantaneous explosion replete with guttural growls and gnashing teeth. The wolves locked their jaws upon each other and held on with death grips. They rolled recklessly, relentlessly. Nature watched for submission. Submission was inevitable.

A lone wolf navigated the edge of the ravine and howled with horrifying effect. He caught a scent that would lead the pack to pending prey and a feast that would tame empty guts. The wolf howled loud and true. He issued a call for coalition.

The weaker of the two wolves fighting for dominance lost focus. A hunger for food surpassed that of power. His opponent was not distracted. Stronger in more ways than one, the dominant wolf remained true to purpose and seized his adversary's neck with greater force and drilled him to the ground and waited. Prone and defenseless, with paws thrusting upward, when the weaker yelped with finality and the stronger cranked his hold tighter, the former whined with a weak whimper. Only then did the new leader step back and claim rightful victory. Triumphant and without hesitation, he raced forward to lead the pack. The defeated followed.

Victor saw what was unfolding. "Sebby!" he screamed into the night. "Sebby!" Tears surged to his eyes. Terror drove him. He grabbed the sides of the loop and belted out another warning. "Sebby, they have your scent! Sebby!" The boy did not give up. He cried out loud and, through growing sobs and gusts of anger, petitioned his hero to do what was not possible. "Run Sebby! Sebby run!" An audience of one desired a particular outcome, that preferred slant. Far above the ravine, Victor was a lone siren in the wilderness. He blasted a warning to a world which did not hear and would not respond. "Sebby! The wolves have your scent. They're coming!"

The child shook the cocoon in a fit of rage. He was wild and caged. He was crazed by his powerlessness to escape a most dreaded circumstance. He was unable to act. He was unable to love a man who had loved him. Victor had a mission that was destined to fail regardless of his loyalty to duty and hero. In every respect, he was as helpless as when he faced the pack of wolves alone earlier in the day. Now, beyond immediate threat, separated for a reason and a season, Victor could do nothing but scream and lament a pending and sorrowful loss.

The wolves tracked the run around the first tree and stalled. They dodged haltingly here and then there. They turned and stopped and turned again, only to charge forward in a wider search. They recaptured the scent and headed to the left and down where three more trees delayed them. With the run now high above the ground, the scent had long faded. Another wolf strayed from the knot of activity and climbed the opposite hill. A breeze carrying the scent of human flesh fell and tickled the ground and flowed past the lone carnivore. The prize was nigh. The wolf howled confidently; others came to validate; the pack pursued a new course and climbed the hill and found their substitute quarry. They circled and converged. No different than a herd of sheep feasting upon green grass, the wolves would sate a gnawing hunger. This was their intention.

It did not matter that Victor could not see the carnage. He knew. Nature does what nature does. Survival is instinctive and authentic. Innocent and ruthless is nature. He heard the fierce raucous. Howls and barks overlapped barks and howls. A cold streak raced along the boy's arms and up his neck. His flesh tightened. Small hairs raised by miniscule mounds over the landscape of his skin. He yelled sharply—a call to the wild from the wilderness of a boy's heart hoping beyond hope. "No! Don't do it!" He realized the foolishness of his appeal, a defeatist's attitude. He changed his tune and encouraged his hero. "Fight Sebby! Fight!"

The wolves arrived as combatants without knowing Sebastian had no inclination or strength to battle. His fighting days were done. He leaned and watched hysterical attempts of fixated beings leaping into the air without success. He reversed his gaze and saw the hill fall precipitously away with the breadth of the ravine cloaked in darkness. The moon, however, shone brightly and highlighted the run stretching down and across the abyss. A hellish gap separated man from boy. Hell was there, below, waiting, wanting man to cross over, into, and out at his choosing. The fearful would not enter and that was hell itself.

Sebastian knew hell. Hell was a state of mind. His life had been a living-hell. Hell was the valley of despair negotiated daily. The timid

exist in a living-hell. They do not bridge perilous depths and connect peaks of heavenly inspiration birthed from the richness of rugged experience and keenness of reason. The valiant do. Sebastian was valiant. The image of the run crossing the abyss, anchoring hill to hill, connecting soul to soul, joining death to life, spoke to Sebastian-the-warrior as God would a saint. Hell was conquered. Sebastian conquered hell. He redeemed death from the clutches of interminable damnation where mind and heart are conflicted and confused within the infamous middle—that venue which torments the already anguished soul.

Sebastian viewed the bridge and revisited the sanctity of his childhood bedroom decorated with images of metal and wooden structures. Those pictures had emboldened his professional life. He recalled women wearing new gowns with steel cables scaling down and across their bodies, redirected at anchor points, and supported by steel plates until the architectural testament spoke of his every hope. He recalled men in suits fashioned with iron brackets shouldering lengthy spans of suspended balustrades ribbed into matchless symmetry. These images touched Sebastian in his final moments. The bridges of the past, those designed and erected by other architects, encouraged his efforts on behalf of the Chiffon clothing enterprise. Those same bridges inspired him even that day. Those were memories made for the present when he abandoned a profession he loathed and, by divine invitation, crossed another bridge before creating his masterpiece, a bridge without rival, one which manifested the essence of his being.

The moon shone for a reason. The celestial light underscored God's intent. God made Sebastian in His image, to span hell, rule the earth, and hope with heavenly inspiration. No longer in a house divided, Sebastian confronted death and lived his life. Moonlight danced upon him. He traversed one end to another and connected life and death into harmony without muddling of mind and befuddling of heart within a damned middle that is and will always be hell. Death and life were now one. Sebastian bridged into near omniscience. Made in God's image, he was like God.

Pearls of wisdom were strewn his way and Sebastian was a wealthy man. He sensed that the workings of the mind, heart, and body were not in vain if one had the purest of intentions, when circumstances are discerned, when errant thoughts and emotions are ignored, when actions are appropriated without misgivings. Sebastian's bridge was made more from love than cloth and was as pure as wind-driven rain seeking a target. He rained sweat and blood and gave his all until he

could give no more and the object of his efforts was soaked in providential love. Did Sebastian have to wrap fabric around a child and over a tree, down a ravine, around another tree and then three more in order to secure an anchor-hold and take the fabric across a ravine, up a hill, into the heights of a last tree, and down to a final resting place? Yes. Yes, he did. He acted. Love is an act. To act is to love. He loved.

As if his latest and last creation should have been memorialized upon a child's wall, Sebastian saw the image clearly. The run crossed the ravine, scaled up the hill and over a knoll, and to a tree with branches that formed a natural patibulum. He thought of his employees and the occasions when he drew lines and arcs upon clothing patterns. His subordinates used these instructions and gave life to creations which people wore and tore and washed repeatedly pending the ruining of these same shirts, dresses, and suits to timely and untimely endings. Sebastian was a creator. Let there be no doubt, he was God's protégé. Sebastian created and he created with purpose. Such was his calling; such did the pearls of wisdom speak.

Sebastian looked down and acknowledged the wolves with due respect, a warrior-to-warrior honor, especially when one warrior deferred from battling because he rested upon principle.

The wolves did not understand. They did not care. They circled beneath Sebastian. They growled and snapped. They rolled in blood splattered leaves and leaped into the air without nearing their mark.

"Love is an act," Sebastian whispered. He stared a foot above the wolves and at nothing in particular. "Dear God," he said, "I contributed more for humanity in the last ten hours than I did in fifty-six years." Humbled, sobered, assured, and reassured, he reached the denouement of his performance in a three act play and spoke truth, "God is love."

Sebastian did not move. He did not care to move. Though he lay dying, he was energized. The suspended door before him was bright and captivating. He discerned a far greater presence in and around him. Guided by providential instinct, he knew death was more than he had falsely perceived. Upon death, he would not be as he had been in life. He would be as he was before his birth. He would be that which was, is, and will always be.

"Death has purpose," he whispered. "Death is a bridge from consciousness into super consciousness. Death validates that the illusory must be experienced knowing it is illusory." Humbled by this conclusion he said, "Death is life as much as life is the death of lies. One either knows and possesses truth or he knows nothing at all."

These words reflected a Christ-consciousness, a true knowing. Death and life were inextricably linked. Death was not an ending, but a beginning and, even more, a return to a beginning. If he rebelled against this truth, he had but one option, live a lie and maintain an illusion into an inglorious death. He would end life in defeat rather than begin in triumph. He understood why most people avoid death. "Man is fearfully ignorant of death and, as a result, fearful of life." Sebastian's inevitable crossing into that vast unknown was the most remarkable of all rugged experiences and he accomplished it with honor and hope. Sebastian was not fearful. "I will not allow another tragedy in my life," he vowed.

He thought of family and friends. Though an integral part of his life, kinship bonds left him unmoved and those closest to him were but a part of the illusion. Be they spouse, brothers, sisters, children, parents, friends, each of them experienced the ordinary. Around and around, they rode an amusement ride moving through events and circumstances that were nothing but lies in constant flux. The ride was a lie which traveled far from truth.

Was Victor any different? Sebastian saw the child as an anomaly. Victor was his conductor, a lightning rod, a magnet which drew Sebastian to a wondrous juncture which defined him as much as he defined the juncture. Without Victor, the juncture would never have been. Without Sebastian, the juncture would not be.

No one knows when a seminal encounter will strike along a journey that appears as ordinary as any other. No one knows when a confluence of elements will lead to a salient distinction. Yet, when that moment occurs, potential heroes must be ready, willing, and able to battle to the last and to the apex of the summit. For there they will acquire absolute context.

Had Sebastian refused to perform his role, Victor would not have survived. Sebastian would not have arrived at truth. Had he deferred to the belief that his wife and children were his primary concern, Victor would have died and Sebastian would have been less of a man in an even more shallow existence, going around and around on an empty and meaningless ride to nowhere of note. He would not have been like the nomad trekking through barren experiences for years until a beacon was sensed and that weary traveler changed course and dead reckoned for nothing but that one focal point. Sebastian would not have become a purveyor of truth with a heart hankering for union with God. This was the truth.

If exposed for the audience to see, cowardice dwells just below a man's facade. Cowardice drives him from truth. The brave front he

feigns does not matter. Lies and cowardice are partners in crime. Lies shield the frail from a harsh and unwanted reality and if the lies were known, they would be received as true. The lie that Sebastian's family was his priority and a lost boy was not would have enabled him to advance the belief that he was unwilling and incapable of saving Victor.

Sebastian savored these conclusions. "I understand why so few accept truth at the threshold of death." He mourned for humanity. "Lies must be true for most souls. Lies are the basis upon which people cope with and within the fictitious. Lies permit them to avoid truth. Lies permit them to survive without the possibility to thrive." He confessed what was now transparent. "Most do not have a true purpose, much less know their true calling. If, perchance, they do know, most lack the honesty and courage to accept purpose or act out of love of truth to fulfill that purpose for a higher calling. They will not love in the truest sense of the word." Sebastian was brutally candid. "I did not understand this precept. I was attached to a world unworthy of attachment." This was a premise he understood and expressed with resolve. "The puzzle is solved," he said.

Sebastian saw everything as he should have. He no longer viewed the wolves with disdain. Those wild creatures were not a means to an end, but a beginning. They, too, served a purpose. They indirectly fulfilled a divine appointment in his life. The wolves were a tool, one of many permutations within an illusory scheme in a forever evolving fiction in search of truth. "The illusory led me to the narrow path," he concluded. "But I had to see the illusory."

Truth would not be denied. If he fought against the concept of death, he would not possess truth that would have persisted and prevailed nonetheless. Sebastian was a sacrificial lamb. He had to be. He surrendered knowing he had chosen to love a child who was not his own. Love is truth and truth, love. Sebastian was like the weaker wolf defeated by the stronger. While they both had fought and submitted, in Sebastian's case, he was victorious. Victory is not a flawed perception when understood in proper context.

"I am not deceived." He reflected and added, "The child lives." Sebastian began to cry. He cried because he was joyous. He escorted truth through his mind and into his heart. "I fulfilled my purpose, truth prevailed, and love conquered." Sebastian smiled as tears rolled down his cheeks. He retraced his philosophical and spiritual musings to a word he used earlier. "Nothing." He expressed himself deliberately. "All is nothing and nothing is the means to truth."

A voice spoke from beyond the door. “Sebby, let go and struggle no more.”

Sebastian raised his arm toward the light. “Beautiful,” he said. He drew in his final breath and exhaled. His story was complete. His history was stamped and sealed with his signature creation. Victorious, Sebastian bridged into eternity. A new beginning dawned.

The suspended door opened and a lady flowed gracefully toward him. She hugged Sebastian. She pointed to the wolves and his former physical embodiment and then to the boy who waited for the next scene of his life to unfold. “I am Juliette. Victor is my son,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “I know.” He marveled at her presence. Upon his last breath, truth had showered him no differently than summer storms shedding grey sheets of life-giving water from the heavens. Truth fell from on high and nourished his spirit. He knew and understood all. If he had been able to weep with unprecedented joy for simply knowing truth, he would have done so. For, with truth came absolute love.

Victor’s mother continued. “Sebby, I have observed you for years. I have been waiting for destiny to manifest what would be.” She looked at him and said, “Your life is and will be a testament for many. My son will sing your praises. Many a life will be transformed. People will leave the ordinary and become extraordinary because of you.”

Sebastian looked at her with spiritual wonder. She had been in life and was in the afterlife exactly as he hoped he would be, a rugged pioneer who journeyed through untamed terrain in pursuit of a destiny conquered at great cost. She intuited at an early age that nothing, save truth, mattered. She yearned for truth no differently than a comet rips through the universe in search of a collision point with an unimaginable impact felt in every possible direction and distance. She had prevailed in life and death and into the eternal.

A man’s journey through life is oft touted as having greater significance than the final destination. Yet, the cliché that life is about the journey is as cheap as the concept of time. Sebastian knew better. Victor’s mother proved as much. A journey into a lie and only a lie does not make the journey worthy. A journey must be guided by more than false perceptions. A soul is ill-served when illusions persist into a purposeless life and truth remains undiscovered and uncherished.

Sebastian regarded truth as miraculous. The wolves’ voracious appetites and Victor’s unquenchable thirst for tomorrow were as unadulterated as any element of nature. The simplicity of life could not be discounted. Trappings of the world which precluded possession of

truth were to be avoided as deceptions to those who were suspicious. Sebastian knew truth was not known by most souls. Most are blinded by their own prejudices. They cannot and will not see the brightness of truth. Then there is the power of faith. Only the faithful reckon for what is unseen into victory.

“The deceived are many,” Sebastian remarked to himself. He looked at Victor’s mother and concluded, “Few are not.” Sebastian suffered no illusions. He was home. He emitted a frequency of love. He was love. He had loved into death and, as a result, he loved in life. Fittingly, he was a two-piece puzzle bound to truth everlasting.

He ascended into the sky and looked toward the Southern Bypass. North of Willington, hours away from a lost lamb hanging from a tree, a search party moved swiftly. Villagers answered a calling. In the present, within space and matter, with frequencies joined in a chorus as hopeful and courageous as the villagers had ever manifested, the throng advanced purposefully. Torches swayed without rhythm. Small fires bounced according to the individual gaits of the bearers. Like fireflies illuminated against a black canvas, lights floated freely, willingly.

Willington citizens had dismounted the amusement ride and embarked upon an extraordinary quest of love. The measure of their love would not be known until the whole truth was disclosed. For, truth would join the adventure when the search party found one piece to the puzzle, a boy, hopefully stowed safely in a tree, and the second piece to the puzzle, a hero’s body not strewn at the bottom of a ravine with wolves chewing flesh and gnawing the ends of bones, but hanging from the veritable fulcrum of destiny, from the quintessential seat of truth.

Whether Victor lived or died, Sebastian knew a mixture of emotions would overwhelm the group. Divergent thoughts would be expressed, some reasonable, others not. They would form perceptions, some true, most false. However, beyond the inevitable flow of lies, one distinction would be known, an extraordinary distinction of an extraordinary truth. Sebastian Chiffon, though a most unlikely candidate, was a hero through and through. They would know he had devised and executed a plan built upon the firmest foundation of love. They would know that Sebastian Chiffon loved and he did so in a way that was not ordinary in the least.

Sebastian marveled at the unfolding scene and grandeur of life and death. He marveled at the wonder of life, that he had lived, that he was able to view the procession of souls, those he knew, those who, he hoped, would rescue Victor. Oh, did he marvel. He hoped those affected by his struggle into death would be moved into truth as readily

and naturally as they drew breath to sustain their bodies. He hoped they would know death was life as much as life was death, that lies were but a fool's errand to ignominy while truth paved the path to heaven on earth and into the eternal. He hoped they would acquire an awareness not that man is being one way or another by whim of perceptions, but that he may be dispassionate without attachment to anything but truth.

In the heavens, Juliette pointed above, below, and around. Within the vast expanse of the cosmos, streaks beyond the scope of a massive lightning storm filled the void. Bending, melding, leaping streams of colored and sparkling luminescence raced beyond the earthly plane and lanced velvet as black as midnight until all lights converged as one. Sebastian saw millions of rays of energy emitted from nature, energy divinely channeled into seamless connectivity.

Juliette asked Sebastian to close his eyes. "Listen, dear brother," she whispered.

Anointed, his ears opened and the harmonics of transcendent bliss filled his spirit. The panoramic scene was not simply light and energy, but a symphony of holy frequencies, overtones of fundamental tones, vibrations from providence. Love resonated everywhere and in and through animals and plants and insects and objects. Nature sung in synchronous praise to the glory of One, the Creator of truth and love. Sebastian heard a timeless message, an eternal song, a divine mantra, singular notes and strings of pure pitches. Every light and frequency coalesced and pointed to an aura of absolute glory. The unknowable and indescribable moved Sebastian's spirit. He heard logos. Logos was his faithful reservoir and no longer a latent belief subverted by a history of deceit. There were no lies. Truth reigned supreme.

Without an introduction and fanfare worthy of the one true King, for silence alone was sufficient, an unexpected and undeniable voice sprang from an unknown distance into the fore. A Father championed a son's true name. Sebastian received the pronouncement, a matchless and holy declaration, a calling echoed in song by a heavenly chorus. Magnetized by a radiating love, Sebastian's spirit longed for quick passage to his Father.

A heavenly zephyr stirred. In a swirling motion, countless lights and frequencies joined the expanding force. Frequencies from all space and matter converged toward the suspended door and merged into a holy instrument, a blade of energy, a providential needle that moved gracefully toward Sebastian.

A divine proclamation cracked the expanse. "It is finished and it is good!"

The heavens rocked in thunderous applause.

As if electrons bouncing off barriers within a confined field, Sebastian's spirit leaped in uncontrolled excitement. The needle hovered and, then, on cue, Sebastian darted forward. A hushed awe foreshadowed the crescendo of a pure and holy pitch. A divine thread would be drawn through the eye of the needle and, with this action, the most glorious, spiritual riddle would be solved and the audience would know the answer. All of creation would see the resolution of a two-piece puzzle made of heavenly cloth handcrafted for a reason only the Creator understood and He, alone, was able to express.

When the work was finished, the stars would lay dust forward and down into a royal path stretching to the epicenter of the cosmos, the place where the Master Clothier sews perfectly and seamlessly into the eternal. The consummate Mentor, the Father of fathers, the God of all would meet Sebby at the threshold.

Then it was done. God drew His son through the needle as if he were the finest silk and stitched him into timeless truth. Sebastian crossed unreservedly and became part of an ever-expanding tapestry, a masterpiece. He was a masterpiece. He was extraordinary.

By providential reckoning, fearless and hopeful, in unassailable super consciousness and a comprehensive Christ-consciousness, Sebastian delighted in his Father's craftsmanship. He praised the Holy of Holies for clothing him in such spiritual splendor, the finest apparel for a purveyor of truth. And, truth be told, Sebastian fit his heavenly attire perfectly.

Silence filled the heavens. The audience stilled. The anticipation was great. At a new beginning, Sebby waited for the curtain to rise. At the appointed time, he walked to center stage and performed his role in an eternal play for an audience of One.

XXXVI

Sebastian was gone. The wolves knew as much. Death's sweet fragrance wafted through their ranks and quieted their resolve long enough to pay a silent tribute to nature and man, warriors both.

Victor sensed the worst. The quiet interlude had signaled the attack. He did not doubt that his hero was being eaten alive. Outrage rushed through his veins and deposited mineral upon mineral until a monolith of hate filled his young heart.

The pack's tribute was short-lived. Hunger remained a constant reminder of their mortality. Annoyed, disturbed, confused, they grew restless again.

Victor heard faint sounds in the distant forest. He stood quickly, awkwardly. "Fight, Sebby!" Tension gripped the base of his throat. His chest was laden with pain. He poked his head out of the loop and tuned his hearing. Nothing. To his way of thinking, nothing defeated hope. "Noooooo! Oh, God! No!" He had heard nothing once before. He felt nothing in his arms in a snow-covered alley in the recent past. He avoided that particular memory.

He closed his eyes and lifted his face toward the heavens. He planted his feet into the bottom of a precariously hanging orb. He grabbed the sides of the opening and cried out with all his might. "Fight, Sebby! Fight! You have to fight!" His tears fell and pattered upon scattered paw prints etched loosely in the soil. Nothing. Defeated, he lowered his head and withdrew. He succumbed to a slow fall and squatted. He cradled his knees and held himself. Alone again. He was all he had. "No! No! No!" Indecipherable mumblings, heartfelt moans no child should express rumbled over the boy's lips. In a barely audible whisper, he said, "Fight, Sebby! You can do it! You can do anything!"

Victor was stuck between hope and despair. Despair reached up and over the edge and pulled the child down. He rolled willingly with the flow. His mind conjured stark images. He saw the wolves approach Sebastian assuredly and cautiously. They appeared to either respect Sebastian-the-warrior or they were not sure his fighting was done. Victor imagined the sound of low-grade growls as the pack circled a man who waited helplessly upon the ground. When their moist breath fell warmly upon his face and he did not stir, they knew. Their growls grew more intense. Their eyes showed resolve. They crept lower. They stalked closer. The fight was finished. The feast would begin.

Victor projected the worst possible outcome. The lead wolf attacked. He seized Sebastian's arm, pushed back on all four paws, and shook the appendage like a puppy tosses a disposed rag into the air without letting go. The rest of the pack tore into their repast. Sebastian screamed to the heavens for a duration that seemed longer than it was. Then, as if a small feather had been blown by the sweet sigh of a carefree child, with a final exhale, Sebastian's spirit sailed upward. Victor saw his hero die, murdered by a mob, killed for a meal that would satisfy them for but a day.

Distraught by these images, bound by delirium, Victor seized the loop and raised himself into an unbalanced squat and screamed. He

pleaded for help one final time. This was a noble and necessary act. He loved. He loved a man who gave him a gift, the gift of gifts. Victor wanted to give something in return, anything. He yelled unreservedly. He refused to acknowledge certain defeat. Without accepting Sebastian's death, he encouraged his hero. "Fight, Sebby! Fight! Please, fight!"

His fervor intensified. With each yell, more tears fell and every sob excavated his soul. He was too young to weather a second tragedy. To avoid what was real, Victor searched for something fictional. He did not want to understand. However, what was real brought pain and he was powerless to stop the avalanche heading his way. Downward, onward, understanding cascaded with the intent to pummel the unsuspecting. This is how hard lessons are won.

Sebastian's death was a rare testament of selflessness to the child. Victor had witnessed the impact of a virtuous sacrifice. He knew and felt the impact of virtue. If able to match words to emotions, Victor would have declared himself a victim to virtue. He suffered from it. He would never forget those distant, harrowing images conjured by a mind working independently from the boy. He knew abject loss. He felt soul-shattering regret.

Somewhere within the recesses of his heart, he yearned to reconcile what many grown men never appreciate. While he did not know it at the time, he searched for keen insight. Sebastian was his teacher. Sebastian was the messenger. Sebastian was the means to an end and a beginning to what Victor needed most, healing that only comes at certain junctures throughout life. This was one such moment.

"Help! Please, somebody help!" Just as he did when he battled a pack of wolves alone, Victor pleaded for any willing warrior to join the battle. No one answered the call.

Victor heard nothing. Nothing was the unstated, nothing was silence—an impasse which lingers before forgiveness reigns or caustic contempt levels blame. He wanted to blame. His face melted. Tears flowed. He thought. Both mind and boy thought. He thought of her. "No one answered her call," he whispered. "No one saved my mother." Victor blamed without shame. He was in the right and he knew as much. He would prove as much.

Victor's mind reverted to Sebastian's imaginary scream. He saw wolves who refused to tire. Jerk after jerk of clenched jaws biting into flesh sent limbs and torso up and down and around. The wolves pulled their prey in six directions at once. Within minutes, the strongest of the wolves secured pieces of flesh and secreted themselves along the perimeter. They bit muscle into chunks and swallowed them whole.

Blood flowed over their gums and dampened their chins before spilling to the soil. They glared and snarled at the weaker wolves attempting to take what did not belong to them. Others lay alongside Sebastian's body. They ate and growled warnings to those who came near.

The pack plowed without principle save one, to take. The baseness of their ritual was a lesson. The act of taking is nature's constant refrain, an essential routine if nature is to be natural. Nature takes without ceasing. That something or someone had to be taken in the process ensured new beginnings.

However, in Sebastian's case, the belief that he had been taken did not apply. Sebastian gave everything and he gave freely. He did not exact a charge. He did not forecast a profit motive. This was not business as usual. He held to his true purpose. Truth could not be retracted. Sebastian was truth. He gave himself to the wolves as much as he gave himself to and for Victor. The perception that the wolves took his life was false. Preordained an offering, Sebastian was a willing sacrifice.

Victor closed his eyes. He shook his head. He could not reconcile polar opposites—giving and receiving, taking and losing. He thought of his grandfather as a young boy without his mother. “No!” he cried out. He saw loss. He saw loneliness, despair. Then there was Sebastian. Victor never asked if he was married. Did he have a family? Did he have a son? A daughter? Victor struggled with the idea that his hero's children would be without their father.

Timothy Sadler—that orphan—entered Victor's mind. Sadler had no one. But, then again, he had someone. With clenched fists, Victor slammed his thighs. “No!” He did not expect what was unfolding. He did not want to release what was hidden within his heart. He coveted a certain hate and avoided what lay dormant. “Sebby!” he screamed in an effort to distract himself. “Sebby!” However, the avalanche hurried onward. A massive force would destroy all in its path. Rebirth would follow soon after.

Victor saw more images. His mother's body rested in an alley covered in snow. She was cold, bruised, battered. “Sebby!” He cried out even louder. He thought of Timothy Sadler again. “Damn the orphan!” he yelled. Timothy was to blame. Victor blamed Timothy. “No!” He pounded his fists. “Sebby!” He tried to focus on Sebastian. Victor fought to remain in the murky middle where nothing is resolved.

Victor wiped his nose with his sleeve, narrowed his eyes, and gritted his teeth in a futile attempt to focus his thoughts and rid himself of emotions he did not want to feel. He moaned a vile sentiment lurking below the surface; he uttered words of spiteful rage, bullets directed at

an easy target. “The wolves. The wolves. The wolves.” He repeated these words through tight lips and seething contempt. Now he blamed the wolves. “The wolves.” He had to blame someone, something. “Those damn wolves!” Little did Victor know blaming served no purpose. Blame has no place. Blame is the trait of cowards to avoid being strong. Blame is the tool of fools to deflect wisdom’s biting truth.

“The wolves. The wolves.” The chant became a mantra. Timothy Sadler haunted him. “The wolves! The wolves!” Victor had long blamed the orphan. He had to blame him. Who else would or should bear responsibility for his mother’s death? Timothy was the reason; he was the cause. He did not know who or what he despised, but Victor despised someone or something. He despised and he liked doing so. Victor refused to accept Timothy as the path to truth. Just as he rejected Sebastian’s death, Victor rejected the orphan as a bridge to reconciliation. If the orphan was the narrow path, Victor would take the easy route. He might arrive late or he might not arrive at all, however, the easy route was preferred to the hard journey. He would follow misery. “No! Sebby!” Victor fought for some easy diversion. “Sebby, fight!”

Suddenly, Victor stopped. He looked blankly. He heard voices. He heard his father discuss the murder of his mother with the other men. Victor learned things, frightful and evil things. He learned of the depravity of man. They spoke of Ms. Fitzsimmons’ discovery—little Lucy Blake was the last soul to see Timothy Sadler waving two sugar cookies aloft. No one knew if the boy, that starling which flew home with a treasure in each hand and a secret pouch about his waist, had made a mistake. Yet, not a single man blamed Timothy. No one blamed Timothy, not a living soul save Victor.

The night of the murder, Victor and his father were given refuge on Father Downing’s living room floor. It was a sleepless night. Marcail discussed Timothy’s kidnapping and Juliette’s murder. The woodsman had a profound belief that anything unstated, anything hidden by design, even if to protect those who were weaker, did more harm than good. He shared how Victor’s mother was killed, the blows to her torso, the kicks to her head. He spoke of motives and the nature of man. He shared two overpowering emotions, fear of loss and greed, constant devils which hounded the human soul into shameful acts and sinister ends.

Marcail Cameron had the best teacher, nature. Nature was raw and real. Nature exposed all and hid nothing. Nature mocked man’s propensity to shield the soul in clouded emotions and strained reasoning borne of flawed perceptions. Marcail believed one’s failure

to know, to truly understand, denied growth, that ignorance ensured weakness. He believed in honest talk. He believed his son would not become the man he could or would unless the boy had a father who spoke in strength and encouraged Victor to listen in strength.

Thus, Victor asked his father one question over and over again. "Why? Why? Why, Father? Why did it have to be mother?" He recalled the answer.

"God made ye mother special. She was made to love."

Victor wrestled with this notion. He searched without sincerity. He did not want to find anything. He did not want to agree with anyone. He knew one fact; he lost his mother. As if another answer would be better, as if to trick his father into revealing some withheld truth, he asked the same question, but with different words.

His father was wise and patient. He spoke as before, but with a more complete explanation. "God made man for many reasons. He made us to love Him and praise Him. He made us to love others, and not just family. And for a special few, he allows them to die so that others might live."

"But the Sadler boy did not live."

"We don't know this to be true, Victor. And even if Timothy Sadler was killed by those men, ye mother had to try. She had to save 'im, if she could." Marcail met his son's beleaguered eyes with his own and spoke earnestly. "Son, hear me now. For I am going to speak true, just as I always 'ave and always will. God made ye mother to love, to love me and you and to love another child as if he were her own. When she died fighting for that boy's life, she glorified God."

The answer. Always the answer. Nature answers. Nature answers especially when one arrives at a juncture along his journey and he is in tune with nature, when he is whole, when truth becomes his only companion. Marcail Cameron did not equivocate. "Victor, ye mother answered her calling." Victor could not deny this one truth. His mother was extraordinary. She was an iconoclast. Iconoclasts are natural. They are the answer.

Marcail's words and face faded from Victor's memory. Victor looked up. He saw darkness and nothing but the outlines of leaves and tree limbs. The world did not make sense to him. His father's wisdom conflicted with Victor's longing to love as he had loved before, to be with and to love his mother, to have his family, to be one.

Victor's imagination may have deceived him with flawed impressions and stirred base emotions that would be filtered for years until washed clean by constant pounding against hard experiences; however, embedded within his subconscious, wedged tightly within his

soul, a latent yearning waited for a catalyst that would lead the child to a future awakening, a confluence of elements that would propel him to the summit and the revelation of his being. He, too, would become an iconoclast. Had he known this truth in the present, he might have been assuaged. His heart may have been consoled. But, alas, he was only a child. His grief was more than he could bear. Any relief had to come in doses, large or small, gently or harshly, but knowingly.

The truth? Timothy was a bridge. Sebastian was a bridge. The wolves, those damn wolves, were a bridge. Victor sensed as much. He wilted under the pressure. He lay prostrate within the cocoon and wept like he had never wept and would likely never weep again. “Mother,” he cried. “Mother.”

He saw images. He saw the big man holding her. He saw her claw and fight her attackers. He saw the small man hit her with the money pouch. He saw the big man throw her to the ground. He saw him kick her in the back and head. He saw the other man sling the pouch this way and that, onto her ribs, into her gut. Victor saw the shame in their actions. He saw the heroic fight of a mother for a motherless child. Victor saw contrasts, a world of stark and unnerving contrasts.

Victor reached forward with one hand and then the other for that precious image. “Mother! Oh mother!” He expressed inconsolable anguish. Then he thought of Sebby, the stranger strewn in pieces in the ravine. “Sebby,” he whispered. He knew what Sebastian had done for a motherless child, a son to a father, a boy Sebastian had not known.

Victor contended with a large dose of relief. He understood more. “Mother, I know what ye did and why ye did it.” He eked out words that would have been tough for anyone to confess. “Mother, you loved that orphan boy more than life itself.” The weight of this truth crushed the lie he once believed, that his mother’s efforts were wasted, that the orphan was not worth so great a loss, that that boy was more important than her own son. The Truth? Well, the truth arrived and Victor sensed a greater measure of his mother’s worth. She fought for the cause of life. She understood death’s role. She sought not the end of things, but the beginning. Another soul, a frightened boy, an orphan, had called her by name. She rushed forward and lifted limbs; she turned and twisted during a hunt in the wild. She hunted evil. She gave her all so that innocence might live. Victor sighed. He reconciled the loss of his mother and felt the weight of Sebastian’s sacrifice.

As if the chaperone of an urgent message, the winds dropped from on high and brushed Victor’s ear and said, “Hush. Hush. Hush,

dear child.” The boy fell into a trance. He closed his eyes. He shed no more tears.

XXXVII

A woodsman from Forkwood learned of Sebastian’s roaming donkey and the missing boy—his son.

Marcail Cameron led the search party along a dark road and up the mountain. Ian, who walked alongside the woodsman, was the same age as Sebastian when he alighted the windowsill and pondered a daring trek into the wild. Ian’s journey made an extraordinary turn. He was on his maiden voyage into danger. To Ian’s right and on the outer flank, Mr. Garst rode his horse and scouted for clues. He pointed and shared his insights with Mr. Samuels. Brett Thorton walked with two other men on the left flank. Ava’s scarf, as if this torn piece of cloth had a purpose or would bring some closure, was wrapped around his neck. In the second row, a retinue of citizens marched loosely and held rifles and pistols, rakes and shovels, bars and ropes. Most men held a torch. The flames chewed the night and spit pure black in its wake.

In the rear, Lydia, walked with her mother. Marie Chiffon, a woman as faithful to Sebastian as his mother had been to his father, refused to remain at home. Trailing behind and sitting upon a wagon driven by the constable, Mr. Eammon Chiffon appeared lost. When he was awoken by the commotion hours earlier, he learned of the torn fabric. He feared the worst and rejected pleas for him to remain at home. He left without realizing he would find more than his son.

Another conveyance lagged to the rear of the formation. In a covered carriage, Mrs. Samuels, the doctor, and cook sat pensively. They had enough provisions to feed and care for a small army. Once Victor’s grandparents learned of the search party, they purchased supplies that would account for almost any contingency.

Mrs. Samuels, though reassured by her companions, was no less distressed. She dabbed a kerchief about her eyes every so often. Her countenance was serious. She considered the multitude of tragedies that could have occurred, the *and such* of the dangerous sort that would trouble any grandmother. Yet, she relied upon her optimistic spirit and ignored what she abhorred. She uplifted her precious grandson in prayer. She uplifted Sebastian Chiffon, her favorite proprietor. She prayed for her son-in-law and the burdens he carried. She prayed for one primary reason. She would find it difficult to live without her grandson. A second loss would be too much.

The wolves had no recourse but to leave Sebastian's body. They returned to their only prospect. They would get to the boy or wait for the inevitable. The child must come down at some point. The lead wolf wasted no time. He descended the hill, crossed the ravine, and charged onward and upward toward the knoll. The rustling disturbed Victor out of a stupor.

The wolves congregated beneath the loop while the leader and his second-in-command bounded to the top of the knoll. They balked initially, but not for long. The understudy jumped and landed on the loop only to fall as quickly. A thud sounded. The loop swung wildly and the rips lengthened.

"No!" Victor screamed.

Unharméd, the wolf charged up the knoll for a second attempt.

Victor's face whitened. He was a ghost of his former self. He grabbed the knife and braced against odds a gambler would take on a hundred to one wager the boy would die. He was outnumbered. He was hungry and weak. He was tired. The rips had weakened the loop with every twist and bounce. The irony is that the once safe cocoon was a bomb that would drop and explode within minutes. Worst of all, he was alone in the dark, the fire had died, and the branches and leaves blocked most of the moon's light. He could not see clearly. Heavy pants, creaking limbs burdened with weighted fabric, and the constant growls—the sounds drove him mad. He dodged within the cocoon without a plan. He was trapped.

The woodsman raised his torch and found tracks left by Beast. The search party was close. He sent two men forward to reconnoiter the area. Soon thereafter, encouragement rang out. They found a long piece of fabric stretched across the road. The men scanned the area and deciphered wheel marks trailing through nearby grass. Marvail surveyed the terrain and noted the slope. He found the path created by the wagon and led the search party down the mountain with steadiness and discipline. He positioned men with firearms on the flanks. They were primed for anything. He placed torch bearers in between those with weapons. No less implements of combat, he flanked the rear with men carrying shovels and rakes. Mother and children were placed in the center of the fold. Alone and still behind the search party, Mr. Chiffon wrestled with thoughts and emotions of an unknown origin.

The woodsman was the first to sound off. "Sebastian! Victor!" His cries, strong and emotional, invaded the forest. He could not imagine a more important hunt.

The rest of the party followed suit. An overlapping refrain sliced the darkness as much as the torches forced its retreat. "Victor! Sebastian!"

Onward they marched; forward they sought.

Victor was uncertain whether he had heard anything at all. His disbelief was too strong amid the pack's feverish rush to devour him.

"Victor! Sebastian!"

Sebastian's children relinquished their fears and issued their own appeals for mercy to prevail. They released their hold of their mother's hands and cupped their mouths. Lydia shouted words of hope. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She realized how much she loved her father. She realized how much she took him for granted. She had lived day in and day out expecting to enjoy what was provided without the context of his sacrifice. "Father! We are coming!" Ian sensed his sister's change; he heard her voice; something was different, new even. He echoed her sentiment. Sebastian's wife, a woman who genuinely loved her husband, was distraught. She could not bear adding her calls into the mix only to have them fall upon the dead. She believed in the end of things. She walked in silence. She was afraid. Most of all, she was afraid of death.

Victor strained his ears in an attempt to separate noises that were inconsistent with his present company. When he was certain, he unscrewed himself from a tension that had drilled him into intractable hopelessness. The droning of constant growls and the hostility of shuffling paws tracking erratically in a small circle beneath him suddenly lost their relevance. As if looking into the dark forest would confirm his hearing, he raised his eyes. He was not deceived. He heard human voices. He ignored the pack. He placed one foot forward and raised his arm. Unbalanced, with the knife in his grasp, he waved without being seen. The defenseless went on the offensive. "Over here!" He belted out a cry of renewed hope. "Over here!"

The wolves noticed the disturbance and Victor's new tone. The leader and his second went below and joined the pack. There was strength in numbers. They knew this maxim instinctively.

The woodsman and right flank came upon the broken wagon and its many pieces. Bolts of fabric littered the landscape. The colors were less vibrant within a muted grey, but the torches made them pop with brilliance. When the contingent of armed men moved forward of the crash, by the light of their torches, they saw the besieged knoll and a tree bearing the weight of a cocoon. The men could not believe their eyes. Then they saw movement. Someone was within the orb. Someone was alive. The woodsman looked at Mr. Garst and nodded. Mr. Garst

knew what to do. He gestured to Mr. Samuels and the men under his charge. They advanced. They tracked to the right of the knoll. The woodsman and Brett controlled the left flank.

“Over here!” A child’s cries bounded and rebounded up the mountain and pierced a father’s ears and wrenched his gut.

“Victor!” the woodsman shouted.

“Father! I’m here! Over here!”

“I’m coming, son!”

Victor looked below. The pack reacted defensively and moved cautiously. Their eyes darted here and there. They assessed the unknown. “Father! Wolves! There are wolves down here. Father! There’s wolves, lots of wolves, ye hear?”

The woodsman froze upon hearing his son’s warning. The seasoned hunter tempered his excitement. On his command, the party moved closer. “Raise ye torches men! Rifles ready!”

The Willington volunteers held their lights aloft. The fire flew forward and exposed a scene which burned an impression into their minds and stilled their hearts. Terror. Nothing less than raw terror. The search party witnessed and understood what they could not express.

The wolves stood firmly in place. Their eyes received and reflected orange and yellow flashes back to the crowd standing in horror.

The search party saw a loop streaked with rips and soaked in red as it

swayed gently side to side. Within the cocoon, they saw a young warrior staring back.

Victor saw figures beyond the light and against the night, profiles of men with torches and rifles in a forest waiting for a triumphant conclusion.

The woodsman thought of his wife and looked at his son. The boy had been through hell, again.

Marcail Cameron eyed the wolves and placed the butt of his rifle against his shoulder. He signaled to both flanks. “Take aim men!” They pulled their hammers back. A series of clicks, like winks from the wise to a less informed audience, spoke knowingly, a watch this and see posture.

“Hurry, father! You gotta hurry! Sebby’s in the ravine!”

The riflemen held their weapons as if bestowing offerings to Hephaestus. Some of the men kneeled; others stepped forward. Metal forged cylinders crept through the air. Dark chambers would soon discharge elements of fury without hesitation. The sight below demanded a quick release of bullets starved for destruction.

Unified by fear, the pack took its last stand and considered retreat. Retreat did not come soon enough.

“Fire!” The woodsman yelled as he squeezed his finger against a trigger worn smooth.

The men discharged their weapons in unison. Metal balls pelted soft flesh and splintered bones. Wolves, injured and not, limped and fled into the forest. Yelps fell everywhere like leaves in autumn. One wolf dropped upon impact and never breathed again. The woodsman’s trigger was smooth for a reason.

The men scaled down the knoll and secured the perimeter. Overcome with joy, Victor smiled. He cried.

Marcaïl nodded in a manner only a father could.

The boy knew he was safe. “Father! You ‘ave to help Sebby!” He pointed into the abyss. “He’s down there. He’s hurt bad!” He cried a mourner’s cry. “Father, please go. The wolves attacked him. He’s bleeding.”

A younger man gestured toward the cocoon. “We could get extra fabric and stretch it wide. The lad could drop from above.”

The woodsman looked at the height of the loop. He did not like the idea. He conferred with Mr. Garst, Brett, and Mr. Samuels. He looked the loop over again and reached a conclusion. “We have to lower the loop to get him down.”

Victor stated the obvious. “Sebby has the end of the run. The wolves got to him. I fear the worst.”

The woodsman separated the men. He nodded to Mr. Samuels and asked him to stay behind and guard Victor and the women and children.

Mr. Samuels nodded once.

The men could not move fast enough for Victor. “Please hurry!” he sobbed more than he spoke.

Sebastian’s wife and children crept to the edge of the knoll and looked down. Lydia gasped. Ian grabbed her arm. Mrs. Chiffon caved. She squinted for two reasons, to learn and to avoid knowing. The dark ravine, now partially filled with light, told one half of the story. She sobbed for what she could not reconcile. She clung to her children. They were all she had. As they stood within the heart of wickedness, she could not have imagined a more frightening scene. Such were the false perceptions of a lady who lived in fear.

Sebastian’s father approached. He watched as the woodsman led Mr. Garst, Brett, and a third man down the ravine. He tapped Marie on her shoulders and departed. He wanted to know the whole story. He

made his way to the left of the knoll and followed in the woodsman's wake.

Sebastian's children eyed each other. They refused to remain only to do nothing. They pulled away from their mother's clutches. They gave her a look which told her not to argue or stop them. She was at a loss and lowered her head. Lydia and Ian hurried and caught their grandfather just as he reached the edge of the ravine. He was surprised. He turned and offered Marie a note of reassurance and descended. In no time, Mr. Chiffon and his grandchildren crossed the threshold and into the unknown.

The woodsman tracked the run to the first tree and then to the three trees farther down. He placed his hand on the fabric rising into the air at a sharp angle from the base of the fourth tree and across the ravine. The moon guided the group along a gilded path. They ran across the ravine and charged the hill. Seconds later, they found the man they sought. Suspended some two ells above the ground, Sebastian Chiffon hung in the stillness of a night rocked by pandemonium. In yet another cocoon, an uncommon hero rested easily.

The woodsman barked an order to his compatriots. "Let's move!"

When they arrived at Sebastian's side, the men circled the makeshift tomb and saw what they did not want. Their hopes were dashed. Covered with dirt and sweat, his hands and fingers rubbed raw, his gaunt face made so by loss of blood, Sebastian slept peacefully under a blanket of truth, wrapped within a bank of stars, enveloped by expanding heavens, and within the heart of a loving God.

The men stood and spoke not a word. Humbled. Speechless. The woodsman removed his hat. The others paid their respects.

Mr. Garst expressed their collective sentiment with a soft, "Dear God." They petitioned the Almighty in both dismay and reverence. They granted honor to the divine and the dead. They sought understanding for the living. They wanted to make sense of it all—the elusive how and why, the motivations of the warrior, internal deliberations which defied reason—things no ordinary man would appreciate until he battled under similar conditions. Even the wisest of men would fall short of the true context of Sebastian's choices. They would fail to grasp the nuances of a struggle that had birthed unspeakable glory. And perhaps most of all, they would be no nearer an appreciation of unconditional love, an act of pure sacrifice immersed in a calling for truth.

The woodsman touched the encasement and directed his sight to the branch and the bridge crossing the ravine. Awed by the

architectural feat, he shook his head in disbelief. “The physical demands required to build this creation had to be...” He could not finish his sentence. He thought of his son hanging from a tree on the other side. Had a stranger not heard a scream and sent a wagon storming down a mountain until it crashed and rained wood planks, axles and wheels, and bolts of fabric, his son would have died. The weight of this thought broke the woodsman. He had faced bears and wolves and mountain lions. He had fished the fiercest rivers and snared the deadliest snakes. He had faced the death of his true love. The bravest of the brave sank to his knees in submission. The woodsman, a man of the natural could not reconcile the supernatural. He fell forward and over his thighs and placed his head upon the ground and cried.

Mr. Garst and Brett withdrew. They discussed Sebastian’s bridge and the intricacies involved, the strips and rocks, the staff and the twists, the suspension wires used to lift the cocoon with the staff braced against those very cables as pressure points.

The woodsman came behind them and in a solemn voice said, “If we had arrived an hour earlier, we would know the man and his motives.”

“We know ‘is motives, do we not?’” Brett asked.

“No.” Mr. Garst spoke as if he discerned deeper meaning. “One would hope any man would have saved the child.” He paused. He pointed to the bridge and offered a conclusion most would not have tendered. “Sebastian Chiffon was saving something else, likely his soul, or that of humanity.”

“I am but a common man,” the woodsman added, “and Mr. Garst may be right, but Sebastian,” he choked with emotion, “is more a man than I ever will be.” He raised both arms and acknowledged Sebastian’s masterpiece. Tears slid to the corner of his eyes and down. “I cannot begin to explain this!” He placed his hand against Brett’s arm. “Brilliant. Simple and brilliant.” He eulogized a man with words that would be repeated in various circles until the truth of Sebastian’s acts made him a legend, a legend which failed to adequately honor the hero and his actions.

Brett wrapped his massive arm around the woodsman’s shoulder. Mr. Garst drew nigh. They paid their respects in silence.

Mr. Chiffon struggled up the second hill. He had genuine intentions. Moved by mountains of regret, he wanted to praise his son. He wanted to hug him and make amends. When he saw the men standing next to a second cocoon in a manner which told of Sebastian’s demise, he knew he had spoken his last words to Sebastian a month

ago. Those words were about business, nothing else. Business terms. This was the language he had employed with his only son.

Though Sebastian had operated the factory for decades, he was not the driving force. At one point Sebastian thought owning and running the family dynasty would change him, as if the business would open another window and he would alight the sill, cross over and down, and race into innovations of his choosing. His father had denied this possibility as well.

Sebastian's father felt the weight of his sins—the sins of a father with repercussions that would affect generations. His example would seep into minds and hearts without awareness. Seeds of discontent would remain until the eighth generation forgot him and his influence was diluted to irrelevance. He was Sebastian's father; Sebastian became him; Ian would become Sebastian; Lydia would search for Sebastian in a mate. Like a pernicious plague with evil intentions, Mr. Chiffon was the cause of the disease without a cure. He would adversely influence his progeny long after his death. Such was the impact of his short-sightedness. Such was the toll of his selfishness. He had been wrong and he wrote the final chapter. Unless he shed the lies, there would be no rewrites.

With stooped shoulders, a short gait made shorter as he attempted to scale the incline, with eyesight diminished from years of reviewing intricate patterns and finely stitched sewing, he stalled. He could not go on. He bent his knees, reached for the ground, and fell on his side. His core tightened; his lungs seized; his heart pounded heavily and as rapidly as his breathing. He wept. "This cannot be."

"Grandfather!" Lydia saw him fall. "Grandfather!" She came running.

Mr. Chiffon looked to Lydia and Ian. He thrust his arm forward. "Stay children! Stay!" He saw what no child should. "Stay, Lydia!" he wailed.

Alas, it was too late. She was the first to arrive. She prepared to help him to his feet. However, one glance to her left changed everything. That one look drove her from youthful hope to suppressed maturity. A longing to hug her father who was no longer alive became a greater longing to hug. "Father!" she yelled. "Father." She fell to the ground and nestled against her grandfather.

Ian heard the commotion and ran stepping and slipping to his grandfather's feet.

"No, Ian!" Lydia wanted to protect her brother.

The boy looked straightaway. The sight was unexpected. Death was unknown, unwanted, and grossly misunderstood at his age.

Ian stared. Speechless, he knelt without knowing he moved at all. He knew the story. He knew the lesson. He heard it from others. He saw the absence in their lives. He was now one of the fatherless.

The woodsman had already decided his course of action and undertook the initial steps. He approached the cocoon. Mr. Garst and Brett readied themselves.

“Wait!” Mr. Chiffon said. He stood awkwardly and deliberately. “Wait, good men.”

Brett rushed over and gave the old man support.

Mr. Garst stood aside.

Mr. Chiffon drew near and gazed at Sebastian. He touched the suspension wires. He viewed the bridge as if it were made for him and him alone, a gift for an unbelieving father, or a final rebellious testament from a son in need of acknowledgement. Neither was the truth. The bridge was a gift to God. Mr. Chiffon looked upon his son and wept.

The woodsman came alongside Mr. Chiffon. He encouraged and reassured. “Mr. Chiffon, Sebastian saved my son’s life.”

Mr. Chiffon stood and pointed to the bridge crossing the ravine. “He was a natural.” He recalled a distant memory. He had to explain what he had long ignored. He had to confess his sin. “When Sebby was a child, he had pictures of bridges on his bedroom walls. He was born to be an...” He began to cry. “He wanted to be an...” He could say no more. His sin was too great to confess. Mr. Chiffon backed away and stumbled to the ground.

Lydia raced forward to console him.

Ian did not budge; he felt out of place, like he did not belong, like a dream gone wrong. He stood alone and watched without knowing what to do.

At the woodsman’s direction, as he held the run, the men removed Sebastian and rested him upon the ground. Mr. Chiffon crawled near, settled to the ground, and cradled his son. “Sebby, my son, my courageous son.” He looked at Marcaïl a second time. “Sebby wanted to be... an architect.”

Marcaïl knew the right response. He knew truth. “Mr. Chiffon, hear me now. Sebby was an architect.” He looked at the bridge again and said, “And I must say, he was an excellent architect.”

Mr. Chiffon wept. His eyes blurred and his speech slurred. His burden was great. “Forgive me, Sebby.”

Lydia could not endure the state of her father’s body and stole away. She held her brother.

The woodsman waved Brett and Mr. Garst to his side. "Here it the plan. I will throw the staff over the branch." He pointed. "Brett, place yourself in the base of the ravine." He directed Mr. Garst's attention to the family mourning to their left. "Mr. Garst, you and the young man stay with Sebastian. We will make a sled and carry him to the wagon."

"Agreed," Mr. Garst responded with a lift of his rifle.

The blacksmith signaled with his booming voice. "Throw it when you're ready."

The woodsman chucked the staff. The fabric whispered through the air. The projectile soared in an arc somewhere in the dark and penetrated the soil with a thump. Brett located the spear in seconds. Marvail came running and sliding. Brett untied the staff and handed the run to the leader of the expedition. The woodsman walked point. Both men held the material firmly and made their way back, ever mindful that one slip would send Victor to certain injury or worse. They marched to and around the three trees that had served as an anchor and approached the first one, the cornerstone. They circled once and unwrapped the run. The woodsman braced himself. Brett carried the balance of the fabric in a heap.

The woodsman wrapped the run around his arm and waist and leaned against the trunk. He made an assessment. "Brett, the weight of the loop is incredible. It would be better if you take hold of the run and lower me boy."

Brett nodded. He dropped the cloth and wrapped the portion nearest the woodsman around his waist. He stepped forward, planted his foot against the base of the trunk. The woodsman knew exactly what Brett was doing. He trusted him.

"Careful now," Brett said. "When I reach behind ye and grab 'old, I will tell ye when I'm good and ready." He fished his arm under and around the woodsman's waist and over his arm. He took hold of the fabric and squeezed with all his might. He drove his shoulder into the tree. "I got it now."

The woodsman lowered himself under the run and stepped to the side.

Brett adjusted his feet and eliminated any slack at his waist. The weight of the loop was not insignificant. "I don't know 'ow Sebastian did it," Brett said. "'Twas no small task."

The woodsman wondered about this comment spoken by a man as large as any. "I guess the strength of a man on the inside is never known."

"Aye. Well said. That is well said, for sure."

The woodsman, distracted by a glimmer to the left of the tree, moved quickly past Brett. Lunar light bounced off metal, a spark among the leaves. The seasoned guide picked up Sebastian's pistol and flung the cylinder open. "Empty." He looked at Brett with wonder. That Sebastian had fired a final bullet was enough to unsettle any man. What was the reason? How did he arrive at his choice? Brett and the woodsman shared a knowing without saying a word. The strength of Sebastian Chiffon was mightier in more ways than they would ever understand.

The pistol and the firing of that final bullet aggravated the woodsman. He placed the weapon at the base of his back with more than a hint of disgust. "Brett, I will go to the top of the ravine and tell the men. Then we will lower Victor."

Brett acknowledged the plan. "Yes, Sir."

"I will be back to 'elp ye. Be sure to wait for me."

"Yes, Sir."

The woodsman scaled the hill and yelled. "Men, we'll lower the boy now. Stand ready!"

"Father! Did ye find Sebby?" Victor shouted.

The woodsman ignored the question. He had a burden of his own, the safety of his son and those on the expedition.

With Brett's front foot firmly planted against the base of the tree, his arms straining under the weight of the run, the woodsman slid his front foot next to Brett's back foot. On Brett's command, they leaned backward and leaked the fabric forward in small increments. Victor descended in a dumbwaiter tested more by wear and tear than by the passage of time. The jerking motion of the descent was not a sign of uncertainty, but an assurance equal to the insurance the loop had provided on its ascent hours earlier.

The men under the loop raised their arms in anticipation. "We got him!" someone yelled.

A man ran to the edge of the ravine to report what the slackness in the fabric already revealed. "We have the lad," he reported excitedly.

The woodsman smacked Brett upon the shoulder and trudged up the hill again. Victor broke through the circle of men and came running. "Father!" The woodsman hugged his son. It was just that simple. Victor hugged his father like never before, as if he hugged him for the first time and in the right way. Tears fell without delay. Bottled pressure sought release and a confession had to be shared, a sin, a cardinal violation of the hunter's creed. "I got lost. I followed a rabbit and got lost!" Victor bore the full weight of the tragedy.

His father knelt slowly. He took his son's shoulders and eased him away. He looked lovingly and sympathetically into his son's eyes.

"It's my fault, father!"

The woodsman, high priest of this cathedral, flanked by wooden spires buttressed by moon beams, with a congregation witnessing the transparency of a vanquished soul, offered absolution. "Son, everyone gets lost at one time or another. The key is to be found." He hugged his son again.

Marcail Cameron was not the author of the words he spoke and he knew it. He was inspired to have his wife's only child in his arms. Those words came from someone who knew Victor, a special soul who knew he needed a salve to heal. Juliette was with Marcail and he with her.

The word *found* was a word Victor understood. He looked left and right and then at his father. He gripped his father's jacket hard. "Sebby? Father, you found Sebby?"

There are some burdens the most discerning fathers cannot dignify with words. The woodsman drew his son's eyes to his own and spoke with silence. In that critical moment, with his father's mouth relaxed, face forlorn, and eyes sharing sad news, Victor did not need to hear words. He knew Sebastian was gone. His lips quivered. His eyes watered. Victor buried his head into his father's chest. "Sebby, Sebby, Oh, Sebby."

Mr. Chiffon walked up the ravine with his grandchildren by his side.

Lydia raced to her mother with a message.

Mrs. Chiffon collapsed to the ground. Her foundation was gone. Her worst fear had been confirmed. She and her children were alone in the world. This was yet another lie that would not be expelled without extraordinary effort.

Ian stopped and looked keenly at Victor. He admired the boy. Victor was a stranger who met his father only hours ago and knew him in ways Ian never did and never would. Ian wanted to know Victor. He wanted to learn about his father's courageous acts. A hope took root in his soul.

Mr. Chiffon approached the woodsman.

"Victor," the woodsman said as he stood, "this is Sebastian's father."

Mr. Chiffon had aged in the last three hours. He was tired, so very tired. The toll upon his conscience was great. But now he had a reason to make a journey into the unknown and down a narrow path that might grant him peace beyond understanding. The first step began

with Victor, the lad who knew the greatness of his son, the architect of the boy's survival.

"Victor, you and I have the same hero, do we not?" Mr. Chiffon asked.

Victor was struck by the thought that a son could be a hero to a father. As if to correct the elder Chiffon, he stated the obvious rather innocently. "Sebby saved me life."

"Yes, lad." Mr. Chiffon deliberated but a second for the right response. "Let me tell you something, Victor. Because Sebby saved your life, well, in a manner of speaking, he saved my life. I will never be the same." As if in the presence of royalty, Mr. Chiffon stood as straight as possible, removed his hat, and extended his arm to the child. Humbled like never before, the old man said, "Sir, I am so very honored to meet you." A tear dripped down his cheek. Mr. Chiffon expressed true humility for the first time in his life.

Victor shook his hand only briefly and barreled into Mr. Chiffon. He wrapped his arms around the grieving father. "I am sorry. I am so sorry, Mr. Chiffon. And, yes, Sebby is our hero!"

Mr. Chiffon thanked the woodsman and walked toward his grandchildren.

Mr. and Mrs. Samuels approached their only grandchild. "Victor?" his grandmother asked. When Victor turned, she bolted forward with open arms.

"Grandmother, you came!" He hugged her tightly and reached for his grandfather. "I am so glad to see you grandfather!" A statue no more, Mr. Samuels melted over the boy's frame and cried aloud, "I am so glad to see you, my boy!"

The woodsman made his way toward his wife's parents. They had met for the first time and only briefly before the search got underway. Marcail placed his hands upon his son's shoulders.

"Marcail, we are indebted to you," Mr. Samuels said. Tears welled in his eyes. "Please forgive us and have mercy." He lowered his head.

Mrs. Samuels hugged her husband.

Marcail stepped forward. He held his wife's mother and father. "Mr. and Mrs. Samuels."

Mr. Samuels interrupted the man. "Please call me, father."

Mrs. Samuels could barely speak. Tears flowed. She tried to smile. She whispered one word in the form of a question. "Mother?"

The woodsman looked at his son and then at his in-laws. "Father, mother, we love you. We have always loved you." He brought them closer. The hunt was over.

Brett lumbered toward Victor with the white scarf. “Excuse me,” he said. Mr. and Mrs. Samuels stepped aside. Victor looked at the big man. “Victor, this piece of cloth was tied to Sebastian’s donkey. My daughter found the creature at the creek today.” Brett pondered his next words. He was a blacksmith, after all, and not a blathering preacher. “Sebastian would want you to have this.” Brett was a commoner who toiled. He knew the lessons of life and death. He lived those lessons daily. He searched for words that would complete his thought. “This cloth, after all, led to a new beginning.”

Victor received the gift. He turned and looked at the knoll. He saw the tree. He saw the wolves’ encampment. The loop, which had become a garment that clothed him with safety and security, lay worn and torn and beyond use. Yet, it also gave the impression of having legendary and eternal significance. He looked down and into the ravine. He thought of Sebby. He would never forget their friendship, a bond birthed from blood, sweat, tears, suffering, and possibility. He looked at the scarf. He found writing along the edge. He opened the scarf and read the words *I love you*. Victor looked at his father, his grandparents, and then Brett. He looked into the sky and sensed, for good reason, that he knew the true meaning of love.

High above the scene, Sebastian watched the boy. He nodded and whispered, “You have a purpose, Victor. Honor your purpose.”

The wind stirred and Victor looked up. He saw branches swaying as if they beckoned him. He was at home in the woods, in what was natural. He thought of his next hunt.

The Beginning.

Epilogue

Mr. Lorne finished *The Legend of Sebastian Chiffon* and fell silent. He looked at the ground and then at me. He remained vigilante. He watched and waited for his most able warrior to do battle in a new beginning.

I was speechless. I did not know what to say. I wondered how I should respond, if at all. Mr. Lorne's story was more than I had ever expected. He articulated it so well, I did not doubt the moral of the story and the significance of Sebastian's death and life. I did not doubt that Sebastian began to live his life only after he accepted the bounty and wonder of death. With his acceptance of death, his life became and was meaningful. He had his life. He possessed his life.

Unbeknownst to me, my cheeks were wet. I wiped my eyes. How could a soul not be affected by so compelling a story? I asked myself this question as if to excuse my tears and justify my expression of a profound sorrow and joy, a sadness for humanity, a gladness for Sebastian.

I felt odd. What was happening to me? I observed myself. For some strange reason, I sat in a state of uncertainty. Yet, I was sure of what I did and did not believe. I was even more sure than before Mr. Lorne began his yarn. Then a realization dawned. I sensed that a certain state of uncertainty was nothing more than a reluctance to discard a way of thinking and being that got me to where I was at this point in my life. Did I experience this uncertainty simply because I didn't want to release my hold of a twenty-four-year way of being?

A new way—a beginning—would hold me in good stead. But I had to reject what was no longer worthwhile. I could not remain as before. Ironically, I had to be proactive and I had to be so in a state of finality—which itself was an unequivocal beginning. There was only one state of finality which would allow for this. Death. Death was renewal. I had to be in and with death.

I felt queasy about the idea, no different than giving away a toy or a boy's first pocketknife, but wanting to keep them nonetheless. Was I ready? Did I want to grow wiser and stronger and dispense with childish notions? I felt as if I stood upon a treacherous ledge and needed to jump from a trailing danger. The danger was not imminent, but it was close. The trailing danger might not harm me to a great extent, but, more importantly, failing to jump would deny what could be. This radical thought was worse than the concept of death as I once understood it. How could I live life without a true purpose into a wild

unknown? How could I cheapen life and death by not accomplishing what should be?

Struggle and suffering brought Sebastian to a calling and death claimed rightful pre-eminence. I was glad for Sebastian in this one respect. Of course, he made amends for past regrets, but I saw the greater glory. Perhaps this was the rub. Sebastian did not experience a typical death. He lived. He had truly lived his final eight hours and this made his death and life notable and noble. He saved a life! He saved a child! He acted to his own peril! By doing so, he rid himself of every deceit he had ever believed. What liberation!

Shouldn't Sebastian's extraordinary death and life become the ordinary for all of humanity? That is, should man not aspire to live in a similar manner, to live life in such a way that one might be killed. I imagined people living as mavericks in life and death and how the world would be changed. I saw what would be unrecognizable by present standards.

I wanted this knowing and being. I wanted the glory of an extraordinary life and death, but I did not know if I was willing to shed coveted lies. I did not know if I was willing to shed lies which had formed me and would continue to influence who I would become, what I would have, and what should be. I knew these were selfish motives, greedy ones. This was the struggle, after all. Would I give away a toy that rightly belonged to a child, a toy I wanted to keep? I forced myself to answer this question. The toy is but an attachment. Would I ensure my own safety or would I leap from a ledge simply because I was destined to act courageously? I must admit, the state of my uncertainty loomed larger than I preferred.

I was sickened by the thought that I would remain in the contemptuous middle, that infamous and inglorious impasse, the place between impossibility and possibility. If I had to arrive at an apt comparison, I would explain it this way. Temptation was to the left of me, which meant every conceivable pleasure and pain could be had or avoided, while compelled acceptance was to my right, which meant I would choose a path I could not reject regardless of the repercussions, like the choice to save a child. This choice posed a problem and I knew why. Compelled acceptance was the path of truth. If one knew and possessed truth, he would travel no other path. However, a choice to travel that truth-driven path is the most difficult.

If my analogy was appropriate, what I had long believed, at least for the sake of comparison, now represented impossibility, while the unknown, represented possibility. "How clever," I whispered. What was known was pervasive and ordinary and obviously the choice

most preserve while believing they lived lives of possibility—that mule ride at Beltane’s Day Festival. On the other hand, the unknown, which is unwanted because it is unknown—was inviting only to an intrepid few, those who would never mount a ride they would not dismount, if only because life and death hanged in the balance and they wanted to truly live and truly die.

I looked at Mr. Lorne. He waited still. He knew what he was doing. He was wise for sure.

I thought of that trailing danger again. What was the danger? Was it living life as if I knew how to live life, which meant I was deceived? Was the trailing danger the approach of that ominous and unwanted death without knowing the true nature of death? I recalled what I had told Mr. Lorne before he shared the legend of Sebastian Chiffon. I had declared my willingness to die. Mr. Lorne was excited by my declaration, so much so, he offered his first recitation of this story.

I thought of Mr. Lorne’s riddle. Not all endings are beginnings and not all beginnings are endings; however, every ending ends and all beginnings are begotten. I was certain this was a false statement. Now I knew that living life required the acceptance of death as the highest aim. This was a true statement, a new beginning.

I had learned more from the Family of Lorne storehouse of wisdom than I possessed on my own after twenty some years on this earth. Perhaps Mr. Lorne was correct. No one knows how to teach a man how to live life. And here was the irony, no one lives life until he accepts death for what it is and not as a false perception, a deception, a grand lie. Thus, only those who embrace death in its rightful context have possession of their lives. They, alone, live and die nobly. They are the ones who are able to teach others how to live. Mr. Lorne was one of the intrepid few. He taught lost souls how to live life. He taught me.

I nodded my head in a knowing kind of way. I chuckled. I looked up eagerly. I knew what I wanted to share about Sebby. I knew what I wanted to ask Mr. Lorne. Yet, to my surprise and regret, the wall was empty. I turned. The field and hills were as empty as the wall. I shot into the air and raced here and there. I shouted for Mr. Lorne. He was gone. I was alone. I shook my head in disbelief. However, disbelief soon turned into an encouraging realization. I had a new beginning. This must have been Mr. Lorne’s intention.

As I collected my belongings and headed north, a cackle cracked the expanse.

I smiled.

