

Chaotic Reflections

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*To the City of Boston,
Your trenches inspired truth.
And to Jason,
I have arisen from the ashes.*

Chaotic: Complete confusion or disorder
Reflection: Giving thoughts or images careful consideration

“I watched the world end in a brilliant flash of light. My ears were deafened by the chilling screams of despair. The earth’s children wept tears of blood as flesh-scorching waves of sulfur washed their lifeless bodies away. I have pitied those limbless soldiers as they returned from war—painfully attempting to hobble home. I have held them in my arms as they discovered their homes were nothing more than smoldering shacks of flame.

“And as their fatigued faces fall further, their ailing bodies collapse and sink into the ground, they weep tears with such abandon that Despair itself is ashamed. I pray to Death to grant them mercy and silence their hearts with a kiss, but Death, ruthless joker, knows no mercy on this day.

“And as I sink further into the ending of the world, I realize, that even in the end there is talk of mercy. The saints that we turn to for guidance promise God’s mercy, and those saints seek peace in the chapels of the Lord. Yet, these are the saints carrying weapons wherever they must go. The earth? Our precious, life-bearing, earth is the greatest casualty of all. Her air is poison, rancid swill; her children are gone, most of them killed, and the earth sends forth human blood.

“I found the final sign that the end was here to be the most shocking of them all. Here among the living the very dead do crawl. They walk amongst us without shame. Barely Human. Barely Sane.

“Though the world would end in a brilliant flash of light, it would foreshadow and begin humanity’s bleakest night. I alone am haunted by unchanging pained expressions; I alone am surrounded by constant screams of anguished depression. Sorrow falls around me as if it were a drenching rain. The sky reflects my heart—still and utterly black. The truth reflects only hopelessness—you humans can never turn back.

“I have seen buildings topple as if they were crumbling nations. The barren fields remind me of stripped morality. And as the chilling wind blows all around me, I can feel The Rapture, nipping at my heels.

“Yet, this is not the end. We are not that lucky.

“Looking back I can hear the promise mankind has made. They promised the end would be a splendid sight to see, so I held my breath in climatic wonder for the crumbling of humanity, but now I know the truth.

“The end of the world. How many decades have we taunted the heavens with that phrase? How many horrendous

ways have we envisioned going to our graves? I waited for them all...yet, no aliens came to annihilate our planet. No communist faction pushed a button to cause a nuclear reaction, and if the Second Coming means a holy war, I must confess I never saw God, or the devil.

“I only saw the chaos that is here every day. How can I make you understand the end? How much detail must I use to paint a filthy picture? How dark? How painful? How senseless and bleak must I present the end of existence?”

“I have vowed not to recreate the end simply to make you understand I will not focus on the flames and the terror I have seen. Instead, I will tell you the story of a man and as I serenade you with the events of one life, I will release the details I have witnessed.

“In that way I will bring the end to you.”

One

“War—a simple, almost, limited word that doesn’t quite do battle justice. War is not a political game that keeps nations in power. War is when hell escapes from the ground below. War is when the devil’s minions rise and bestow upon the earth the suppressed wrath of the beast. These demons dress in camouflage and rip apart mortal souls. They destroy a human life without a shred of remorse or compassion. And I have witnessed it all.

“World War III. Armageddon. Put any face on it that you need. Label it. Color it. Give it a title—War will still bring you to your knees. Don’t act surprised that in the end War lingers on. You creatures, under heaven, have waged War since the beginning of time. You wage War for many reasons,

all of them divine. War is fought for love of country; War was created by man; I am even bold enough to say, that War, was God's greatest plan. For only in War can man find the means to justify all the evil lurking within his heart. Only in war can a nation justify horrendous crimes. Rape is revered, destruction desired, and murder made miraculous.

"And when the end arrives (and arrive, I tell you, it will) men will be hired as soldiers, soldiers paid to kill. Kill without remorse. Kill without regret. Kill for your nation, son, for a nation knows what's best.

"In every boot camp and within every military lie, the demons of hell await. They enter a man's soul and they corrupt his spirit. They turn a docile soul into a ruthless killer. And that is how a soldier forgets he is a man and that is how a man deviates from God's plan. God's plan was a man and that man had a name.

"Jimmy is a soldier. Jimmy loves to kill. Jimmy used to be a man. Jimmy used to feel. Now, he is a killer. He shoots whatever stands. Jimmy loves his gun because that gun makes him a man.

"He loves the sound of bullets cutting through the air. He loves the way a rotting corpse begins to smell. Jimmy loves the way his gun warms up in his hands. Jimmy likes to squeeze the trigger; he is war's greatest fan. Jimmy is a nightmare—a machine paid to kill. Jimmy is my nightmare—he does not want you to live.

"Jimmy walks through the jungle, a playground for children's games. Jimmy sprays the air with his rifle and the bodies drop like rain. Bodies lie without their limbs, both scattered, upon the ground.

“Jimmy sees a man before him and that man has Jimmy’s face. Jimmy aims the gun carefully—with a poetic grace.

“‘Brother,’ the man cries out hoping to be saved.

“‘Brother indeed,’ replies Jimmy as he digs a grave.

“Bullets shatter and pierce the air; those bullets are searching for blood.

“And now comes chemical warfare. Every side has a story, this being no exception. Another group of warriors have a need for blood as well. These soldiers evoke death and swiftly promise hell. They wear gas masks and carry the canisters of death. The creeping liquid, hidden within these containers, subtly finds a home and the toxic nerve gas settles down...

...very,

.....very,

.....very, slowly.

“Jimmy’s battalion chokes before it falls; Jimmy’s battalion spits and hacks as it chokes on lung; Jimmy’s battalion will not give up—it struggles, stumbles and falls. Soldiers do not give up—they refuse to fail. Jimmy struggles to see through the dark and cloudy smoke. His vision is distorted and he is blinded by the poison as it liquefies his iris. As the puss-like juice runs down Jimmy’s cheek he attempts to curse war—his pleas are short-lived as he gags on the salty fluid seeping into his mouth.

“The demons feel a burst of humanity, leaving Jimmy in the jungle wounded and on his knees. Jimmy frantically scrambles to touch the rosary he has placed beside his clip. Jimmy prays to God to save his soul as his eye proceeds to drip.

“And Jimmy falls to the ground and remembers that he is just a man. Now, I could go to Jimmy’s side and I could help him stand. But I won’t. For I know someone else will come along and take his place. Another man will come along and attempt to destroy the human race. I will continue the story and I hope that you will not choose Jimmy’s path.

“Jimmy has fallen to the ground and he fears it is the end. Perhaps, if I take you inside his mind, we can see how this began.”

MONDAY: STARS AND STRIPES

Jimmy Washington stood behind the solid, oak podium and slowly looked around the lecture hall. As he scanned the sea of college faces he softly cleared his throat, quickly skimmed his note cards and unified them in a neat stack by tapping them against the podium's newly shellacked surface.

The seemingly lightweight index cards created a loud bang as they made contact with the hollow wood and Jimmy laughed nervously along with his startled classmates. While reaching up to straighten his tie, Jimmy looked at his professor standing at the back of the classroom the man nodded his head in encouragement, waiting for Jimmy to start.

Jimmy closed his eyes for the briefest of seconds, focusing on how relaxed and ready he felt to make this presentation; public speaking was in his blood. He enjoyed talking and interacting with a large crowd, and he adored being the center of attention. Jimmy opened his eyes and smiled warmly at his audience.

“What makes a criminal, a criminal?” he finally spoke, directing his question to his classmates. He patiently awaited an answer, finally a voice spoke up from the back of the room.

“A criminal is any individual who violates the law.”

Jimmy nodded in approval before responding, “Exactly, now what makes an individual break the law?”

Jimmy waited for an answer, but receiving none he continued, “Statistics and history give us three specific reasons individuals break the law: environment, intelligence, and social dissatisfaction. Let us study these.”

Jimmy walked across the tile floor to the chalkboard; after picking up a piece of chalk, he wrote “ENVIRONMENT” in capital letters.

“Okay, now how does one’s environment affect criminal behavior?”

One student spoke up, “Well, if you are in a neighborhood where a lot of crime happens chances are you will be more likely to commit crime.”

“Yes, I agree,” Jimmy replied elated the conversation was going in the right direction. “Statistic’s show most criminals come from environments high in crime, therefore the cities with the highest rates of crime are producing larger and larger generations of criminals.”

Jimmy took the time to pause his lecture momentarily. Maintaining eye contact with his audience, he slowly and deliberately poured himself a glass of water, after years of watching his mother in the courtroom, he knew that the simple acting of pausing for a drink of water during a speech made the speaker seem more confident, more believable. During this long pause Jimmy was careful not lose eye contact

with the audience and continued to survey the room for signs of approval.

The sounds of rustling coming from the back of the classroom did not affect Jimmy's decision to continue with his lecture.

"Now, how does intelligence factor into crime? Any theories?"

Another student spoke, "I would speculate that individuals with higher levels of education, such as a college graduate for example, would be less likely to commit crime."

"Yes, yes very good," Jimmy began in his charismatic tone. "In fact statistics show that..."

"Excuse me?"

Jimmy quickly searched the audience to see who was speaking and standing before him was an attractive mocha-skinned woman with sparkling eyes and wavy dark hair.

Jimmy momentarily paused to study her body language and the defiant scowl darkening her beautiful face. He smiled slightly, making no effort to hide his amusement, it was a pleasant surprise that a classmate, female no less, was choosing to challenge him. Most of Jimmy's classmates had learned, one painful way or another, that Jimmy's argument style was almost flawless. Publicly, Jimmy Washington had never lost an argument—no one had yet to prove him wrong about anything. He was ruthless in his argumentation style and meticulous in his research resulting in flawless, lawyer-like perfection. The silence overtaking the room was overwhelming as Jimmy prepared himself to educate his new opponent.

"Yes," Jimmy replied smiling his voice hinting at sarcasm. "Did I miss something?"

“Yes, I think you did. I think all of you did,” the woman replied looking around the room in obvious disgust. “Criminals,” she continued, “are not a cut and dried entity that can be separated from society. A criminal is not an anomaly that can be labeled, evaluated, or classified as if he were a thoroughbred horse.”

Jimmy looked at the woman thoughtfully, as if he were giving her challenge ample consideration, before retorting. “Unfortunately, you are wrong. In fact most criminal analysts would disagree with you. A criminal, such as a murderer, is a separate faction of society, and they exist in a world very different from our own. These ruthless individuals do what they do for pleasure, and the only hope our society has to prevent crime is to look at the criminal, dissect him, and discover why he does what he does.”

Now, would be the time where you sit down, and wish you could disappear, Jimmy thought to himself. Instead the woman’s face softened, and she looked at him for a long time. *Perhaps, she is in shock.* Jimmy thought. *I hope she doesn’t start crying, that would be pathetic.* Jimmy’s self-engaging banter was interrupted when the woman began to speak to him softly, and in a voice etched with so much pain and emotion no one dared to interrupt.

“I pity you, Jimmy, a man with your intelligence is forced to rely on the statistics of society to determine reality. The time you spend memorizing and reciting the lies and labels of a flawed system is another moment wasted. Walk away from the convenient answers someone else provides. Pursue truth.”

The woman stopped to take a breath and Jimmy felt as if he would collapse. It was unexplainable, his head was reeling

and his mind was racing. For the first time in his life his unusually sharp mind and witty tongue were both at a loss for words. He wiped his sweaty palms on his jacket and he could not grasp why or how this woman unnerved him so. He wanted to pull her away from this place and speak with her, understand her, and he longed to talk to her, to ask her something—anything, just so that voice would not stop speaking. He wanted—he wanted—he wasn't sure what he wanted. Clarity? Yes, clarity.

“What do you mean,” he managed to ask.

The room gasped aloud as he offered this passive comeback, but at the moment Jimmy was unconcerned with being the victor of this debate. The woman looked at Jimmy and his gaze was transfixed upon her face. The words she spoke cut through him, demanding truth.

“Do you want to know what a murderer is, Jimmy?”

Jimmy nodded mutely, willing to accept whatever this woman was about to say.

“Yes,” he pleaded, his voice resembling a helpless child.

“I've heard the Lord giveth and I have seen him take away, but in the end, the very end, man destroys the days. Jimmy, all the darkness you fear—those criminals you seek—are no more twisted than your own heart.”

Jimmy shook his head ‘no,’ not wanting to listen, but she would not stop.

“You don't honestly believe that the killer lurking within your heart will not emerge because you live in a crime-free neighborhood, go to college, and believe the lies of society, do you? Jimmy, all things dismissed and everyone on equal

ground, I think you would pull the trigger before any one of us.”

“Never,” Jimmy spoke the word without sounding convinced.

“All men’s hearts are the same and any one of you would kill,” the woman said addressing her classmates. “And I don’t need to be a criminal analyst to know that. I only need to know you, Jimmy.”

“You have no evidence to support that,” Jimmy interjected finally able to present an argument now that her gaze had left him.

She turned back and stared at him in the same relentless fashion, and Jimmy swallowed hard, attempting to clear his head.

“Would you like me to prove it to you?” she asked her voice etched with sincerity.

“Sure, if you think you are up to it,” he replied jokingly, almost flirtatiously. For a moment he wondered if those were tears shining in her dark beautiful eyes.

“All right, Jimmy. If that is what you want.”

She stopped speaking and the tone of finality in her voice caused Jimmy’s heart to clench in his chest. His breath was coming in ragged intervals and sweat began to bead on the back on his neck. His mind was racing and it seemed that for the first time terror was creeping into every cell of his body. He took a moment to reflect and realize that it was not the public embarrassment of defeat that he was feared, it was her cunning words. Her words found their way past his reason and his intellect, and it caused him to doubt himself,

to question himself. Doubt. Yes, it was this emotion that had forced him to leave his confidence atop the index cards.

By the time Jimmy thought of another response the woman was walking out of the classroom. As she left, the lecture hall occupants murmured their outrage, quietly. The professor walked down the sloping aisle and Jimmy stared at the door the woman had disappeared through.

The class began to filter out and Jimmy, obviously shaken, scrambled up the aisle after her. He ignored the teacher calling his name and once he was out of the lecture hall he did not stop. He headed straight for the double doors and raced outside. The moment he felt the sunlight, he wiped at the sweat dripping from his forehead, loosened his tie, and stepped out further into the parking lot. He could not get the words of that woman out of his head.

“Walk away from the convenient answers someone else provides.”

The moment she had said that it was as if a light went off in Jimmy’s head and he realized he had been living his life for someone else, trying to fit into this idealistic mold. Jimmy did not strive for perfection out of sheer boredom. He didn’t have a choice. He had to be a success and he had to become everything his parents wanted, after all, they had led such accomplished lives. If Jimmy failed, his parents would view that as their failure and that was unacceptable. The Washingtons did not fail and Jimmy was a Washington, so he knew he must surpass success.

Jimmy wanted nothing more than to make his parents proud. He wanted to be their greatest accomplishment and though his parents no longer reminded him on a daily basis, he

knew exactly what was expected of him. Their expectations weighed heavily on his heart, navigating and dictating his every move. His mother, Rebecca, graduated at the top of her Harvard class—she was the most respected lawyer in Orange County. She hadn't needed to pull any strings to get Jimmy into Pepperdine because the admissions director was their next-door neighbor. All the same, Jimmy had poured himself into undergraduate studies relentlessly. His 4.0 G.P.A. had ensured his acceptance into Harvard Law School, and he was leaving for Cambridge, Massachusetts next fall.

Despite the nagging feeling in his stomach, Jimmy kept assuring himself that law school was what he wanted. Yes, he was glad to be going to law school—well maybe glad wasn't exactly the word, but it did beat the alternative. Jimmy's father was a military officer, and like Mrs. Washington, he wanted his son to follow in his career footsteps.

Jimmy would have loved nothing more than to have a couple of pot-smoking hippie parents with funky clothes and open minds but he didn't. Instead, he had parents who were focused on success and accomplishment, and considering his parents, he would have rather been a blood-sucking lawyer than a brainless military clone. Jimmy hated the fact that his father had been an emotionless, rifle-toting, grenade-launching, military robot. Sergeant Washington, the name Jimmy had called him by since the age of three, wanted his son's first words to be "About Face!" At least in his dad's older age he had traded in his combat boots for a suit, tie, and briefcase. Jimmy often joked that his dad could reinstate the draft if his company ever became desperate for employees.

Sergeant Washington wanted his son to be a great military leader due to his lingering respect for the concept of patriotism, and he reminded Jimmy every day of “all the great men and women who had served before him. Those people gave up their lives and sacrificed everything for freedom.” He also reminded Jimmy that, “the greatest honor a man could know was to give up his life for his country.”

This was the world as Jimmy knew it—predictable, boring, and safe. Jimmy had lived his life in good conscience, until a few minutes ago, comfortable that he was a capable twenty-two year old senior at Pepperdine University. He had the clothes, the looks, the connections, the money, and the promising future. Jimmy scanned the parking lot, confident that he had reassessed who he was and how he had lived his life. He had made good choices, yes, he was positive of that. And if that woman were here, he would tell her just that. That woman. Who was she? How did she know him so well? He had so many questions that perhaps only she could answer. Jimmy had searched his entire life for an equal: someone brilliant, full of compassion, someone like her—and she didn’t even agree with him and he liked that. He liked her. He began to walk across the parking lot, toward the lush green grass growing in the Malibu sunlight overlooking the Pacific Ocean when he thought he saw her walking towards him. No, no that was just some thin pale girl. Not the gorgeous mysterious creature that was captivating his mind.

The pale girl continued walking towards Jimmy and he brushed past her, eager to continue his search. The woman had to be here somewhere, Jimmy’s thoughts were interrupted as he felt something tugging at his arm, and at first his

preoccupation would not allow him to respond. Finally, impatiently, he looked down at the girl.

“What!” he demanded. Suddenly he recognized a very familiar face, it was Amy, his girlfriend. “Hi, Amy,” Jimmy responded as he quickly scanned the parking lot one last time.

“James, we need to talk.”

Hearing Amy’s voice made Jimmy remember how much he loved her—she was this sweet, thoughtful girl, not to mention a dark-eyed looker. Jimmy had plans to marry Amy as soon as he was out of law school.

“James?” Amy never called him James. She said the name was far too serious for his dancing eyes.

“What’s wrong, Amy.”

“I’m pregnant.”

Jimmy’s stomach hit the ground as the color drained from his face and his mind began to whirl. He felt as if his heart had been pile-driven into the hot cement and any previous thoughts instantly faded from his memory.

“Say something, Jimmy.”

Jimmy saw the tears well in Amy’s eyes. Suddenly, he heard the voice of his father.

“Jim, one day you are going to have be a man. You can’t depend on your mother and I, forever.”

Could his world really change this quickly—without warning? Jimmy did the only thing he knew how to do.

“I love you, Amy.”

Jimmy held Amy in a loving embrace and he smiled. *I can handle this but what will my parents say? Does it matter? I am going to be a father, I am not a kid anymore—I am finally*

a man. I am. I can do this for Amy, for our child, for myself—to hell with what they think. I am going to start living my life for me! Not for them. I am going to be a father! And I'm going to be a great one. A child. I've created life, that's no small feat. That's what I'm going to tell them.

He would smile brightly as if he had been elected to the Supreme Court. If he was happy enough, confident enough, then perhaps they would be happy for him—despite his young age. Jimmy knew his mother was worried she had pushed him too hard and that he would break under the strain of Harvard Law. Now, she would realize his ability to overcome any challenge and to provide for his family. Jimmy hoped his parent's reactions would mirror his fantasies but he highly doubted that.

“It's going to be all right, Amy. I am going to take care of you. Everything is going to be okay.”

Amy looked up at Jimmy, the fresh tears making her eyes an electric green.

“Really,” she asked hopefully.

Jimmy pulled her closer and tightened his embrace. *Oh, Amy you will always need me won't you?*

“Really,” Jimmy replied and he almost convinced himself. “Nothing in this world means more to me than you. We are going to raise this baby, together. And our child will have everything he or she could ever want.”

As the sun warmed his shoulders and the sweet smell of Amy's hair tickled his nostrils—a hesitant smile began to spread across his face. An unrecognizable feeling began to creep through his whole being as he realized all the possibilities whirling through his head. An idea suddenly sprang to

Jimmy's mind and it seemed so important—so necessary, that Jimmy did not hesitate.

“Amy, let's get married,” Jimmy blurted out.

“Now?” Amy asked, a puzzled look on her face. “I thought we were going to wait until you were out of law school.”

Jimmy smiled and patted Amy's stomach, “I don't think Junior is going to wait for my Jurist Doctorate, do you?”

Amy laughed softly, “I guess not.”

“Come on,” Jimmy cried excitedly.

Without another moment's thought, Jimmy grabbed Amy's hand and together they drove to Las Vegas stopping only for coffee and gas. As the lone highway seemed to stretch on forever Jimmy realized he hadn't even thought to bring a change of clothes and he hoped his khakis and tie were presentable enough, but Amy with her faded jeans and loose t-shirt seemed overly plain—and that was putting it kindly.

He had envisioned their wedding day somewhat different with her wearing a long white gown complete with veil and train. He took another moment and looked at Amy, the woman who would soon be his wife, and he wondered if she longed for a beautiful flowing gown. As he gently took her hand, in an apologetic gesture, he almost expected her to pull away instead she looked at him and smiled. Carefully leaning over, he kissed her softly, and they continued down the deserted highway.

The ceremony, if it could be called that, was a short, rushed, clichéd event that was supposed to symbolize a lifelong bond. Jimmy found his mind drifting to all the promises he had made to Amy on the long trip to Vegas—he had promised to be a

good father and husband. Now, he promised himself that he would do those things without his parents' help and he vowed to protect Amy and the child at all costs.

The trip back to Malibu was quiet and overshadowed by the doubt and worry that were consuming Jimmy. A large billboard in the distance caught his eyes.

Do the right thing for your family—your country. Join the Marines!

*

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Sergeant Washington had been enjoying his day off, lounging in his favorite recliner, he was reading the Wall Street Journal.

“Dad, can I talk to you?” Sergeant Washington looked up at the word ‘dad’. Jimmy hadn’t called him dad...ever. Jimmy was stubborn, just like his mother, and insisted on calling him Sergeant, even after he had surpassed that ranking seventeen years ago.

“What is it, son?” Washington stretched that last word out with immeasurable sarcasm.

“Dad, I—I want to join the Corps.”

Washington almost laughed aloud, “Surely my little gavel-pounding lawyer doesn’t want to be a...what was it again, Jim?”

Jimmy realized that getting his father to accept the new him, responsible and mature, was going to be harder than anticipated.

“Sir, I believe it was a mindless, emotionless, rifle-toting, grenade-launching, military robot.”

“Oh, yes,” Washington replied in a bored voice barely looking up from his paper. “As opposed to a knife-wielding, back-stabbing, ass-kissing bureaucrat.”

“Dad! There is nothing wrong with being a lawyer!”

“Exactly! So what is all this nonsense about a military career?”

“Amy’s pregnant.”

“I see...” Washington replied in an emotionless tone.

“Dad, I’m trying to be a man.”

“It’s not going to be easy...”

“I know the Corps is tough but,”

“Not the Corps, Jimmy. The Corps is easy compared to being a man.”

Jimmy listened closely, for the first time in his life, as his dad began to tell him about the military and what he called every man’s responsibility to the nation.

“Jimmy, as a man it is your responsibility to protect this nation. By doing so, you are protecting your family and everything that matters. Jimmy, we are men. Men love and men die. But the great ones, they love the Stars and Stripes, and the greatest ones, die for them.”

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“You did what!” Amy shouted at Jimmy before he could finish telling her his “wonderful” news.

“I joined the Marines. Now, before you get upset you have to understand...” Jimmy said softly as he stepped closer to Amy.

“Understand? Understand what? That you’re running away, that you are leaving me and the baby—for what?” Amy demanded as she took a step back.

There has to be a way to make her understand. Jimmy frantically searched his mind for the right words. *Why doesn’t she understand how important this is to me?*

“Amy, its only for a little while. Three years active and after that we can...”

“We can what? Jimmy, three years? Law school is three years and at least I can go to Boston with you—me and the baby.”

“I can’t afford law school.”

“Excuse me?” Amy could hardly believe her ears. “Your parents are paying for law school. Don’t tell me that in your moment of delusion you forgot that.”

“Amy! Have you forgotten how much I hate begging them for their money! I am so tired of needing them.”

“Since when?” she demanded.

“Since now, for Christ’s sake, Amy. I’m a man, damn it!”

“Then act like one,” she continued. “Be my husband, here. Not on some stupid crusade for masculinity.”

“Amy,” Jimmy replied patiently. “I love you. I’m doing this for you—for you and the baby.”

“So what I want doesn’t matter,” Amy asked in a defeated voice.

“You? You are all that matters,” Jimmy moved closer to Amy and gathered her in his arms and gently kissed her. Amy nodded and quietly brushed away her tears.

* * *

As Jimmy stood on the warm, sun-bleached sand and stared into the blue tranquil waters of Cancun, he could think of only one thing: his beautiful bride. He turned and watched Amy as she gazed at the approaching surf. The tiny waves lapped at her feet as she absently rubbed her soon-to-be-swollen tummy.

Jimmy smiled and slowly inhaled the sea air. He began to daydream about their child. What would it look like? What would it be? Jimmy felt strongly that it would be a boy. And he could almost see the child playing in the sand and running into the surf.

Their honeymoon to Cancun had been Jimmy’s way of making up for the fact that he would at boot camp for the next twelve weeks. He wanted to pick the most romantic vacation spot possible, one that would leave Amy with wonderful memories while he was away. He wanted to remind Amy how strong their love was. He hated leaving her especially while she was pregnant, but he knew he must.

With each passing day, Jimmy felt his love for Amy grow; he loved her for not making him feel guilty. In fact, Amy hadn’t even mentioned Jimmy leaving for the Marines, and it was this simple fact that made him realize she was the only woman in the world for him. He loved her for carrying his child, for being so strong and for her enduring love.

Yes, our child will be amazing. Jimmy was having a vision of his son many years from now standing at a podium speaking to a large crowd. The boy was speaking of peace and glory and the crowd listened diligently. Jimmy knew their child would inherit strength, joy, and love from his parents and that alone made Jimmy smile.

“Jimmy,” Amy called from the sand.

“Yes, beautiful.”

“What if you have to go to war?”

“Baby, don’t be silly,” Jimmy replied.

After all, he thought to himself. We are in an age of technological advancement. This is an era of peace. We are a civilized people. And civilized people do not engage in war. Somewhere in the back of Jimmy’s mind he could hear a voice calling to him.

“*Would you like me to prove it to you?*”

“I’ll be home soon, princess. I promise you that,” Jimmy kissed his wife on the forehead and walked away before her tears started to fall.

“Take care of yourself. I’ll be home before the baby is born,” Jimmy whispered.

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Jimmy attempted to stretch out on the thin, narrow, mattress that was placed atop a wobbly bed frame. The day had been long and sticky hot, but the night air was cool. Strange sounds seemed to penetrate the thin barrack’s walls and the sound of some strange slithering southern swamp creature

bombarded Jimmy's ears, forcing him to stay awake. Jimmy lay in his bunk trying to find the perfect words to describe boot camp. Hell. Yes, hell, if he was not running until his lungs were ablaze, then he was scrambling up some company rope or ladder. All he wanted was to go home—to just close his eyes, drift home and be holding Amy in his arms.

Jimmy felt, with every fiber in this being, that the loneliness plaguing him would either kill him or drive him insane. Jimmy thanked God his father was not here. If he were, Jimmy might actually spit in the man's face. How dare his father place “military” and “glory” in the same sentence? This was not glory; this was chaos and turmoil.

Jimmy would give anything for a moment of peace. His body ached and his muscles were fatigued, but none of that compared to how close his mind was to overload. Overload, as if the gray-matter telling Jimmy's body how to function was ready to give up. It would ooze out of his head through his ears and onto the coarse wool blanket.

Jimmy began to sob and shake uncontrollably. Finally, with rising of the sun, he found sleep.

* * *

The drill sergeant stared at the platoon of trainees in front of him, his eyes seeming to burn holes through Jimmy.

“Some of you,” the sergeant began, “have made these barracks your home and adopted the Marine way of life as your own. Most of you, however, have been waiting for these long twelve weeks of hell—to end.”

Jimmy's eyes shifted to the ground in shame it was true with every day that passed Jimmy told himself this hell would soon be over. That was the only thing keeping his sanity from escaping.

The drill sergeant continued to speak, "The news I have will comfort some of you and cause the remainder of you to ask yourselves what your time here has meant. A conflict has arisen overseas, and though no formal declaration of war has been made, Marines are being deployed."

Jimmy slowly blinked and gasped for air. *This is not happening. This cannot be happening.*

"For those of you who feel the joy of being a Marine, the next few weeks will be anxious ones and for the rest of you, learn what loyalty is, learn what love is," the drill sergeant barked, while glaring directly at Jimmy. "You and your life no longer matter. You are now a part of something larger than you can imagine and if you are lucky enough to die in combat—find comfort in the knowledge that the Marines, your family, your brothers will live on."

Jimmy believed it was at that moment his sanity drifted away. Compassion drained from his heart like water poured from a glass. He forgot about his family, he forgot any hopes or dreams he had clung to in the past. Completely empty and utterly hollow, Jimmy lost the ability to fear death because he no longer possessed the emotion to care.

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Jimmy walked through the jungle completely stripped of his humanity. He felt destined to die and he squeezed the trigger

frantically, over and over again. His movements were twitchy as if he were a wounded animal yet, he could not stop and he shot at everything that wore the enemy's color. He had become a walking nightmare, a killer void of emotion—the perfect killing machine.

When the land mind exploded, it knocked Jimmy back a few feet and the shrapnel that pierced his skin caused an emotion to register immediately. Jimmy howled in pain as he came reeling to his senses, he panicked, looked around, and attempted to stand but his injured leg would not allow it.

Jimmy looked down to inspect the wound he could not believe that the oozing mass of ground-pink flesh belonged to him. He could hear the other soldiers in his platoon moaning, but his commander's voice rose above the cries.

"Men, it looks bad," he stated, his voice breaking. "If we don't make it out of here, if you don't make it home today...remember you died for this country and there is no shame in that."

No shame? Jimmy thought as he began to weep surrounded by injured bodies. In his head he could hear the broken promises he had made to Amy—he had promised her that he would come home. He had promised to always love her and protect her. The baby? Oh, the baby, he would never get to love, or teach, or hold it. Jimmy cried out to God.

"Please, No!"

And he shut his eyes against the explosion of white light.

"And that is what war is, if you strip away the lies of glory and the sickening hope of power, and I know this is what men have become. War is death's shadow and death has

finally won. When a man fights a war, how can that man ever win?

“I saw your world end in a brilliant flash of light. I tell you what ushered death was the soldier’s fight. And in between the whizzing bullets and the thumps of bodies falling, I swear that in the darkness, I could hear the devil laughing and applauding. As the earth becomes a grave, war will begin. And it begins the end. Feeling fatigued and shell-shocked, I know much more remains to be told.

“This is where the story truly begins to unfold. This war will lead to more tragedy. This war will continue to kill. Remember, Jimmy’s family? Remember Jimmy’s bride?

Two

“A marriage is a frail, cheap glass. One can fill it to the brim with promises and vows, yet marriage still can end. Amy is alone now; Jimmy is gone. Amy’s gonna be a mommy; mommies must be strong. A wife is not a wife once her husband’s gone. Yet, mommy must find the will to survive and go on. Amy has a life to live and many plans to make.

“What are the decisions a mother contemplates?

“Amy: she is a woman of sweetness, a woman made of spice. The lies of a nursery rhyme tell of women only nice. Men are the monsters who love to kill; men alone kill for pleasure; men love the thrill. Men can be quite dense. Men can be quite blind. Men “protect” their women. What a precious crime. “Women can’t fight in wars. The female can never kill.”

“I tell you women destroy soldiers before soldiers can live. Politically correct? That concerns us all, but politically correct nations are the ones I have seen fall. Yes, it is a damsel’s right to do whatever she will choose. And believe me, it is humanity’s right, to watch its species lose.”

TUESDAY: AND THE CHILDREN WEPT

Amy sits alone in the cramped dark room boxes of infant clothing and unassembled toys linger nearby. Finding it hard to breathe, Amy remains silent, only her shuddered gasps elude to the pain being contained in her heart, she clenches a tearstained letter from the war department.

“Mrs. Washington, we regret to inform you...”

Regret? What does that mean? Amy thought to herself. What exactly does the military regret? Do they regret that Jimmy is dead, or that he deserted his family? Or is it that he didn't need to die? How could they regret? Jimmy died for his country and the military preaches that that is the greatest honor.

“But I don't want his damn honor! Jimmy, I just want you,” Amy screamed into the darkness.

The baby seems to know and has been restless for hours. As Amy feels the fetus wriggle and squirm in her womb, she forces herself to envision Jimmy dying. She sees him deep in the jungle, arms outstretched, face constricted, as he attempts to escape death. Amy knows Jimmy's death was painfully long and lonely. She absently rubs her tummy and

prays her baby doesn't know; if the child knows about its father death then it must know of its mother's heavy heart and painful decision.

The funeral is tomorrow and Jimmy's mother had offered to pick Amy up. Amy declined because the anger she feels towards Rebecca Washington stems from the loss of Jimmy. Amy cannot help but feel that if Rebecca had used her power and influence as an attorney perhaps she could have stopped Jimmy from leaving. *But she didn't even try.* Amy thought bitterly. Amy vowed to never forgive Rebecca for allowing Jimmy to leave her completely alone and abandoned.

"Damn you, Jimmy! Why did you have to go and leave me so alone? You promised. You promised!" Amy took off her wedding ring and threw it across the room. Closing her eyes she allows her emotions to sweep over her and she tries to remember Jimmy and the happier times.

* * *

"Amy, you are my angel."

"Jimmy, you say that to all the girls," Amy said rolling her eyes and laughing.

"Oh, I see," Jimmy said nonchalantly. "Well, do I say this to all the girls?" Jimmy stripped the blankets off, got out of bed, and knelt down on one knee. "Amy, I love you. I always want to be with you, will you marry me?"

Amy made no attempts to stifle her giggles. "You just proposed to me in the buff!"

Jimmy feigned a hurt expression, "Does that mean you don't love me?"

“I love you more than you could possibly know, Jimmy.”

That was the happiest day of Amy’s life. Never in her wildest dreams could she have envisioned Jimmy wanting to marry her. Yes, she had known him for six years but he was from another world; his family was wealthy and he seemed destined to go to Harvard. Jimmy could have been with any girl in Orange County, that was clear to Amy, yet, for some reason he wanted her. It was a hard fact for Amy to admit, but she knew Jimmy gave her his attention and affection out of pity, not love.

After all, Amy and Jimmy’s lives were so different, they were separated by money and their meeting seemed to have been one of fate. Amy had grown up outside of Los Angeles and her mother had been a single parent. Most of Amy’s life she remembered her mother working two jobs just to pay the lot fee and bills for their tiny trailer. Amy could not remember the exact time when her mother, desperate for an escape from reality, began to ignore her feelings by drowning them in alcohol.

But she did remember the nights when her mother entertained the most aggressively brutal men as playmates. Amy could almost envision the poisonous liquor seeking out these brutes, to ensure ruthless and damaging companionships. The men and the liquor played cruel, cruel games; the alcohol racked her mother’s internal organs while the men assaulted the exterior. Amy watched it all, quietly weeping from the shadows.

Every night she prayed for a life void of chaos, yet the drama continued, time and time again in her short grief-stricken life.

The time finally arrived when those sweaty heathen barbarians turned their jaded eyes toward Amy. In the wee hours of the night, long after her mother was rendered unconscious and helpless, those men searched out tender young victims and their desires fell upon Amy.

Night after night the violent game of stalking prey would resume, some nights Amy escaped unscathed, but most nights, her skin would reek of salted whiskey sweat, and her pillow would welcome her tears. She did not have the heart to tell her mother such things or perhaps she feared the woman simply would not care.

On Amy's sixteenth birthday she returned home from working a double shift at the local diner. She could hear the screaming from the street and she recognized her mother's voice, a fight was ensuing and Amy heard her name.

"What are you saying," her mother screamed.

"I'm saying your daughter is a sweeter piece of ass than you," Amy recognized the voice of her mother's boyfriend.

"I'll kill you!" the woman shrieked. Amy began to run as she heard the loud crash of glass and a ground-shaking thud. She turned the door handle after climbing the rickety trailer steps and lying where the glass coffee table had once stood was her mother. Her motionless body was covered in glass and the shards were cutting into her flesh.

The man turned to Amy looking as wild as a caged animal and Amy, filled with anger and fear, grabbed the first object within her reach. As the man crept toward her she tightened her grip on the scotch bottle. Amy remembered, with a smile on her face, breaking the seal of the bottle by bashing it against the man's head. Afterwards, she frantically raced

throughout the house, gathering her few belongings and stuffing them into a backpack. Her mother was regaining consciousness and Amy could not bear the thought of her mother's sober eyes staring at her with judgmental contempt and disappointment. No, Amy would never allow her mother (of all people) to look at her that way.

"Goodbye, Mommy," Amy whispered as she crept away from the trailer.

She walked through the night and into the late morning, stopping occasionally to ask passersby if they knew of families looking for a maid or nanny. She stumbled upon the Washington's house and her eyes saw a magnificent green lawn and a sign displaying,

"Pool House For Rent."

Amy gingerly stepped across the lawn and rang the bell next to the massive door that lead into the enormous house. A confident and undeniably beautiful woman appeared almost instantly. Rebecca Washington glanced at Amy quickly and instantly noticed the girl's day-old clothing, disheveled hair, and tear-stained face and invited her inside immediately. Amy cautiously stepped into the foyer and marveled at the vaulted ceilings of the entryway, she could not help but feel overwhelmed by this modern day palace. Rebecca looked at Amy with a gentle yet sympathetic expression on her face before speaking, "I'm Rebecca, would you like something to drink?"

"Yes, please," Amy responded her voice barely a whisper. Rebecca retreated into someplace unknown after ushering Amy into the sitting room. Amy sat in a leather recliner and marveled at the artwork, the tile floor was made of a hard-encased

stone resembling ivory and statues carved from marble surrounded her. The room consisted of tan and cream rugs and furniture. In fact, the only object in the room of any color was a wall-sized portrait. Rebecca stood on the right hand side, looking headstrong and ravishing, her smile cool and certain, on her left was a stern yet jovial-looking man in a suit. He was not smiling and his expression was clearly one of determination, and wedged directly in front of the two was a boy with the face of an angel. He appeared to be around Amy's age and while his face wore an unsure smile his eyes were happy. Amy would have given anything to know what he was thinking about at that moment. The portrait conveyed an unmistakable message: "The perfect family."

Rebecca returned with two cups of steaming hot liquid, and as they sat drinking Italian coffee flavored with Amaretto, Amy told Rebecca everything. Rebecca listened patiently and then insisted Amy stay in the pool house; Amy felt grateful but embarrassed at the generous offer.

"At least allow me to pay you for your kindness," Amy said realizing that no amount of money she could offer would be enough.

Rebecca's first instinct was to decline the offer of money from the homeless girl, but she knew the importance of female independence so she reconsidered,

"I'll make you a deal, Amy. My son, Jimmy, has been bugging me to replace the pool boy. If you clean the pool three times a week during the summer the pool house is all yours."

Amy's eyes widened at the promise of a pool and at the mention of Jimmy's name. Rebecca smiled knowingly, "Jimmy, can show you how it's done. He should be home any

moment. Now, as for your mother, Amy, I am not going to sit here and pretend that I have any clue as to what you've been through. What I can tell you is that life is hard and being a woman only makes it harder. You are going to be okay now and the cold hard fact of it is only you can save you. You have to learn to accept life and then move forward."

Amy wondered what Rebecca's life philosophies were saying about Jimmy's untimely death. Did she think his dying was part of some natural order? Maybe it was God's will?

Was it? Was it God's will for you to die, Jimmy? Amy's thoughts plagued her in the dark and empty room and fresh tears fell from her eyes as she wondered what God's plan was for her. She thought about Jimmy's broken promises, how he had vowed to return to her, and she thought of the promises she made herself long ago. She had promised to never be like her mother, a struggling woman in a single-income trailer, barely making ends meet.

But now Amy was forced to face reality, the Washingtons had been kind to her in the past, but now that Jimmy was gone what would they think of her? She was no longer the same innocent girl who had arrived on their doorstep; she was their daughter-in-law, and their son had rushed off to the military because she had gotten pregnant. Could they ever forgive her for that? She had taken their only child away from them, thinking back Amy wondered if those long looks Rebecca gave her were really disapproving glances. After all didn't Jimmy deserve someone better than her? She was nothing but a lost, pathetic puppy dog that his family sympathetically took in. *Jimmy must have mistaken pity for love.*

“Look what it got you, Jimmy,” Amy wept aloud. “I killed you. You went off to war for me because...” She tried to calm herself but her mind would not stop racing. *If I hadn’t gotten pregnant, Jimmy would still be alive. Oh, dear God, what have I done?*

It would only be a matter of time before Jimmy’s parents allowed their grief to become anger and when that time came they would kick her and her unborn child out into the street. And she would be a struggling single mother barely able to afford rent and food.

No. I won’t do it. I will die before I force my child to live way I had to.

The fetus in Amy’s tummy squirmed and swam about in an attempt to become more comfortable. The baby was hungry and restless, sensing that something was wrong. He had been awakened from his dream by the distant screaming and crying of a woman, the crying did not bother it, but the sudden change in her emotion affected the flavor of the amniotic fluid. The baby had been developing for five months and was accustomed to receiving nutrients on a regular basis, and Amy had not eaten in days. The baby sucked on its thumb and half-heartily kicked its mother in frustration.

“Oh!” Amy felt the baby kick, taking that as a sign she got up and picked up the telephone.

“Hello? Doctor Ligato?” Amy sobbed into the phone.

“Amy, how are you feeling? You sound upset.”

“Dr. Ligato, it’s the baby.”

“Yes, Amy, what about the baby?”

“Jimmy’s dead, he was killed. I just don’t know what to do.”

“Amy, calm down. I want you to get a glass of water, sit down, and drink it slowly. I’ll be at my office in ten minutes can you meet me there? We need to talk.”

* * *

“No, I couldn’t.”

“Amy, it’s important you understand you have options. A death in the family is never easy, especially when a pregnancy is involved.” Dr. Ligato stared at Amy with extraordinarily dark eyes before tucking a strand of wavy dark hair behind her ear.

“But, it’s wrong.”

“Amy, no one is judging you. How will you raise a child on your own? Unless you believe Jimmy’s parents will assist you.”

“They won’t. You’ve never met them, Doctor, you have no idea what they are like.”

“You are right, Amy. I never met them, in fact, I was looking forwarding to meeting Jimmy, again.”

That last word eluded Amy momentarily, “Wait, you knew Jimmy?”

Doctor Ligato smiled at her error before speaking, “I attended one of his lectures once, I played a little devil’s advocate with him about the development of the criminal mind.”

“Oh, well, Jimmy loved a good debate.”

“Yes, I know. It is truly a tragedy that he won’t meet his child.” Dr. Ligato placed a delicate hand on Amy’s shoulder reassuringly. “I know this is hard on you, Amy.”

“I’m so alone. I never wanted it to be this way. I wanted to raise a child with Jimmy.”

“Yes, of course you did. No one wanted this, Amy.”

“So what are my options, doctor?”

* * *

Amy’s sleep that night was fitful at best; she was haunted by dreams that were dark and twisted nightmares. She dreamt of unborn children weeping and floating in seas of sulfur and the sulfur melted away their skin leaving them scarred and unrecognizable. Suddenly she hears a voice calling her name, “Mommy?”

Instantly, she is slammed into another dream, this one darker than the first, she turns and sees a man with a wilting flower and a dark uniform standing besides the sea. She wants to run to him but her legs will not move, he turns to look at her and something flickers in his eyes. Before he can speak the surf washes in, covering his feet, they both look down and a small, burnt corpse washes up on the shore. The man looks at her accusingly and he begins to weep, he bends down and wraps the tiny body in the jacket of his uniform and then he walks away.

The rising of the sun finally awakens her and she is haunted by her dreams, but determined to do the right thing she gets up and dresses quickly.

“Amy, you are early for your appointment,” the doctor informs her. “Two hours early.”

“Doctor Ligato, you said the baby would feel no pain, right?”

Doctor Ligato looked at her with a puzzled expression.

“I believe what I told you was that it is a simple, painless procedure.”

“Are you sure?”

“Come on. Let’s get you prepped.”

* * *

Amy stands in the stark white office and looks around nervously finally, she sits down on the bench-like cushioned table, her cloth gown rustling softly. The sound reminds her of dead leaves blowing in the fall. The instruments that are lying on the small metal table heighten her growing sense of dread so she turns away from them. Instead, she focuses on the only non-medical related object in the room: a calendar. It is a calendar of various endangered species—the white baby seals, the blue whales, even the bald eagle. Each creature has a caption below their picture, Amy reads the quietly to herself.

Save the Whales. Save the Baby Seals. Save the American Bald Eagle. Interesting. I wonder who will save my baby?

The sound of the doctor reorganizing objects on the metal table startled Amy. She lay down on the bench as the doctor reached for items Amy couldn’t see.

“Okay, Amy, you are going to feel a little pinch and then some cold fluid.”

The doctor reached for a large syringe full of a clear liquid and carefully injects it into Amy's uterus.

"What's that," Amy asks as the cold liquid enters her body.

"Saline solution."

"What's it for?"

"It makes the water of the womb toxic to the unborn fetus."

"You are going to poison him?" Amy struggled to get up, but the liquid was burning, making her weak.

"It's not a him any longer. The solution reverses the growth process, making the fetus unrecognizable."

"Unrecognizable?"

"The saline destroys all developing skin tissue," Doctor Ligato replied in an emotionless tone.

* * *

Amy walked out of the clinic, glossy-eyed and reeling from the truth. She glanced at her watch and realized she was late for her husband's funeral. A lone tear slid down her cheek there would be no funeral for their baby.

"Children, weep your tears of blood. You are the second sign the end has begun. And as this child finds its grave, it is a saint who will give it a name. Names like Michael and Raphael, they tell us of angels who never fell. But saints aren't angels, no, not quite. Saints were human, not divine, and when Wednesday comes saints will sin. Saints will lose their faith and saints will kill."

Three

“If I were to tell you, that the world would end on Sunday, could you imagine what the next sign would be? The previous Monday a soldier gave his life for war, and then on Tuesday you witnessed a child’s death. So what should come on Wednesday? Since there are only four days left.

“Behold, on Wednesday, a temple built for the worship of God. This building houses a tiny relic, a splinter from the cross; it lies within a mighty altar used to consecrate blood. I can hear silent angels singing for their Lord.

“It is here in these sacred shadows that the incense burns long, and it is here in the house of the Lord, that Judgment Day is called. Here sits a woman in the belly of despair, here sits a mother her arms now empty—bare. Softly, she is

sobbing, diligently on her knees, here she needs compassion; grant her, Lord, your peace. The cross of her rosary cuts into her flesh as she begs the Virgin Mary for strength. This tormented soul can't sink any lower on her knees—this obedient disciple has tried so hard to please.

“She believes she is a follower, a disciple of the Lord, and she finds her faith in justice, she swings the mighty sword. Yet, I know her heart and I see what she desires the creature you perceive a lamb, is as ruthless as a lion. The Wednesday before the end the long slumber is over and the beast begins to fulfill all the ancient prophecies.

“It was said in the beginning that The Rapture was at hand I anticipated The Second Coming when Satan becomes a man. I've seen the creature creep in the temple of the Lord, and I've seen the beast emerge from deep within the sea. And as the beast emerges it dips its hand in holy water. The beast will ask a question; a question of righteousness.

“How far must the holy go to convert the faithless?”

“So the beast begins its journey, its mission to walk on land. A quest is undertaken, the quest is to serve God. The beast will cleanse the earth in service of the Lord.”

WEDNESDAY: BLESS ME FATHER...

Mrs. Rebecca Washington stood in silence as the priest began to read the twenty-third Psalm:

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...”

I want my son back. She thought to herself.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures...”

He died in that muddy jungle.

“He leads me beside quiet waters...”

They couldn't even recover his body.

“He restores my soul...”

God, why have you punished me so?

Mrs. Washington stared at the coffin knowing that it was empty, and she feared the worst. She feared her son had died horribly and alone, believing she longer loved him. Yes, she was angry he joined the Marines and it wasn't because she wanted him to be some damn corporate attorney with few morals and even less happiness. She had only wanted Jimmy to live his life and pursue his dreams. Being a Marine was hardly a dream, after all the Marines, at best, were for

undisciplined youth looking for a purpose. Jimmy was not undisciplined and death was hardly a purpose.

Above all else she loved Jimmy, he was her only child and the only thing forcing her to cling to a dying marriage. Next to her Harvard-spawned law career, Jimmy was her greatest accomplishment and he could have been a great man, greater than his father, but he was cut down in some jungle for a cause he didn't need to fight for.

The grief would have broken any other woman, but Rebecca Washington was strong. She clung to the only hope left in her life, searching for something to bring her through this turmoil, as she scanned the faces surrounding her she was searching for Amy. Amy, sweet Amy, was all Rebecca had left, her and Jimmy's child; his precious child.

Rebecca became frantic. Amy was not there, then suddenly she was, but something was wrong. Amy was glossy-eyed, yet not weeping and she was wearing denim jeans. Rebecca was surprised Amy was not wearing a veil or black dress. It took her a moment to notice that Amy seemed abnormally pale and at that moment Rebecca felt something being placed in her hands. The sound of seven rifle shots brought her to her senses. She looked down and realized a Marine had handed her a flag, its flawless fabric was cool against her fingers. The man standing before her was speaking words of honor, duty, and pride, but Rebecca could not hear him.

She walked past the rifled soldiers and went to be near Amy. As she approached she could sense something was wrong. There was a dark circle at the front of Amy's jeans and Rebecca began to walk faster. Just as she reached her, Amy fell to the ground and the puddle of dark ooze spread

down her pant leg. Rebecca placed her hand on Amy's leg and her hand felt the saturation, instinctively, she brought her hand to her lips and upon inhaling sharply she could taste the blood.

"Oh, God! No!" Rebecca frantically looked around staring into the sea of faces.

"Somebody call an ambulance," she pleaded.

* * *

Rebecca's life had ceased. Jimmy was dead and Amy was dead (but not before she killed the baby). Jimmy's baby. Rebecca's reason to live was gone and the tears she cried for Amy, they started as bittersweet. In the beginning she was too grief stricken to think about what Amy had done. She needed to get away and she needed to find a place with complete calmness, a place where she could think.

Rebecca entered The Church of the Holy Cross, pulling open the heavy, wooden door as she had so many times before. The smell of sweet incense instantly reminded her of the warmth and safety she felt in this church, the dimmed lights softened her heart. She walked to the basin of holy water and as she looked down the length of the church her gaze fixed upon the life-sized crucifix suspended above the altar. She made the sign of the cross and slowly proceeded down the aisle of the empty church.

"God's house is always open," she whispered to herself.

She stopped at a pew on her right-hand side, dropped to one knee, and genuflected. Pulling the kneeler out she rested her weight on the soft velvet, as she closed her eyes she

remembered the first time she had brought Jimmy here. The day he was baptized was unmistakably clear, he was such a pretty baby, even the priest had said so, and Jimmy didn't make a sound when he was baptized with the holy water.

A tear escaped Rebecca's eye, as she recalled the baptism outfit she had recently bought for Jimmy's son, at least she had hoped for a son. *Amy, what have you done? What reason could you have had for killing the baby? He was all I had.* Rebecca picked up the Bible that was lying next to her in the pew, her heart was torn beyond repair, and her shattered faith was all she had for comfort. Quietly, she stared up at the ceiling, "Please, God. I know my baby, Jimmy, is up there with you. Please, Lord, just show me the way. Help me live through this."

Rebecca opened the Bible and flipped to a random section, her eyes blurred with tears as she recognized Matthew 5:6 and remembered the last time she had reflected on those words.

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Before she had entered law school her father had died of cancer. Rebecca stayed with him through his sickness and even delayed her entrance into Harvard for a year to be by his side. The admission's office was very understanding and Rebecca felt it was her duty to help her father anyway she could, but she had also felt very guilty because she knew her father's dying wish was to have her go to nursing school. He did not want her to become an attorney.

But her father did not understand Rebecca's reasons for going to law school and she did not understand his burning desire to stop her. As she held his hand on his deathbed she did everything in her power to avoid their last conversation ending in bitter words.

"Becca, darling?" her father's skeletal frame could barely hold the sagging skin that seemed determined to slip unto the pillow. Rebecca was sure that his voice became softer, his eyes more sunken with each passing second. And though she loved her father immensely, his withering flesh forced even her to pull away.

*...then the LORD will bring extraordinary plagues
On you and your descendants,
Even severe and lasting plagues,
And miserable and chronic sicknesses.*

"Yes, father I am here."

"Becca, I...I want you to be a nurse. You should care for people—help them."

Rebecca bit her tongue and promise herself she would not argue. She nodded her head and fought back the tears, for she knew she was breaking her father's heart.

"Promise me one thing," her father said gasping for air.

"Anything, Papa."

"You never did listen to me and I'm sure you won't start now. I want you to remember that any job can have dignity as long as you serve the Lord."

"Yes, I know."

“You know? You know what, girl? How is a lawyer’s life at all dignified? All the lies, the bribes, the plea-bargaining, mingling with criminals...”

“*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*” Rebecca said the passage from Matthew slowly and quietly; more for herself than for her father. Rebecca knew that she would become a great attorney and she believed she would always pursue justice.

“Ah, that’s my girl, but if you are going to be righteous you must never hesitate. Never waver in your conviction. *“To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will—I will..”*”

And those were the last words he ever spoke to her, strange she should remember them now, twenty-seven years later. She wondered what he would have told her if he were still alive today? Laodicea? Laodicea? Yes, it was one of the seven churches mentioned in the Book of Revelation.

Rebecca knew this because the last book of the New Testament was her favorite and she turned to that passage and read what was to come.

I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. Because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. Because you say, “I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,” and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe

yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.

Rebecca eyes remained glued to the pages of the Bible and deep within her heart she felt as if her world had collapsed before her very eyes. Filled with immeasurable despair and hanging her head in sadness she wept aloud to the Lord.

“Lord, I have failed you. I wanted to pursue the path of righteousness but I lost my way somehow. I know money became my master and I desired to be rich. Yes, I forgot, I ignored, I abandoned my search for justice. I broke my promise to my father and I deserve your punishment, oh Lord.”

Rebecca sat in the church for hours until her knees and back began to ache, but she refused to leave. She felt an obligation to right all the wrongs she had committed. She knew that she must make amends and hope the Lord could forgive her. As she remained in the church she began to realize that she was responsible for the pain she was feeling and she longed to expose her sins in order to correct the damage.

“Jimmy, please forgive me. God had to take your life to show me how twisted and jaded I had become, and Amy please forgive me for cursing you. I know you were forced to suffer because I abandoned God...please find a way to forgive me.”

Rebecca slowly got up from the kneeler, genuflected, and turned to leave the church. She had a new purpose and she knew she had to correct the wrongs she had done to find favor with the Lord. She also knew she must atone for her

sins. Rebecca dipped her hand in the basin of holy water, once again faced the crucifix, and made the sign of the cross.

“Lord, give me strength.”

* * *

Rebecca Washington entered her home with a strong resolve to do exactly what was necessary. She walked down the wine-colored, plush-carpeted stairs and into the basement where her office was located. The room smelled of sweet mahogany, and though it was cluttered with mounds of papers and folders, it felt like the safest room of the house. Many nights Rebecca had slept on the soft leather sofa in this office, only to awaken and haunted by a case she felt she couldn't win, but Rebecca never lost a case—not really.

It was in this office that Rebecca had some of the most brilliant ideas the California courtrooms had ever seen. The inspiration and wisdom she had gathered over the years seemed to seep from the walls of the study. At one time, Rebecca had revered this place as her chapel, her sanctuary; here in this room she was a god.

Smiling softly, Rebecca remembered her first big case many years ago when Jimmy was just a boy.

“Mommy, can I come in,” seven-year-old Jimmy asked his mother.

“Well, you're already in, aren't you?”

Jimmy giggled his reply, “I guess so.”

“Okay, what do you want? Mommy is very busy,” Rebecca shuffled through the stacks of paper on her desk for

the third time. "I know it is here somewhere," she whispered quietly to herself.

"Did you lose something, Mommy? I can help you find it."

"No, Jimmy I don't think you can."

"Why not? Is it very small?" Rebecca looked up and saw Jimmy's face constricted in confusion.

"I know! I will look on the floor," Jimmy crawled around on his hands and knees searching every inch of the floor.

"No, baby it isn't small," Rebecca said quietly as she stared at her child in awe. He was so compassionate, always attempting to help.

"Well, then what is it?" Jimmy looked up and smiled crookedly at his mother.

"I've lost the case, baby."

"Mommy, you are silly! Your briefcase is right here," Jimmy said triumphantly.

"No, not that case. The case I am working on it seems your Mother isn't a very good attorney." Saying the words she had been feeling for months took a huge weight off of her shoulders. Rebecca felt safe talking to Jimmy maybe because she knew that it didn't matter to him whether or not she won or lost her first big case. She would always be his Mommy.

"That's okay, Mommy. You can stay home with me, and we can bake cookies!" Jimmy sat there and smiled at her as if he had just solved the world's problems with that simple statement. Rebecca smiled through her tears and watched as Jimmy stood up, brushed off his knees, and walked over to Rebecca. He climbed into her lap and looked in her eyes.

"What are you doing, Jimmy?"

“Daddy—Sergeant Washington, said that if you want to see into a man’s soul you have to look him in the eye. I know you are a girl, mommy, but I want to help.”

“Baby, it’s gonna be okay,” Rebecca didn’t sound very convinced.

“You are scared, but Mommy, it’s okay to lose sometime? Isn’t it?”

“Not when it’s your job to win.”

“Oh? But Mommy you are good at your job,” Jimmy said matter-of-factly.

“Sometimes that’s not enough. Jimmy, I really want to win this case, because it means a lot of me.”

Jimmy seemed to think about this for a long time finally he spoke, “Mommy, you will win this case, because you are the best lawyer in the whole world. I promise.”

“You promise?” Rebecca laughed. Everything seemed so simple to Jimmy.

“Yes, I promise you will win the case if you promise that one day I can be a lawyer like you.”

“Okay, Jimmy I promise,” Rebecca hugged Jimmy not realizing how serious he was. In fact she wouldn’t realize the severity of that promise until ten years later.

The handsome boy, with the dark hair peaking out beneath his graduation cap, straightened his tie and cleared his throat. *He is nervous.* His mother thought to herself and then he smiled at her with that crooked grin that always managed to melt her heart. His dark eyes flashed and he began to speak.

“I know most of you are as anxious as I am to get out of this place,” Jimmy said as the audience of graduating seniors cheered and applauded. He waited for a moment for the auditorium to grow quiet once again. Gazing at his mother he saw her smile, a genuine smile, and his heart swelled with pride.

“So I will keep this short. As the Valedictorian I guess I’m suppose to leave you all with some profound thoughts and heartfelt confessions, but I’m not going to do that. In fact, I’m going to surprise most of you and keep this relatively short.

“When I was seven years old I made a promise to someone very important to me,” Jimmy paused momentarily and fought to keep his voice from breaking.

“Because of that promise, I have strived to be the best and I never settled for second place. Some of you could never understand that and many of you thought I was far too serious for someone my age. But as I said, I made a promise and I keep my promises.

“So instead of leaving you with quotations or sonnets I simply wanted to take the opportunity to say thank you to the most amazing woman I know—my mother.” Jimmy stopped speaking and stared out across the individuals watching him. He saw his father’s face fixed in a mask of indifference but, most importantly he saw his mother her eyes gleaming with tears of pride, and he spoke to her as if they were the only two people in the room.

“I love you. You wanted me to be a better man than I thought possible. I could never thank you enough for what you’ve done for me and I will become an amazing attorney. And I will make you proud, mother.”

“I already am,” she silently replied.

The one thing Jimmy never realized was that she, too, was changed forever by the promise she made to him. She did win that case, but only because she persuaded the District Attorney to throw out some evidence. Her client never spent a day in jail, and Rebecca turned her back on justice. At the time, she tried to tell herself that she rigged the outcome of the trial because she couldn't bear to break her promise to Jimmy; that promise was sacred. Jimmy, of course, eventually broke his and he never became a lawyer. She remembered the day he had told her as if it were yesterday.

She walked down the hallway to his room, her heels clicking softly on the imported tile. He was sitting on his bed staring out towards the pool house and instantly she realized that something was terribly wrong.

"What is the matter, Jimmy?" she asked him.

He looked up at her and his eyes were unrecognizable, they were shrouded in fear and doubt. Jimmy had never looked this uncertain in his life.

"What's wrong?" she asked again.

"I don't know how to tell you this," he began.

Rebecca sat down in the nearest chair and prepared herself for the worst.

"I'm not going to law school, Mom," his tone was final.

"Your not what?"

"Amy's pregnant, we got married. I just—"

"Your not what?" she asked again.

Jimmy was staring at his hands as if they were fascinating. The silence of the room was grating on his nerves and he knew his mother was waiting for an answer.

“I’m not going to law school,” he said again.

“Would you like to tell me why?” she answered careful to control the volume in her voice. Jimmy was staring at her in disbelief.

“Um, Amy’s pregnant and we got married,” he replied carefully forming every word.

“Yes, I heard you the first time. What does that have to do with law school?”

Jimmy’s head was a blur of thoughts and emotions as he struggled to find the words.

“I, um, I just thought that I have a responsibility now and I should—” he voice faltered and faded.

“I expect you to do a better job of convincing me than that Jimmy,” Rebecca said.

“Mom. I don’t need to convince you! This is my life and Amy’s my wife now so...”

“I think I understand Jimmy. You are scared and you are looking for a way out. The truth is, you don’t know if you can handle law school and Amy gave you the out you needed, didn’t she?”

Rebecca looked at Jimmy waiting for him to respond, to disagree, but he didn’t. She had seen right through him and past the truth he would not admit.

“Jimmy,” she reached out and touched his hand and he flinched as if she had burned him. “Listen to me, please. I know what you think. I do. But if you do this, if you don’t go to law school, you are going to regret it for the rest of your

life and eventually you will begin to hate her for what she made you sacrifice.”

Jimmy stared at his mother and although he knew she was telling him what he needed to hear he could not stomach it, and he wasted no time verbally attacking her.

“Oh, would it be better if I was a self-absorbed perfectionist like you? You are the most selfish person I know! It is always about you! It’s no wonder Dad can’t stand being married to you,” Jimmy could not stop himself from continuing. “Don’t give me any advice on marriage, Mom. You aren’t an expert at that.”

Rebecca stood up slowly and walked towards the hallway wordlessly, before she exited his bedroom she turned to look at Jimmy and softly replied,

“Maybe your father can help you. He always said you would never be a lawyer, I guess he was right. I can’t help you,” her tone was one of finality. She could not help him because her pride would never allow her to. She did not want to admit that maybe he was right and she certainly did not want to accept that he would not become a lawyer. She walked away with her pride left intact and her son completely alone.

“Oh, but what price have I paid,” she asked herself as she looked around her office. Thinking of Jimmy, she hoped that this place would once again inspire her to write an amazing closing statement. This closing statement would not bring her into the hearts and minds of a jury and it would not win her a trial. Instead, it would conclude a great career.

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Rebecca Washington and for the past twenty-five years I have served as a defense attorney in the Orange County area. I graduated from Harvard Law in 1966 and since that time I have been a representative of the United States Judicial System. I am disheartened and ashamed to say that neither education nor the concept of justice allowed my career to reflect anything except biased misrepresentation.

Only in my hour of grief am I able to look upon my former actions with disgust and regret. I am now attempting to recognize and apologize for the decisions I have made and for the injustices I chose to overlook.

I am writing to inform you of the horrendous atrocities occurring within the Judicial System of the United States. I have knowingly tainted trials and I have purposefully and intentionally allowed some of my clients to be found guilty. I have broken and completely disregarded the oath I took to defend my clients to the best of my abilities. I, and many other attorneys, in the twenty-five years I have served within the system, have ensured our clients be found guilty despite their obvious innocence.

This was done in the hopes of career advancement, for cash payoffs, and for political bias. I am aware and I am a part of a system where our nation's top prosecuting attorneys achieve their positions by paying and bribing public defenders. This is done for many reasons: the most obvious is a carefully plotted, unspoken need to ensure that the ratio of minority convictions doubles that of whites.

I have received over seventy-five direct promotions or pay-offs ranging from \$45,000 to \$125,000 simply for not calling a key witness to aid in the defense of my client. I then would publicly claim disappointment while privately I knew it was a fact that a lawyer never really loses. If a lawyer helps the right individuals, a lost case can be quite profitable. The cases I purposely sabotaged involved minority males being accused of committing crimes that white suspects had originally been arrested for. In all these cases the original suspect was never indicted, their relatives were either political players or member of a police force.

I tell you these things hoping that it will incite change and that other attorneys such as Randolph, Hinkle, Barnes, McCloud, Phillips, Neigle, Paris and McArthur will come forward and clear their consciences. These men are currently working on cases in Los Angeles, Santa Monica, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Boston, San Antonio, Cleveland, and Miami. I know these men are simply puppets being pulled and promised by a plethora of political strings.

This letter will serve as my official resignation and I hope the families of the men whom I allowed to be falsely convicted can find a way to forgive my blindness. My only intentions are to no longer stand idly by as innocent people suffer for the crimes of the guilty.

My sincere apologizes,
Rebecca Washington

“For those of you who serve the Lord, I ask you a question of justice. How far must the righteous go to convert the faithless?”

Rebecca would descend to the bowels of hell in search of righteousness. Yet, I see Rebecca has chosen to overlook her darker, more sinister side. When you strive to be perfect, you often learn to lie. Lie to yourself, believing your intentions are good, lie all you would like to—I can see right through you. Good intentions are seldom enough. Intentions insight war. To hell with righteousness.

“Prophecies will be fulfilled. The beast will walk on water and shout a message from on high. The message is what matters now, not how loudly the beast will cry. I cannot give rhyme or reason to the intentions of mankind. I have no desire to do so—that never was my plan. Now, the time is arriving and the message will unfold. Listen carefully to the intentions of the story you’ve been told...”

3.5

“...I told you a soldier’s war would cause the end to start. We know that the soldier’s intentions were the very best of all. We watched him try to be a man and make his Daddy proud and Amy, Jimmy’s loving wife, tried to do what was right. She only wanted to protect the baby, even if it had to die. The saint of our story, her intentions are so divine but her quest for justice will rebel and punish all mankind.

“And as the chaos knocks, bangs, and rattles outside my door I search my mind in a desperate attempt to find how this occurred. The war is not the problem, neither is the girl, nor was the beast who walked on water letting her message unfurl. No, these are not the bone-chilling facts I fear as I face the end. I only fear the intentions that allowed the chaos to begin.”

WEDNESDAY NIGHT: ...FOR I HAVE SINNED

The letter, once it was written, seemed to take on a life of its own. Rebecca Washington had ensured this by distributing a copy of it to several newspaper editors. The letter was published the next morning in every major newspaper across the United States. After all, it is not everyday that America's most corrupt attorney comes into your house and makes confession at the morning breakfast table.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," Rebecca Washington sat in the dark, musty confessional. She kept her voice low and her eyes downcast as she awaited the sacrament of reconciliation.

"Yes, Rebecca, I know."

Rebecca clenched her rosary beads close to her chest, "It's been seventeen years since my last confession..." Rebecca had come to the church after seeing The Morning Tribune with her letter on the front page and she had crept into the confessional and waited for the priest to return. Suddenly,

she realized the priest had said her name and her voice cracked with fear, "How did you know I would be here?"

"But isn't this where all saints come to bask in their righteousness? You always had this preconceived notion that you were serving the Lord," the voice answered from behind the screen.

"I was trying to do what was right," Rebecca desperately wanted him to understand.

"You have no idea what you have done."

Rebecca quietly reached for the doorknob of the confessional, the door was locked, yet she did not panic. Rebecca's heart did skip a beat when she heard the man get up and leave his side of the confessional. She remembered hearing the softest footsteps when she had left her home that morning and now she was certain she had been followed.

"I did the right thing. I did the right thing for Jimmy," she called out into the darkness.

Rebecca detected a subtle aroma that overwhelmed her senses and instantly made her nauseated. Her mind frantically searched to recall what the vaguely familiar smell could be. When she felt the thin liquid splash underneath the door and hit her legs, warming them instantly, she remembered the odor. Years ago she and her husband had taken their honeymoon in Montreal in early January and that same aroma had surrounded the cabin making her sick for days. Her husband eventually had to turn off the kerosene stove and start a fire in the fireplace to keep the cabin warm.

Years had passed but the smell of kerosene had the same effect on Rebecca, and as she leaned over to quietly retch in the cramped confessional, she heard the soft whisper of a

match. The flames engulfed and consumed the wooden closet before Rebecca could scream for help, perhaps she was too dizzy from the fumes, or perhaps she had no desire to be saved. Even as the black smoke and red flames licked at her skin and hair she did not utter a sound.

“The saint with all her divine intentions dies ironically in a shower of flames, but the words of this woman still remain. The words she spawned will live on and on and as the great prophecy foretells, the beast from hell will fall. But the words uttered by the beast are what will survive—these words will seek out others and then they will thrive.

“It is these words that awaken the chaos and the pain. The first beast is gone because its mission is complete, but I see a second beast, one that creeps on land. He too, has a mission; he too, has a plan. This beast is not subtle; this beast is not divine. This beast is a man and he will scorch the sky.”

Four

“The angels with their bronze-colored skin and their eyes of fire walked across the cracked pavement completely focused and unified in their goal. For those of you who have never seen the cleaving sword of Gabriel, let me tell you of Urban War. The rules of war in the city, well, they are not quite the same. They become more deadly for there is so much more to be gained. It is the wars outside of the jungle and far away from the burning sun—these are the wars that will end the world.

“These wars aren’t used by governments to occupy their time and these wars aren’t fought by soldiers who are ignorant or blind. The urban war is fought by those who have lost for four-hundred years and when you know nothing but defeat, victory is not merely a goal. It becomes more like oxygen

allowing you to breathe and the soldiers fighting in this war will not stop until they succeed. And this, yes, this is the war that will cause the earth to bleed.

“These angels with the darker skin link their hearts together and they equal great might. These angels roam and pillage; they burn whatever lies in sight. Glass is broken, stores are looted, hell is raised, and cities burn for days and days. Behind the chaos and beneath the flame the bodies lie scattered and torn. This is the dark side of the ghetto. This is what we have earned.

“And this is what a nation fears, that one day the silent and oppressed will awake, they will grasp and they will take. They will inflict and you will scream. I tell you this is not a dream.

“Thursday, has now arrived.”

THURSDAY: CONCRETE JUNGLE

The riot started in Gary, Indiana, a small town located just east of Chicago. The town in the 50's and 60's had been a real hot spot for steel production. Now, forty years later, the town had a high rate of unemployment matched only by a higher rate of crime. Here the concrete jungle was far away from the palm trees, sandy beaches, and salt water air, here in the streets and alleys that surrounded Chicago you had two responsibilities:

- 1) Protect your family.
- 2) Protect yourself.

The insincere, plastic surgery lifestyle common to Californian residents would not survive the streets of Gary. Here even the make-believe lies of Hollywood would be choked, stomped, and beaten by the dark streets. The air had been filled for decades with the strangling stench of injustice—the knowledge that the outside world progressed and developed, with its consumer-driven hunger, while allowing the children of the inner city to starve and thirst for a better lifestyle.

These are the real facts, the grinding pains of life that told one exactly who and where they were. This stench was never, not even for a second, overcome by the delusional fog that one day you might live in the hills of Malibu, exploiting and neglecting the poor. You were the exploited and the neglected.

Gary was a close-knit society that did not have the opportunity to welcome outsiders. While catholic America prays at football games in the great green stadium located in South Bend, and millionaires flaunt their cash by building great palace casinos on Lake Michigan, no one dares to creep past the border of Joliet. These are the raw emotions, the craving for equality, that charged the very atmosphere.

It was in this town that a letter, written some two-thousand miles away, would awaken a revolution. And to that ignoramus who so snidely utters “Words can never harm,” you have never known words to become the whips and chains of society cutting and slashing at your soul, reminding you of oppression. It will be those very same words that form the mob who kick and beat you in search of justice.

Mobs rarely form with the intention of turning violent and this would be no exception. A fairly quiet neighborhood awoke to a news story that hit very close to home, a big Chicago newspaper decided to run a story on its front page—the heartfelt confession of an attorney from Orange County, California. However, in the story, the name of a well-known Chicago attorney was mentioned—Anthony Clayton Bauer.

Normally, this would not have affected the small town of Gary, but earlier that month, Bauer had taken the case of a young man by the name of Eli Lawson. Bauer had volunteered to take the case, pro-bono, and now because of

Rebecca's letter everyone knew why. Lawson was the oldest son in a large family and the residents of the industrial town of Gary either knew Eli or one of his family members.

Originally the community had been angered by another arrest, but that type of anger had been felt so intensely, for so long, that it had dulled into bitter acceptance. Until, of course, when the letter surfaced and the entire town had some glimpse of that letter. And all those emotions, that had been swallowed and dismissed for years, came rising to the surface.

"Now, that's a damn shame. They got that boy locked up for a crime they know he didn't commit!"

"Yeah, but that's the way it's always been done and that's the way it is always goin' be."

A wife said this to her husband, while cooking him bacon and eggs when suddenly she looked up and happened to see the youngest Lawson boy step outside to get the morning paper. She dropped the skillet and stared in horror as Justin read the letter about his brother's attorney.

"Herb! Come here, quick!" the wife beckoned to her husband.

"What is it, Gloria? I'm trying to eat," Herb replied with an annoyed chew.

"Sweet Jesus, my Savior, help me! Herb, you don't get yo' lazy ass off that chair and come to this window...so help me God, you are gonna wear this skillet!"

Herb heard a tone in his wife's voice he had not detected in years—passion. Passion? Gary had long since sapped her of any feeling. Watching children be killed in the streets by children

had left her empty; hollow. He got up from the table and walked over to his wife.

As he looked out of the window, he too, saw Justin Lawson. The boy who was now fourteen had fallen to his knees in the middle of the lawn. He clutched the newspaper tightly between two flattened palms and tears were running freely down his face and he was whispering frantically toward the heavens. Herb hesitated only for a second before he left his house.

He cautiously crossed the street towards Justin and he found himself thinking about a time when everyone desired justice. He could vaguely remember the days of the civil rights movement and all the men and women who had died. They had died for the right to be recognized as American citizens. Herb had been fortunate he had been born in 1956 and was still a child in the heat of the battle. He remembered the feeling of relief he had during his teenage years that he never had to endure the life those legends who came before him did.

Looking at the boy, though, changed that feeling of relief into one of fury. Herb could only wonder how long a race of people had to cry out into the wilderness for justice before it was granted. He wondered if justice was granted or if it had to be taken by force.

“Hey there, son,” Herb called out softly. Justin finished his prayer and looked up at Herb. The man had changed over the years, the work in the steel mills had left him more worn for the weather. Gray hairs were springing up in various locations on his head, his eyes seem to strain a little more, and his skin had a grimy look from the soot of the machines.

“Hi, Mr. Pearson. Guess you heard about my brother,” Justin asked, his voice breaking and his eyes downcast.

“Yeah, and I uh-was wondering what you were doing...”

“Praying to the Lord, only he can help Eli now.”

“No, I was wondering what you were doing about it? About your brother, I mean.”

“Nothing I can do Mr. Pearson, those white folks, they got all the power, all the money, and it says right here in this paper that is all you need.”

“No, son, you’re wrong there the first thing you can do is hold your head up high, dry those tears, and you stand tall like a man.”

“What good is that gonna do Eli?” Justin asked his voice filled with contempt.

“It will sure help him recognize you when we march down to that courthouse to get some answers,” Herb smiled and his eyes lit up with a feeling he had never known. He was proud of himself for trying to help this young man.

“What do you mean,” Justin asked in disbelief. Surely, this was not the same man who had lived across the street from the Lawson’s all of Justin’s life. This could not be the same man who had watched as Justin was almost beaten to death last summer by an East Chicago gang, never lifting a finger to help him.

“I mean, son, go put on a good pair of walking shoes.”

“Walking shoes? Its gotta be twenty, no, thirty miles to the courthouse from here.”

“Really? Thirty miles to downtown Chicago? I’d have sworn it was further.”

“Yeah, its at least thirty miles, Mr. Pearson.”

“Well, how much does Eli mean to you son?”

* * *

By the time Justin and Herb Pearson were ready to leave, over one hundred neighbors, friends, and relatives had been invited to join them. So at 10:00 A.M. on a typical day, one hundred people began walking through the streets of Gary, Indiana heading towards Chicago. And each street they traveled and every house they passed contributed a member or two, so that by the time the group reached the Illinois State Line they had grown to over 5,000. And as they walked through the streets of Chicago all the people noticed.

By the time Justin Lawson reached the courthouse he had more people trailing behind him than he could see to count. And further back, waiting, was the Chicago Police department. The group arrived chanting, stomping, and screaming at whoever would listen.

“NO MORE LIES! FREE ELI LAWSON! STOP THE LIES! GIVE US ELI LAWSON!”

“Riots and mobs are not in any way an original idea because people with a common need come together, sometimes in large numbers. They bring with them the demands of change and they take their chances. This group of people came together in search of justice and answers but what they found was a precinct of officers. When the police ordered that they disband the crowd suddenly turned violent.

“And scenes of previous riots in L.A. and even Watts seemed small in comparison to the lives that now would be

lost. The crowd had finally had enough and they shouted: “NO MORE.” No one knows who struck the first blow or even where it landed. All I know is that after that, little of Chicago stood. Cars were overturned, buildings set ablaze, and the National Guard was called in and that is how it should have ended.

“But in the hours that the battle raged the crowd knew no fear and they fought for the freedom they have always deserved. And they were not willing to negotiate, and they killed, and they were killed. But as all the blood ran red—the camera’s took their shots and it was America who bled. For the riot that waged in Chicago, well, it found its way out of doors. It slithered into the largest cities and in each one it seemed to grow.

“This war that America witnessed was never declared. But this war that America witnessed has always been there. In every city looted, in every riot called, and in every cry of injustice—you, yourself, were involved. And on the day that war must answer for all the years of oppression there will be no second chance—no desperate search for answers.

“The day that I have witnessed—that was the end of us all. The day the ground did bleed was the day that we did fall.”

Five

“Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon.

“He exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed.

“And he performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men.”

Revelation 13:11, 13

FRIDAY: LAW AND ORDER

Grief has many faces, none of them subtle—grief shatters a heart and basks in the pain. Any man who has lost a son can taste the reality of grief on his lips. It is a bitter, unmistakable flavor that could remind one of sweetness with the passage of time, but in that moment of agony the pain tastes as if it will never end. Intense and agonizing pain wracks the mind and breaks the spirit; it becomes all that you are. And as Sergeant Washington tossed and turned in his sleep, he understood that some pain could not be escaped.

Jimmy's death had washed over him with a wave of pride and sadness. He loved Jimmy so much and he had only wanted the boy to become a man. But now he was haunted by his own words. His restless sleep became a dream of recollection and he remembered when he spoke to Jimmy about strength and control. Entering the dream world he wondered if, in that final moment, control could have saved Jimmy's life.

On Jimmy's twelfth birthday, July 20th, Washington had come home from observing some new cadets running their

maneuvers. He walked into the house and noticed how quiet it was. Normally, Jimmy was running through the house with one or two of his friends. Washington liked to think it was because Jimmy was a leader like his father, but today of all days the house was silent.

Washington walked into the kitchen, and decided to change out of his uniform before giving Jimmy his birthday present. Before he could make it to the stairs, however, he found Jimmy doubled over in pain lying on the kitchen floor. Washington briskly walked across the linoleum floor and knelt down next to his son. He searched for any sign of blood or injury but saw none, Jimmy was clenching his left side tightly and was curled into a ball.

“Jimmy? What’s wrong?” he asked gently touching Jimmy’s shoulder. Jimmy opened his eyes and seemed to search the room for where the voice had come from. He finally found his father’s face and Washington stared down at him and saw the tears forming.

“Dad, I...” Jimmy’s words were barely a whisper and he was struggling to breathe.

“All right, you just lie still now. Where does it hurt?”

“My side-it hurts. Like fire,” Jimmy gasped.

“Okay, I will call an ambulance. You lie still,” Washington walked across the room and picked up the telephone. He dialed the local hospital and the nurse who answered the phone told him it sounded like appendicitis and that the ambulance would arrive in ten minutes. She carefully instructed him to keep Jimmy conscious by talking to him.

Washington looked at his son lying on the floor as he unbuttoned his uniform jacket and placed it on the kitchen

counter. He walked over to Jimmy and knelt down to gather him in his arms. He lifted Jimmy up as gently as possible knowing that any motion would cause his son great amounts of pain. He knew a ruptured appendix could be fatal but as Jimmy gasped aloud in pain, Washington could only picture his son, his flesh and blood, dying on the ground. No, not Jimmy, and not like that. Washington would not let him die on the ground without honor.

Washington placed him on the couch as Jimmy's eyelashes fluttered and twitched before he opened his eyes. Staring at his father he blinked slowly, Washington pushed the boy's hair away from his face. Jimmy's skin felt hot and sweaty from the labor of breathing.

"Dad, am I doing to be okay?"

"Well, soldier, that depends. How tough are you," he asked his voice breaking from holding back the tears.

"I'm trying Dad, I wanna—I wanna be tough, like you."

Washington smiled before speaking, "Jimmy, you're not anything like me."

"But I'm trying," Jimmy argued weakly.

"That's good, Jimmy. You'll be fine."

"Dad, how do you do it? I'm scared and you're never scared."

"Sure I am Jimmy, but you've got to learn to control pain and fear."

"How?"

Washington searched for the words that explained the knowledge he had wanted to express to Jimmy for years. Many times in battle Washington had been made a slave to

his own fear; knowing you could die on a battlefield is the most terrifying experience a man could have.

While he was in boot camp he had a drill sergeant who told him that sometimes you have to turn off everything and become a machine. Because machines do not die, they simply stop working. And Washington found comfort in that and he had lived his life knowing when to disconnect himself from his emotions to get the job done. As he looked down at his son, he wanted Jimmy to know that there were things worse than pain, things even worse than death.

“You can’t be selfish, Jim. You have to realize that our emotions and our desires are so small and insignificant when compared to the rest of the world.”

“Really?” Jimmy’s voice grew weaker.

In his heart Washington knew that he did not fear death or even losing his son instead, he was terrified that one day he would not be able to control himself. He would never allow fear to control his life.

“Jimmy, I love you, but if you were to die today, tomorrow we would bury you and life would go on.”

But, Dad, I don’t want to...”

As the tears began to flow freely down Jimmy’s face Washington suddenly realized how different they were from one another. Jimmy, his only son, would never be satisfied in taking orders without explanation and he would never learn to disconnect himself from pain to survive. It was in that moment that Washington’s words reflected the darkness lurking his heart. After all, he only had one son and he wanted that boy to become a general and now he knew that

Jimmy could not make a career out of the military. Perhaps, it was in that very instant that Washington's heart broke.

"Jimmy, what we want doesn't matter. It never has and it never will." He could see the confusion in Jimmy's eyes and he looked at the boy long and hard, searching for a way to make him understand.

"Jimmy, do you want me to die?"

"No, no—of course not," Jimmy stammered.

"But one day I will. You see what we want doesn't change what happens. You remember that, Jim. You remember that, because that is the only way to live with the decisions you make in your life."

The impatient ringing of a distant telephone forced Washington to wake, sit up, open his eyes, and fumble in the dark for the light. He groggily found the receiver and picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Sarge, is that you?"

Washington sighed aloud verbally expressing his irritation. *What is it with that name?* He asked himself angrily.

"You know I'm not a sergeant—I surpassed that rank a long time ago..."

"How would you like to surpass general?" the voice taunted him.

"Bill, it's two in the morning."

"We've got a situation."

Damn. Washington thought to himself, but he had known this moment was unavoidable, and that premonition only added to the enormous lump forming in his throat.

“Situation,” he asked in disbelief.

“The letter, Washington, this is about the letter.”

“I told you. I took care of that! There will not be any more letters...as God is my witness.”

“I know, Washington, but it seems the letter has caused some riots to erupt in various inner cities.”

“What do you want from me?” Washington knew he had served his country well and he had always followed orders. Most importantly he always did what was necessary and best for the nation—orders spoken or unspoken.

“Sergeant, most of our men who are the capable leadership in quelling domestic backlash are overseas defending their country.”

“Bill, I am retired,” Washington pleaded. *I can't go back.* He was finished being a marine and he had officially ended his service just a few days ago.

“I know that, Washington, but even a retired man, if he is truly a marine, will not allow a domestic squabble to threaten the integrity of this nation.”

“What about the Guard?” Washington asked, desperately wanting someone else to pull the trigger this time.

Bill was relentless, “The Guard as of twenty-three hundred hours has been declared unsuccessful in its attempts to restore order.”

“Come on, Bill! It is the United States National Guard, they were created to maintain domestic order; especially in the inner city. How is it possible that they were unsuccessful?”

“Can you report to headquarters at 0600 hours?”

“I will be there before daybreak,” Washington sighed.

“And Sergeant, pray retirement hasn't made you soft.”

Soft? Washington asked himself. For the entire length of his military career Washington had felt secure in the knowledge that he could never be soft. Marines were not soft, they were not fickle, or without conviction. Marines are killers and so they must stand like age-old stone—absorbing bullets, blows, and even the scorn of those who despised the military.

In fact, for twenty-five years, Washington had been that stone, unbendable and unwavering. From his first days in boot camp through all his years in the service, he was rock solid always doing whatever he was told to do because of his love for his country, and for years he never questioned that.

Ten years ago when he spoke to Jimmy about controlling his fears, he was trying to make the boy understand all the horrible things he had seen in his life. Washington had seen strong, capable men crippled and destroyed by their own fear. In war he had seen men transformed into platoon-destroying monsters driven by fear and paranoia. Losing control of your emotions could cause a man to lose control of his actions, and in Washington's opinion that was unforgivable.

Washington lived his life focused on control, and while he served in the military he had fought in wars and he had made the decision to kill for his country. Most importantly, he had been the man the others had turned to in their moments of self-doubt and confusion because Washington was always in control...until a few days ago.

Rebecca. No, I couldn't help her. She was so consumed by her pain, her guilt, that her delusions became unreasonable. Washington thought to himself. *She thought she was on*

some quest or mission that gave her the right to bring down a nation. She never listened to me!

Rebecca had always been headstrong and sure of herself, but Washington never thought she would become blinded by her thirst for righteousness. She honestly believed that she could cleanse the world with her testimony of the corruption and chaos lurking in within the judicial system. She could not see what her letter would become or what it would do to the nation, but Washington knew. He knew of the beast chaos and how it found momentum when it searched for justice. He had always loved Rebecca, he loved her strength, and he even loved her blindness.

And as he followed her into the church where they were married long ago he loved her, and when he spoke his final words to her outside of the confessional he loved her, and even as he lit the match and dropped it into the kerosene he loved her. He loved her so much he wanted to control her pain, and the only way for him to do that was to sacrifice her. He sacrificed the happiness she brought him to save the nation, and as she burned, his love for her burned stronger.

* * *

“I am glad you could make it, Sergeant.”

“Bill, you didn’t leave me much choice,” Washington replied in a cold voice.

“Sergeant, choices are the one thing I simply do not have.”

“How bad is it, Bill?” Washington looked around the room as he asked the question. A lone metal table had been placed in the center of the large room and it was scattered

with paper and sketches. Bill stood before a large television monitor and he continued to speak to Washington in a hushed tone,

“Sergeant, the information I am about to provide you is classified. National Security is of the utmost importance.”

“I can understand that Bill.”

“No, Washington, I don’t believe that you can understand exactly what is happening out there.”

“Bill, you have always been...excitable.”

“Sergeant,” Bill began, his voice dripping with sarcasm, “I am sure you can understand it is not easy for me to ask you for help—it has been a very long time.”

Bill was looking at Washington with suppressed disgust and obvious contempt. Washington had wanted to believe that time could heal all wounds. Washington shut his eyes for a moment in an attempt to compose himself, instead he found himself remembering the jungles of Cambodia. He could smell the wet and twisted limbs of jungle trees whose leaves dripped a wetter secretion than the endless rainfall. The odor of wetness covered his body and was so concentrated he thought it would never fade.

Explosions surrounded the platoon and, in a moment of chaos, it was Washington who was forced to make a decision. Bill was on his first tour of Nam and he had become the Lieutenant’s shadow. Washington could remember the events of that fateful day as they unfolded in flashing scenes.

The Lieutenant held point, and Bill was close by with a radio strapped to his back. Washington looked up as he felt a cold sensation awakening him. Something was about to

happen and without a moment's hesitation he began to walk towards the Lieutenant.

"Lieutenant, what coordinates did you give headquarters?"

At that moment the claymore exploded. No one knew who had tripped the wire, but when the deafening explosion hit, the platoon hugged the soggy earth praying for their lives. Washington waited for the inevitable gunfire that always followed an ambush but he heard nothing. As the smoke cleared he saw most of the platoon was intact and then he noticed that Bill and the Lieutenant were gone. Washington looked around for a moment before turning to speak to the platoon.

"We are going after the Lieutenant. The Viet Cong ain't here yet but those bastards won't be far behind if they heard that explosion." They found Bill a quarter mile away, he was crouched in the bush, sobbing, and clutching the radio. Washington signaled for the rest of the men to get down and cover him. Washington silently crept toward Bill; he made eye contact and motioned for Bill to be quiet.

"Where's the Lieutenant?" Washington hissed.

"I—I don't know—I ran—the explosion—he..."

"He what?"

"I heard gunshots. I think the Lieutenant went down."

"How many shots?"

"One."

"Where did it come from?"

"I don't know—I'm sorry—I got scared," Bill began to sob as Washington looked down at the ground contemplating what to do.

“Damn Snipers! Where’d the Lieutenant go down?”

“About thirty yards ahead.”

“Thirty yards!” Washington looked at Bill long and hard. “How did you two get separated?”

“I belly crawled back toward the platoon once I heard the shot—I...” Washington stared at him in disbelief.

“You left him there?”

“I—I—was scared and I...”

“And you what?” Washington demanded, needing to hear the words.”

“I left—I left,” Bill stammered.

Washington looked at the man before him crying, overwhelmed with emotion and carrying an M-16. He did not see a soldier, he saw a weak man defeated by his own fear.

“You are a coward. Out here in this jungle—we are all we’ve got! Do you understand that? Do you!”

Washington opened his eyes and looked at Bill, who was thirty years older, and he remembered how on that day they had both been very lucky. The Lieutenant had lived, and Washington had rescued him, taking a bullet in the process, but they had all escaped death and Bill escaped a court martial for desertion.

“No, Bill, I imagine it was not easy to call me for help.”

“So, Sarge, are you still a hero?”

“Well, Billy, that depends,” Washington hesitated before smiling at Bill.

“Depends on what?”

“Are you still a crybaby?”

Bill smiled and nodded, his career had not been as glorious or decorated as Washington's. In fact, he was only a pencil-pushing grunt with a big title: Urban Warfare Coordinator. He had received the position after serving seven years on active duty and the only problem was that he had been under the false pretense that this job was fictional. America would never have to defend itself against other American's. At least that is what Bill had thought in his many years of service, and because of that misconception, he had not developed any strategies that were suited for the current situation.

"As I said, this information is classified. The National Guard has been unsuccessful in subduing riots that have erupted in Chicago, Los Angeles, Santa Monica, New York, Philadelphia, Boston, San Antonio, Cleveland, and Miami."

"Bill, explain to me how that is possible."

"The National Guard is experiencing abnormal levels of resistance. Here, take a look at this." Bill was holding a small remote in his hand and he turned on the television.

Washington watched as the video stream began. The National Guard was marching down the streets of Chicago towards a crowd of people standing before the courthouse. In front of the crowd, of what Washington guessed to be five-thousand or more, a handsome African-American man probably sixteen or seventeen was asking to speak with Anthony Clayton Bauer. Washington's heart clenched in his chest, Bauer had gone to Harvard with his wife.

The National Guard continued to approach the crowd and a uniformed soldier ordered the crowd to disperse. The crowd became restless and began to shift as the members of the guard moved in closer. Bill stopped the tape.

“A few moments later a blood bath would ensue.”

“How many were killed?”

“The guard sustained heavy casualties but 3,200 civilians were killed.”

“What method was used?”

“The guard followed procedure in the beginning and they ordered the crowd to disband. Then they moved in with battering rams to push the crowd back. The rioters began throwing objects at the soldiers and the soldiers readied themselves to launch tear gas when a nearby car backfired. One of the soldiers panicked and fired into the crowd. a teenage boy was killed,” Bill paused to review his notes for a moment. “Yes, Justin Lawson was shot and killed. Afterwards the crowd rushed the soldiers, and in the stampede some soldiers were trampled and stripped of their weapons.”

“But the riot was subdued, correct?”

“That is correct, however, it seems a great deal of the footage was captured by a news helicopter circling overhead and the footage was aired live.”

“And...”

“The force and brutality displayed by the Guard, combined with the letter written by your wife, has sparked eight new riots to break out across the nation.”

“How severe is the damage?”

“Our resources are sparse and we do not have the manpower or the arsenals needed. The war overseas has limited us to a quarter of our potential resources. We simply are not prepared to quell this type of outbreak.”

“How severe is it, Bill,” Washington asked again.

“More than 300,000 rioters in each of the cities.”

“And what is the President saying? What are his orders?”

“Negotiation is not possible. We have a race war on our hands.”

“War? Bill, a riot is hardly a war.”

“These are not rioters! They carry grenades, handguns, M-16’s, and they assemble makeshift bombs. They are launching their arsenals from the rooftops.”

“What do you want from me, Bill?”

“I need you to gain control of the situation. Do whatever you have to do.”

“Bill, do not ask me to do that. I was an officer...”

“And a damn good one—I realize that now.”

“Bill, I took a bullet for you and my country. I would gladly fight in any war and die for this nation, but I am a grunt—a combat soldier. I only know how to annihilate, Bill.”

“Washington, you do not understand the severity of the situation.”

“No, Bill, you don’t understand! If you send me in there,” Washington screamed pointing at the television, “there won’t be anything left when I’m finished.”

“Washington...”

“Nothing.”

The two men sat in silence for what seemed an eternity and finally it was Bill who spoke calmly and confidently, he began to plead with his former Sergeant;

“You are a coward. Years ago you said those words to me and you judged me, no, you damned me because I had no control over my fear. And you were right, but sometimes you need to be scared because fear can drive you. I am scared.

Our American cities are burning and this display of weakness will change how the rest of the world views us. We will no longer be seen as the most powerful nation, but as a nation unable to control its own citizens. A nation without authority is a nation open for attack. We must quell these riots! We are all we've got, remember?"

Washington looked up at Bill.

"Washington, if Jimmy could come home, if he was alive, would you have him survive one war just to face another one here in America?"

"Jimmy?"

"Washington, help me. Help me prevent another civil war."

"Yes, Bill," Washington replied his voice void of emotion. "I will help you, but once you unleash the beast, the fire will fall from heaven."

Bill looked at his former sergeant in bewilderment, "What do you mean?"

Washington turned away from Bill, tired of staring at the same helpless soldier he had rescued thirty years ago. As Washington walked out of the room he spoke to Bill one last time. His voice was filled with resolve as he told Bill what the future held.

"And so it says in the book of Samuel: *Place them and all that they possess under the curse of destruction. Do not spare them. Kill man, woman, and even her suckling babe.* And that is exactly what I will do."

"And as I waited for the humans to bomb and destroy their world, I could hear, in the jungle, a creature beginning

to stir. Many days before, a soldier awoke; he blinked his eye, looked around, and then he spoke:”

“Amy,” the word caught in his throat.

“Friday ended with the army unleashing the beast. He looked down upon the cities and he called down the fire. The flames engulfed the yielding earth and brought creation to its knees. The beast spoke of cleansing fire ridding the world of disease.

“The beast, foul creature I know him to be, had other plans in mind. Once the earth was purified, the rules he could define. The flames burned bright, the bodies they burned long, and the building began to topple and fall.

“Behold your nation, America. I silently weep for you all.”

“Watch as the ground, saturated with blood, appears as though it bleeds. Inhale and cough as human ashes rise toward the sun and the air is as rancid as poison. Yet, humans, even in the end, still attempt to protect. They covet what they love the most, so precious money will be spared.

“The financial districts of the world remain intact and in these dark disgusting burrows a few creatures creep. They cannot breathe and they do not think. These zombies simply walk the earth.

“And as I turn left and right, I glance up and down, everywhere, in every corner, death can be found. The sea’s red waves crash against the shore and the stench could make you sick, and war is the phrase you taste upon your lips. The soldiers are now gone, lost forever in darkness. Not even their legacy lives on.

“Since the beginning, humans are told creation was the most magnificent thing to behold and in the past few days I

have attempted to reveal a most horrific event. I saw your world end in a brilliant flash of light. That is a fact. I watched the bodies burn for days and cause the sky to turn black. I have watched the Atlantic and Pacific bleed like open wounds. I have seen the waters rinse tiny bodies. Your ocean is a tomb.

“And that is how the dark night ends. I have told you how it began. Now, allow me to show you what comes after the end.”

Six

“How do you know that you have entered Hell? Not from the rot, not from the smell. You will know you are trapped in Hell if you look at the man on your right. Stare into his human eyes and ask yourself, “Are they drained of light?” See, that is where a man’s soul lies. Are they flat, reflection-lacking pits? Do they make your blood run cold? Do they make you feel utterly alone?”

“Hell is not a puddle of flame. Hell is the lapse of life. Hell is the common term used by those who do not understand that pain and torture are quite nice compared to being dis-owned.

“A human can be cooked alive and never utter a sound, but the strongest individual will wail and moan. Simply isolate him and leave him alone.

“I walked among the zombies—the ones who survived the bombs and I dreaded to see what remained of humanity. I alone tasted Hell, but I could not escape. You would not believe the irony one can find in Hell—standing at the edge of the flames I saw the beginning of this tale. I was in the pit of fire when a soldier entered Hell.”

SATURDAY: CELL PHONE

The soldier stood at the edge of the city dazed from his lengthy travel. His head was reeling from the difficult journey that remained fresh in his mind. He could remember awakening after the blinding flash of light. He was the only survivor of his platoon and his body was his war prize. As he crawled out of the jungle he had disguised himself as a refugee and he began his long pilgrimage home in a small rickety boat. When his eye saw the American shore he wept in happiness, finally he was home.

The soldier limped toward the outskirts of the city as his mangled leg, barely attached, caused each step to be a slow, dragging motion. His good eye watered and became cloudy from the strain. The protective patch he wore over his useless eye began to droop as if it were attempting to cover the scars that had mutilated and changed his face. As he looked at the distant city he could scarcely remember what had brought him here. He had vague memories of a family but he could not picture one face.

His cane hit the cracked, burnt, and broken pavement making a hollow crunching sound, and the sun appeared to be avoiding his face by hiding behind a veil of black smoke. Yet, the ground was hot enough to slightly melt the soles of his boots. The soldier wiped the sweat from his forehead with his only arm. His fatigues were stained with blood, most of it his own.

Slowly, mechanically, he arrived in the broken city. Broken glass and smashed cement covered the streets; buildings were missing halves and automobiles were overturned, bodies lay atop the mess. The soldier looked around in shocked dismay and wondered why it appeared as though a war had been fought on America's soil.

The only humans he spotted moving seemed to be marching, their steps were awkward and unsure yet somehow completely in sync. The figures that walked before him bore no expression and they were the oddest zombies the soldier had encountered. He had seen the dead walking in the jungle, soldiers drained of emotions also stumble and moan. A human without emotions is more like a clone; not quite living and not quite dead.

And as the corporate clones sliced the air with their briefcases, the soldier took note of their matching ties. The three-piece suits clung to digital phones and moved together in a pack, yet they had nowhere to go. They brushed past the soldier, each one moving a little faster. The soldier saw a man approaching and he recognized his face. The soldier ran after the man and grabbed his arm, but the Sergeant pulled away.

"Dad, it's me," said the soldier, the words catching in his throat. He waited for a sign from the man.

“Dad, it’s Jimmy, I...”

For the briefest second something flashed in the man’s eyes, but it was replaced with the empty blank stare and the man looked straight ahead and replied in an emotionless tone.

“Sorry pal, no change today,” and he simply walked away.

* * *

Jimmy stands where the blue water used to lap at the sandy shore and he realizes that if he looks behind him he can see his house still smoldering with flames. No, he won’t do that. Instead, he’ll stand on the stained sand and smell the stinging sulfur. His eye waters once before he begins to sob.

“Amy, I am so sorry. I told you I would come home. I—I thought you would wait for me.” Jimmy waits for the tide to wash in once more before he leaves and he sees the current carrying something. The bleeding tide washes up a tiny little body. Jimmy thinks of his unborn child and falls to his knees weeping.

He gathers up the tiny body and buries it deep in the sand. Jimmy turns once again toward the water, desperately seeking answers. Somewhere in the surf he is searching for his reflection because he needs to be reassured that he is still a man. At the far end of the beach Jimmy sees someone approaching, the slim figure has dark hair and Jimmy hobbles as quickly as he can toward the woman.

“Amy,” he calls out hopefully.

His eye is filled with tears of joy and his vision becomes blurred. As he reaches the woman he wipes away his tears

and his vision is suddenly clear. He looks at her and realizes it is not Amy. Her face is vaguely familiar but he is so overcome with disappointment that he cannot remember who she is. Hanging his head in sorrow he turns to walk away.

The woman whispers to herself, "I still pity you, Jimmy."

"Why? Why me?" Jimmy shouts toward the heavens.

"He cannot hear you, Jimmy. Not down here."

The enrapturing, elegant, and commanding voice of the woman brings Jimmy to his senses and he pivots on the sand and looks toward the voice. *It can't be*, he thinks to himself, but her liquid-brown eyes find his heart, ease his pain, and reassure him. Her mocha skin, unscathed by the destruction, sets his mind at ease.

He searches the woman's face for answers and she knows his every question. He cannot fathom what all this means and how it is connected to his life. However, the woman knows that everything that has occurred in this place is a direct result of Jimmy. He begins to ask her a question when a mighty and consuming fire springs up around them and she tells him there is no need. His fate has been sealed for all of eternity and she is going to provide him with answers. She begins to speak:

"I've heard the Lord giveth and I've..."

Seven

SUNDAY: EPITAPH

“I’ve heard the Lord giveth
and I have seen him take away.

“But in the end, the very end,
a man destroys the days.

“Have you ever asked your priest
or the gods that you worship
how to avoid Hell and the devil’s grasp?

“Would your holy master give you answers
or do you even know?

“I have watched this earth sink low
for many, many years.

“I have seen the most destruction ever to exist.

“And I have watched worlds
end, time and time again.

“Dare you have the audacity
to ask how this begins...

“When it is you who loved the promise
the end itself should give?

“You could not see enough
visions of prophecy to be satisfied.

“And now that the end is here
you turn to me and cry.

“The secret to avoiding Hell is found in my Reflection.

“See the truth for what it is and

“Stop the fucking questions.

“How horrible is the end?

“Don’t you know the end is all you’ve wanted to see?

“It is what you have wished for.

“How long before the apocalypse?

“Satan is already at the door

“And I knelt beside you inside the church

“Where you claimed to serve the Lord.

“How long does it take for

God’s creation to be destroyed?

“Not long enough,
foolish boy.

“It should take an eternity,
but I have seen mankind reverse
creation in record time.

“And on Sunday the Lord rested
for He gave you the greatest gift.

“He gave you life and then
He promised you bliss.

“Yet, on Sunday
you
destroyed all things that He made.

“You wanted to see the end.
“Tell me, is it everything you hoped for?
“I did not create the end,
I only bore witness as it began.

“I simply whispered the truth I knew
in hopes that you would see.

“The chaos that brought the end
still surrounds me.

“The fires of hell consume my flesh
but it doesn’t sting as much
“As the fact that the beast
is born of human touch.

“Go on and live your life
I will not interfere.
“Go about your way
and I will sit.

“But I won’t pray.

“Not for you, Jimmy.

“You see,
the end has
come and gone.

“This is simply hell’s reflection.”

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