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LUNATICS AND LOVE

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James Andrew Davis

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Masters degree in English

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LUNATICS AND LOVE

By

James Andrew Davis

A Thesis

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

1990

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ABSTRACT
LUNATICS AND LOVE
By
James Andrew Davis

In these six short stories, the main characters are maladjusted, isolated and have poor self-esteem: an angry abused child, a self-righteous street preacher, a psychotic custodian, a mystic who can see demons, a lonely senior citizen and a confused teenager who becomes involved in a cult.

Their mental states vary from depressed to psychotic. As a result, they attract extraordinary conflicts in their relationships. When they encounter people who are willing to give time and attention, they respond to kindness, empathy and love and are changed from a negative focus on life to a positive one.

The main characters gain feelings of self-worth and realize that their state of happiness or sorrow is a choice they make. But choosing to live life in a positive attitude is difficult without significant relationships with other people.

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Dedicated to
my parents,
Robert and Corinne Davis,
for a lifetime of
love and encouragement

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LOVE ALWAYS PROTECTS

The screaming had finally stopped.

Ronnie Cummings released his grip on the pillow he had pressed against his ears. Silence. Opening his eyes, he rolled over and sat up. No lights appeared from below the bedroom door. He knew the living room was now dark, empty and safe. Throwing the covers back, he slid off the bed. The room's blackness fascinated Ronnie who knew every stain, hole and paint chip. He could see the room in his imagination as easily as with his eyes open and the lights on. He silently walked to the lamp and turned the switch. On an end table next to his chair sat his school books. Reading was on top, then math, with spelling on the bottom. His homework had diverted his mind for only an hour this Friday evening.

But the screaming had stopped. Some days it would last all night. Now he could dream about Monday in Mrs. Williams' classroom. Ronnie had been afraid that third grade would be too hard. He felt silly now. He loved school. Mrs. Williams, young, pretty, always saying, "This will be fun," Mr. Johns, the janitor, who let some of his favorites help push the sawdust around the gym floor with those big moppy brooms, Miss Levins, the office lady who always smiled, and, of course, Ronnie's friends. Even the girls, running and playing. Safe. Ronnie knew that was it. School was safe. He was safe. And if his mom would go to school with him, she would be safe, too.

He had thought she might get a job working with the library lady and had suggested it once. His mom had only smiled and said, "I don't think so."

Listening again, he knew they were sleeping. He walked to the door, turned the knob, and eased it open. His room light poured out, and Ronnie saw the coffee table covered with beer cans. An ash tray stuffed with cigarette butts sat near the edge. Their old couch and chair were still where they belonged. Their fight hadn't been so bad, Ronnie thought.

He scanned the floor for broken glass. None. He tiptoed across the flat carpeting into the kitchen. The usual dirty dishes had been washed and put away. Ronnie knew this because the sink was empty. He pulled the kitchen window curtains open letting in dim light from the street lamps. On the back of one chair next to the table hung a

leather jacket. Ronnie slid his hand into a side pocket. He found a cigarette lighter and an empty Ziploc bag which after examining for a moment, he returned.

Slipping his fingers into the other pocket, he heard change touching edges. To Ronnie, it sounded like church bells in the distance. Fingers searching, he grasped the coins and pulled them out. Opening his hand, he began counting when suddenly the living room light burst on.

Ronnie released the curtain and ducked behind the table sliding into the corner. The man he hated stepped from his mother's bedroom. Ronnie knew him too well. Ronnie could smell his foot odor and heard those clomping bare feet on the carpet sounding like someone was walking a horse around. How can skin on carpet make such a clatter? Ronnie wondered. Holding his breath, Ronnie heard the man muttering, talking to himself. "Dumb bitch, goddamn...." A cigarette lighter clicked. Ronnie held perfectly still.

The light snapped off, and his mom's boyfriend, Russ, creaked his body back into bed. Ronnie exhaled. He'd heard the jerk say, "Dumb bitch" a lot. Ronnie had even looked it up in the old dictionary in the school library: "bitch: a female dog" it read. That made no sense at all!

A couple other times, he had heard the jerk say, "Goddamn slut" in an angry voice. Ronnie'd tried looking that up, too, but it wasn't in the dictionary. He'd thought of asking Mrs. Williams what it meant but decided against it. He had an idea: real bad, or maybe worse than rotten, smelly, ugly and real bad.

Slut wasn't a good word.

Ronnie listened and heard no creaking bed or voices, so he crept to his bedroom. His open door plainly showed Ronnie's light and empty bed, but the jerk had been too dumb to notice. Ronnie strode in and eased the door shut. Opening his palm, he counted ninety-seven cents: three quarters, two dimes, and two pennies. Gently, he placed each coin on top of his reading book, smiled, flicked off the light and slid back into bed.

Ronnie sat right in front of the television. Watching Saturday morning cartoons alone for five hours was great. Nobody nagged. No one screamed. For a while, the living room was safe. At eleven-thirty, his mom, wearing jeans and a Los Angeles Lakers T-shirt, pushed through the door into the apartment's living room. Ronnie watched her. She slunk as if ashamed or trying to hide. Her head tilted forward flopping brown hair over her face. Slowly, she lumbered into the kitchen. The faucet burst on and off. Ronnie knew she was swallowing aspirin.

"Hi, Mom," Ronnie said while staring at the cartoon. He heard the glass clunk against the sink.

"You want breakfast?" she said.

Ronnie shook his head no. He'd already eaten a bag of the jerk's potato chips during "Pound Puppies." When some ads came on, Ronnie glanced toward the kitchen. She filled a glass carafe with water, and when she whirled around to pour it into the coffee maker, her hair flipped up, and

Ronnie saw the black and purple stain on her face. Startled, he jumped to his feet and rushed toward her. She looked down and turned her back on him.

"What happened?" Ronnie said.

"I fell and hit the door," she answered. The coffee brewing smell and gurgling began. Ronnie watched her. "It'll be okay in a few days."

Stepping right next to her, Ronnie could see the bruise surrounding her left eye. It reminded him of Jeff Lawson's eye when a baseball had hit him. "You hit a door? How?"

"Well, I fell. I was tired and I fell."

Ronnie knew she was lying. Sad and angry, he wished it were Monday. "This would never happen to Mrs. Williams," he blurted. She began to say something, but he ignored her. He knew the truth. She and the jerk had been screaming early in the morning and now she had a black eye. He had done this. "You know, Mom, you look real ugly," Ronnie said. "I hate both of you." He marched to the television knowing she already felt bad, and he was making it worse. He loved her but all this was so evil. And it was her fault.

A little after noon, Russ Denbow, rubbing both hands through his greasy hair, stepped into the living room wearing only gray boxer shorts. He stunk of smoke and sweat. Ronnie tried not to look at him but did anyway. The jerk was hung over.

"I smelled coffee," Russ muttered. Ronnie heard a kiss smack and then coffee pouring. "Uh, I'm sorry, uh,

I was drunk, you know."

Turning his whole body, Ronnie watched his mother slide both hands around the jerk's shoulders. He touched her, too, and they hugged. Slamming his eyes shut, Ronnie looked away. The living room filled with hatred. Standing, Ronnie punched the television button off, rushed into his bedroom and closed the door.

About an hour later, Ronnie heard the jerk talking and the front door snap. He was probably going somewhere to drink beer and watch football on television. A light hand tapped on Ronnie's door. "Ronnie? Come on out."

He thought about it and being bored playing alone, got up from the floor as she pushed the door open. "Come on out. You don't want to stay in there all day, do you?"

Ronnie glanced at her. She'd tried putting make up over the bruise which looked like pink frosting stuck around her eye. He wanted to scrape it off. Instead, he looked at the floor. "There's football on TV," she said. "I'll make some lunch."

He didn't want her to feel happy. She should be punished for letting the jerk live with them. He slowly walked past her and flicked on the television. Flopping on the couch, trying to look bored and disgusted, Ronnie stared at her.

"You must be hungry," she said while walking toward the kitchen. Lunch and television didn't make it all right. This was all wrong. Ronnie watched her moving around the kitchen, opening the refrigerator, taking dishes, moving a

knife, pouring milk.

"I'm goin'," he said as he stood.

"But lunch...."

He marched for the door, shoved it open, and ran across the yard. Lifting his bicycle, he swung his leg over it, and pumped his legs as hard as he could. He zoomed onto the driveway and down the street.

Ronnie wanted her to chase after him, but when he glanced back at the end of the block, she was not in sight. He knew she had just closed the door. She would have chased after the jerk. He was sure of that.

While riding around the neighborhood, he didn't know where to go. The jerk's ugly face and smelly feet kept appearing in Ronnie's mind. Heart pounding, his sweaty palms gripped the handlebars tighter and anger pulsed through him. He pedaled faster and soared past a stop sign. Rows of houses blurred together. His eyes stared straight ahead. Suddenly, Russ Denbow's face disappeared from Ronnie's mind. He slowed his pedaling and tried to picture that hideous face. It was gone, and he couldn't remember what the jerk looked like.

The bike coasted up a slight hill and finally stopped next to a leaf pile at the curb. While pressing his feet into the crinkling leaves, the sun beamed and a red Camaro cruised past.

"I hate the jerk," Ronnie said but didn't feel it anymore. "I hate him. He's a...." It didn't work. The jerk wasn't the real problem. He thought a moment. It

must be his mom. She was supposed to be in charge yet she had invited this jerk to live with them. He should hate his mother, so he tried. Images of her sad face and bruised eye filled his mind. She looked weak and tired. Ronnie decided, she wouldn't get rid of Russ by herself. Could Ronnie make him leave? No. Who could help? Mrs. Williams? No.

He kicked some sticks and then rolled his bicycle forward. His dad lived a few blocks from here. Ronnie saw him every other weekend usually for an hour or so at lunch or dinner. He was a big man with strong hands and a scruffy face. His trailer was not far. Ronnie rushed down the street.

Joe Cummings raked leaves into a large pile on the edge of his lot. Taking a pack of matches from his pocket, he lit one and ignited the dry leaves. He stepped back and took a deep breath.

"Hi, Dad."

Joe leaned against the rake and glanced to his side. His son stood next to his pickup truck holding a stingray bicycle. Joe was surprised and a little concerned. This was not his weekend. "Uh, well, what are you doin' here, boy?"

He watched Ronnie lay the bike on the ground and step toward the smoldering fire which suddenly exploded into flames. "Don't get too close." The child wore no jacket, only sneakers, jeans and a red sweatshirt. The fifty degree

temperature and whispering breeze chilled Joe as he worked wearing a wool jacket and gloves. This was just like the boy's mother, he thought. "Where's your coat? Aren't you cold? This is no day to be riding around with no coat."

Ronnie shrugged and opened his palms toward the fire.

"Your mom know you're here?"

Ronnie looked down and shook his head no. "I came on my own."

Oh no, Joe thought. Great. The kid's here illegally. That's all he needed was his ex-old lady reporting him to the court. "You're not supposed to be here. This isn't our weekend. You'll get me in trouble. Your mom is supposed to know when you're going to visit me. You better go back home." He raked some leaves into the fire as he worked his way around the pile.

"Dad, uh, I was wondering. How come I can't live with you?"

Joe stopped raking and looked at the boy. "The court decided. You know, the judge. It was just part of the divorce. Anyways, I'm always working and don't have time to babysit. You're better off with her." Joe didn't like this conversation. He felt free now and didn't want or need this kid burdening him.

"But, Dad, Russ lives with us now. He moved in last week and...."

"Oh, Russ is the latest? Russ Denbow? He's such a jerk."

Ronnie nodded. "Well, Mom's got a black eye today.

I think Russ hit her last night when he was drunk. I thought you...."

Joe smiled and then chuckled as he raked some leaves that had blown off back into the fire. "A shiner, huh? What'd she do to get that?" This'll let her know just how good she had it with me, he thought. After all, they'd had to sell the house and now he was stuck in this rotten trailer. Maybe there was a little justice in the world.

"I thought you...."

"Whatever happens, kid, with your mom is her business. Don't expect me to yell and cry and go crazy just cause she got herself punched."

When Joe quit raking, he noticed Ronnie had stepped back and was staring at the ground. Feeling a little uncomfortable, Joe said, "You gonna watch football today?" Ronnie shook his head no and then shrugged as he kicked at the burning leaves. "Careful, don't hurt yourself." The kid strode into the ashes, and flames licked at his pantlegs. Joe dropped the rake, rushed to the boy, and with strong arms heaved him up into the air away from the fire. "What's the matter with you? You trying to burn your clothes? When I tell you to be careful, I mean it." He set the boy down next to his bicycle.

"Dad," he whispered. "What's a goddamn slut?"

"Huh?"

"Russ said it. Goddamn slut."

"Oh? He call your ma that?" Ronnie nodded yes. "It's not nice. It's bad. Don't you say it. It's a dirty word."

"Dad," Ronnie said a little louder. "What's a bitch?"

"Russ called her a bitch, too?" Ronnie nodded. "Well, she's picked a real gentleman this time, hasn't she? Don't you use that word either. It's dirty."

Ronnie scrunched his eyebrows and wrinkled his forehead. "I know it's dirty but what does slut mean?"

Suddenly, the trailer door flew open rapping against the wall. Wearing only one of Joe's white dress shirts, Renee stood in the doorway itching her stomach with both hands. She squinted in Joe's direction.

"Hey, Beefcake, how's it hangin'?" Her knotted brown hair swayed in the breeze. Joe stared at her and suddenly felt Ronnie tugging on his fingers.

"Who's she?" Ronnie said.

"Who's that with you? I don't got my contacts in," she yelled.

Joe decided to answer the easy question. "This is my boy, Ronnie."

"Oh, that's nice. You got any pizza? I'm hungry."

"Check the fridge." So he wasn't the perfect role model, so what? He was just human like everybody else. Now he not only had to get rid of her before tonight's poker game, he also had to send the kid home. "She's Renee," Joe said to Ronnie. Three drinks in a bar and ten hours later he was still burdened with her presence. "She'll be leaving soon."

Ronnie turned his back on the trailer and faced the fire.

"You ought to get home before your ma worries." Ronnie



shrugged. Pulling his wallet from his pocket, Joe tugged a dollar out and pushed it toward the boy. "Here's a present for you." Ronnie reached up and took the bill. "You go buy yourself something at the store and then head on home, okay?" Ronnie nodded and Joe felt relieved.

Just then the door slapped open and Renee hollered, "You got anything besides this light beer?"

Rhonda Morten touched her fingertips along the edge of her eye. The slightest pressure hurt. She wasn't even sure how this had happened. Last night, Ronnie had been putting on his spoiled brat routine refusing to sit in the living room with Russ who had been watching television and drinking beer while she washed and dried the dishes. She'd drunk three or four glasses of chablis as she worked. The evening had passed quickly. She had showered and got ready for bed. At midnight, they started watching some dumb horror movie about nude teenage sunbathers being dismembered by their psychotic high school counselor who wore bib overalls, cowboy boots, a catcher's mask and carried a machete.

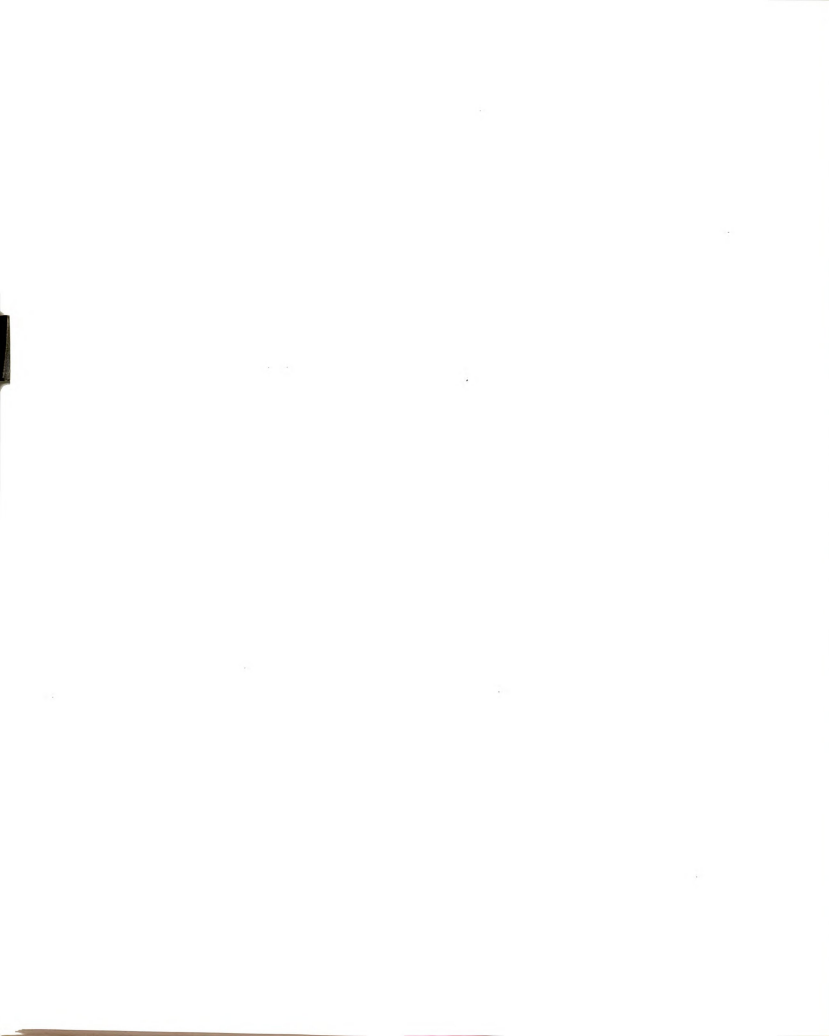
"Let's see what else is on," Rhonda had said.

"Naw, it's just getting to the good part," Russ had answered.

"Good part? In this movie, there's no good part. This movie's retarded. Come on, change the channel."

Russ had suddenly sat up straight. "Don't you call me names, you dumb bitch. I ain't no retard."

"I didn't say you were. I was talking about this stupid



movie."

"Don't you call me stupid, you goddamn slut."

Irrational. It went on like that for a few more minutes, and then she remembered standing in the bathroom crying and splashing cold water on her eye. She couldn't remember getting hit. She wasn't drunk, but still she couldn't remember. She had made him angry, so she got hit. That was it. She'd have to make sure she didn't make him angry again.

No man had ever hit her before. Rhonda was going to make sure it didn't happen again.

What did she feel for Russ? Did she love him? Yes, she thought so. But why? He wasn't handsome or rich. In fact, he was rather homely and was usually broke. He wasn't gentle or kind. He didn't like children. Russ argued about dumb things. He'd bought a 1988 Notre Dame football cap and called the Fighting Irish "My Team." It's easy to associate yourself with a winner after the victories are history, she thought.

And why had she asked him to live with her? She now realized Russ needed to shower more often. He never shined his shoes. His hair was always greasy, and he needed to floss his teeth.

When they first met, she had been moping about losing Joe. She thought Russ was fun. Rhonda remembered him telling jokes and showing off. One time a creep in a bar had called her "Bimbo." Russ had defended her by confronting the man until he backed down and sheepishly apologized.

That night, Russ had seemed strong and very masculine.

But that had happened months ago. What did she like about him now? He didn't gamble except for lottery tickets. That was a positive. Thinking for a moment, she decided the reason he didn't gamble was because he had no money. His 1977 Buick wasn't fit for a demolition derby. His shoes should be burned. She smiled. "And his body contained enough gas to torch all of Brazil," she said and laughed outloud.

The front door squeaked open and Ronnie stepped inside carrying a brown paper bag. Rhonda watched him carefully shut the door. Extending her hands toward him, she said, "Come here." The boy rushed to her on the couch and pounced onto her lap hugging her with both arms. "You're getting so big. Before I know it, you'll be all grown up." She brushed her fingers through Ronnie's hair.

Ronnie leaned back and handed her the bag. "I got you presents at the store."

She felt surprised. "You did? Where'd you get the money?"

"Dad gave it to me. I had one dollar and ninety-seven cents."

She pulled the bag open and reached in. With exaggerated smiles, she removed a pack of gum, a small bag of candy, and a can of fruit cocktail. "Oh, how wonderful. Thank you so much. Thank you." She pressed a gentle kiss into his cheek as he hugged even tighter.

She knew love. Holding her child during a calm

afternoon, talking, listening, caring and giving for her son's well-being, cooperating and not hurting the one she loved. A statement she had heard somewhere popped into her mind: Love is patient, love is kind, it is not easily angered. Love always protects, trusts, hopes and preserves.

Sitting there holding her son, Rhonda Morten knew her life had to change.

The front door snapped open and cracked against the wall. Russ marched in. Rhonda watched his cheek muscles ripple as he ground his teeth. Shaking both clenched fists, he said, "You know that jackass, Ray Snyder? He don't think the Raiders are a good team. Just cause they lost a few don't mean they don't still got a shot at the Super Bowl. So that ass says I don't know nothin' about football, so I says you wouldn't know manure if you got a mouthful, so he says get out, so I took my beer bottle and smashed it all over the kitchen floor. So Ray comes for me, but the other guys grab him, and as I left I called him every name in the book. I hate those stupid asses." He flopped on the couch. Rhonda stared at him. After a long silent moment, Russ said, "Turn on the TV. The game's on." Rhonda wrapped her arms around Ronnie and kissed the top of his head.

"Come on, turn it on."

"You can't get up?" she said.

"I thought we settled this last night," Russ said.

Silence. At least a minute passed. Then Ronnie shot out of Rhonda's grasp and pounced onto Russ. Fists slammed against Russ's surprised face again and again. "I hate you.

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"You're a dumb bitch." Russ caught and held the child's arms in his big hands. Ronnie's sneakers stomped into Russ's groin and kicked relentlessly. "You're a goddamn slut," screamed Ronnie, red faced and exploding with anger.

Again a male was defending her. Only this time it wasn't a man but her child. She was the abused one, Rhonda realized, and by allowing herself to suffer and providing Russ as a role model she was abusing Ronnie. What positive values or behaviors could Ronnie learn from him? None. Her child would learn to hate and respond to people in a violent way if she allowed Russ to stay. Rhonda had never been a fighter. Maybe she was a doormat in most situations, but seeing her son physically threatened released the lioness in her. A tingling, powerful sensation rose from the base of her spine to the top of her head.

Rhonda stood and took her glass Coke bottle from the end table. "Hey, get this brat off me. I don't wanna hurt him, but I will," stammered Russ.

"Don't you dare," Rhonda said while tightening her grip on the bottle.

"You're a slut. Goddamn. You bitch!" screamed the child at Russ.

Releasing one of Ronnie's hands, Russ pushed him away while stretching his right arm back. As Russ formed a punching fist, Rhonda with both hands clubbed the Coke bottle onto the top of Russ's head. An empty thud sounded, Russ's fist dropped to the couch and his fingers spread apart.

Exhausted, Ronnie tumbled off the couch and watched Russ's head nod and finally tip to the side. Russ stopped moving for a moment. The jerk moaned and then was silent. A dribble of blood drooled down the side of his head, collected on his jawbone, and then dripped onto his lap. Ronnie slid away and watched.

Calmly, his mom walked into the kitchen and washed off the Coke bottle in the sink. "Son, why don't you go into your room now?" Ronnie sat right there in front of Russ.

After a few minutes, Russ opened his eyes and clenched his hands to his head. The jerk wasn't dead. Like a baby taking his first steps, he stood and staggered toward the bathroom. Ronnie's mom blocked his path and said, "Get out." Her steel voice made Ronnie duck behind the chair. He knew she meant business. Russ turned, blinked his glassy eyes, and stumbled for the door. His hand smeared blood across the knob as he labored to escape. "I'll send your stuff over to Ray Snyder's," she yelled at the jerk as he made his way to the parking lot.

Later that night as Ronnie lay in bed, his mom kissed him good night. She flicked off the light and left shutting the door behind her. Ronnie listened. No screaming or breaking glass. His mother suddenly seemed a little like his teacher, Mrs. Williams. He had never noticed that before. She didn't look different, but Ronnie knew his mom had changed. In the darkness and silence, Ronnie felt a warmth. He was safe, and his mom was safe, too.

NO LONGER THE ENEMY

Eddie Bismark wished Satan would be thrown into the abyss and burned for eternity, today. But Eddie couldn't control the prophecies. He knew that. His job was to preach, warn, and rebuke the non-believers, and he loved it. Standing on the corner of Monroe and Fountain Streets, he would condemn Satan and all the unrighteous. Sometimes he wore a sandwich board over his shoulders that read "Repent: Your Doom Is Near," but not today.

Last Thursday, a hideous demon-possessed villain had grabbed the sign, yanked it off his shoulders, and chased the good apostle up Monroe all the way to Division Avenue where Eddie had run out of breath. The demon hit Eddie again and again with the sign, and finally the flimsy cardboard tore in half. The vile sinner ripped it to shreds,

blurted an oath, and hurried away leaving Eddie shaken but not hurt. Eddie was glad he'd had the opportunity to suffer for righteousness. Stacking hot coals on the sinner's head and all. As he took his place on the street corner at ten in the morning, he pulled his stocking cap over his ears and breathed on his hands. Snowflakes swirled between the tall buildings and landed on his nose and eyelashes. He brushed them away.

A line of cars, stopped at the intersection, eased forward after the light turned green. It was time for Eddie's first prophecy of the day. "Fear the judgment for all you evil sinners will burn. The sulphur flames await and the fury of an angry God will repay your evil with destruction!"

Three young women wearing long wool coats and leather boots approached the corner. Eddie watched them. At the curb, the women turned their backs on him. He had seen these prostitutes before. Their scarves, gloves, and briefcases couldn't cover their red sins.

"Pain to the prostitutes who shall burn with Satan in the flaming abyss. For eternity in hell waits for you."

The cars stopped and the walk sign flashed. Eddie jumped directly behind the women who scurried across the street like rats escaping from an inferno. He had filled them with fear and may have turned them toward repentance. Smiling, Eddie spun around as a crowd of sinners collected near him. Business people, buyers and sellers of worldly goods, Satan's children, sent streams of frozen breath toward the street like dragons preparing to breathe fire.

Eddie leaped blocking their path and raised his hands to heaven. "Repent, ye vile sinners. Your rotting flesh leaves a stench in God's nose. Your faces make God raise his sword in fury. Your words...."

Suddenly, a tall man dressed in black coat, shoes and gloves stood before Eddie who cowered from this demon's gaze. His dark eyes blazed and his lips curled under on one side.

"What do you say we send this bum to his reward?" the man said. The others started across the street as the Devil's servant grabbed Eddie's coat and flung him into the sidewalk. Scraping his hand and bumping his knees, Eddie looked back as the man crossed the street.

"Get thee behind me, Satan," Eddie tried to yell but only mumbled, "Get thee behind...." His hand hurt. Turning his palm up, blood oozed along the burning spot. Eddie pressed the sore to his mouth glad that his blood had been shed for a righteous cause.

"Are you okay?" someone said.

Eddie glanced up, and two young men wearing down jackets suddenly took hold of Eddie's arms, one on each side, and lifted him to his feet. Eddie stared at them amazed. The blond haired one wore a gold pierced earring and had a cigarette smoldering between his lips. The dark one smiled and said, "Have a Merry Christmas."

Shocked, Eddie stepped back but said nothing. The men stood at the corner for a moment and then crossed. Who were they? Eddie wondered.

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Knees aching, his hand hurting, a cold shiver trembled Eddie. He had missed the big morning rush, and at the moment few people walked the streets. He slid toward the brick wall, one side of a bank, trying to escape the wind. He breathed on his hands again, but it didn't help. Maybe he should go back to the YMCA, he thought. The sinners were indoors warm and comfortable while God's apostle stood alone, freezing and hurting. "Thy will be done," Eddie muttered.

"Um, excuse me, sir," a deep voice said. Eddie looked up and a silver haired man dressed in a cashmere coat stood there holding a plastic bag. "I hope you don't mind. I saw you here yesterday and noticed you didn't have any gloves. I was hoping you'd be here today so I could give these to you." He pulled a pair of blue snowmobiler's gloves out of the bag and held them. Eddie stepped back and looked down. "I understand. Charity may not be what you want, but please take the gloves. It's about twenty degrees out here."

Eddie looked at the man avoiding eye contact and took the gloves. "Well, have a Merry Christmas and God bless you," the man said. Turning away, Eddie pulled the gloves on. When he glanced toward the street, the man was gone.

His warming hands made the rest of his body feel better. Eddie noticed the usually gray buildings and sidewalks had red and green lights strung along the street lamps with huge wreaths. In the distance, church bells began chiming "Silent Night Holy Night." Eddie listened and watched as an elderly woman wearing a mink coat and beret walked out

of the bank and headed toward him. She held a gold box and whistled the Christmas carol. At the corner, Eddie jumped into her path. "Repent for the end is near. Your sin is red as blood and God's judgment...."

"Listen, you," she blurted. "Cut the crap." Eddie's voice seemed to evaporate in the cold. "I know what you want. You want to scare me, so I'll run across the street to get away. Well, I don't scare." With her right index finger, she poked Eddie's chest. He stepped back and looked down feeling her eyes burning into his soul. "You must be freezing," she said. "Come on." She began crossing the street. Eddie watched her but didn't move. "You," she commanded pointing a stubby gloved finger at him. "Follow me. Now!"

Hunching his shoulders, he saw only her silver boots marching away. Without a thought, he followed. Down the street, she turned into Joe's Diner, held the door open, and motioned him inside. The restaurant's warmth surrounded and filled Eddie. The smell of coffee, bacon and eggs made him breathe deeply. At an empty table, the woman pulled out a chair and pointed at him. "You, sit!" she ordered.

Eddie rushed to the table and sat. "Just like training a dog," she muttered. "Joe, coffee, scrambled eggs, toast, and hurry on the coffee." With a clatter, she took her chair. "You want bacon?" Eddie nodded. "Bacon, too, Joe!" she bellowed.

As she yanked off her hat and gloves, Eddie looked at her. She had clear blue eyes and a friendly smile that

contrasted sharply with her determined tone of voice. A dark haired man set two cups on the table. Eddie pulled off his gloves.

"I've seen you on that corner scaring people before," the woman said as she sipped her coffee. "I'm Irene Darling. What's your name?"

Touching the cup's edge, Eddie met her gaze. "This for me?"

"Drink it. Sure it's for you. You think I'm goin' to drink two cups at once?" She laughed. Eddie took a sip. The steam defrosted his face. "So, you got a name or what? If you don't tell me, I'll have to give you one, and I'm sure you won't like it."

"Eddie," he whispered.

"Eddie what?"

"Eddie Bismark."

She nodded. "That's a good name." The waiter slid plates in front of them, and after a moment, refilled their coffee cups. "Eat up, Ed. If you don't mind grease, roach parts and a little rat hair in your food, then Joe's the best cook in town."

Eddie coughed and laughed. He knew what she meant, but the hot food tasted great. Eddie devoured it. His plate empty, he glanced at her and noticed she hadn't taken a bite.

"Hey, Joe," she boomed. "Plate two!" She began eating, and Eddie looked around. The diner was clean, and except for two other tables, empty. A fat woman fried eggs behind the counter. The dark haired man filled coffee cups and

cleared dirty dishes off tables.

"So, Ed, you scare people for a living?" Irene said.

Eddie turned to her but said nothing. The waiter took away Eddie's empty plate and replaced it with another serving. Eddie cleared his throat. "I'm an apostle. I point out sin to sinners."

"How do you know which people are sinners?" she said softly.

"We live in an evil world. Satan has a foothold. I've been beaten and thrown down."

"Ed, people think you're crazy. People think you've escaped from some asylum and are going to pull a knife."

"No."

"Are you crazy?" she said.

"No."

The waiter refilled Irene's coffee. "Thanks, Joe," she said.

"I rebuke Satan."

She waited a moment and said, "Ed, haven't you ever heard 'Do not judge for you shall be judged'? Or how about 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us'?"

"Sure. I've heard that. It's the Bible." Feeling uncomfortable, Eddie slurped his coffee.

"Well, let's talk about something else," Irene said.

"Who do you want to win the Super Bowl?"

Eddie shrugged. He ate his food and downed his coffee.

"You live some place?" she asked.

Eddie shrugged again, but then said, "At the Y."

She nodded. He finished his breakfast in silence, and Irene stood up, handed a ten dollar bill to the waiter, put on her hat and gloves and said, "Have a Merry Christmas, Ed. And God bless." With that, she clomped out the door and disappeared. Eddie watched her go. After a moment, he pulled on his new gloves and walked outside.

After crossing the street, he stood again on his corner. The snow fell harder and the wind swirled little tornadoes on the sidewalk. Images filled Eddie's mind: the two boys who had picked him up, the silver haired man, Irene Dearling. He stared at his gloves until a couple, young sinners, approached. A boy, about eighteen, draped his arm over a girl's shoulders. She squeezed both arms around his waist as they strolled. Listening, Eddie heard him making smooching sounds as she giggled. The sinners stopped at the corner and together turned toward Eddie who heard in his mind, "Repent your evil ways. The sulphur and flames wait to repay your sins."

Eddie looked up and the couple stood there appearing a little puzzled. "You okay, mister?" the girl said.

Eddie couldn't answer but finally nodded.

"Have a Merry Christmas," the boy said as they turned and crossed the street.

Eddie felt cold again. Why stand out here? Was he crazy? he thought. He didn't know for sure. But he did know his anger had disappeared, and the people on the street were no longer the enemy.

LUCKY NIGHT

Lyle Gdowski felt lucky as he slid the heavy vacuum cleaner down the hallway. This wasn't going to be any dusty desk dimes night. He sensed electricity in his mind forwarning a great moment. Maybe he'd find a pile of forgotten cash or a lost diamond. These high style party chumps were always drinking themselves incontinent and losing their prized treasures behind the toilet where Lyle would recover them.

He pushed the Grand Ballroom's doors open, flicked on the light and surveyed the damage. As night man, he was always left with the real work. The kitchen crew had already collected the dishes and silverware, and anything else on the tables had been grabbed before Lyle even had a chance, so he had to explore the more subtle possibilities.

The wall clock read ten minutes after three. He had about eight hours to collect trash, wash the tables, vacuum, clean the toilets and make everything perfect for tomorrow's luncheon. Tonight's brawl had probably been a retirement party, he thought. It couldn't have been a wedding reception, not on a Wednesday night. Maybe it was some business bash. Pinstripe execs didn't need any reason to celebrate as long as it was tax deductible.

Lyle's job was secure because the Manley Hotel was booked months ahead with conventions, conferences, all kinds of talkers, who used the ballroom and partied until hotel security would escort them to their rooms. Lyle started work at three in the morning Tuesday through Saturday. He cleaned the same area five times each week which included a lobby, a coat vestibule, two enormous restrooms and the Grand Ballroom. Once a month, a crew with scaffolding would set up and clean the crystal chandeliers and replace any burnt out lights. That was the only time Lyle ever had company. Usually, he punched in and did his work from three till eleven without speaking to anyone.

At six, the morning crew, cooks, waitresses, maids and desk clerks, punched in, but they ignored Lyle, and he preferred it that way. They were all losers.

A ripple slithered across Lyle's forehead, an electrical twitch, telling him to keep alert for glittering in the trash or crumpled bills. Once he'd spotted a ten dollar bill soaked and wadded into a napkin on a table. He hadn't found anything for a few weeks, so this had to be his lucky

night.

Lyle rolled the gray rubber trash can down an aisle as he shoved paper and assorted junk into it. The kitchen vultures had really cleaned up. Like a robin pecking for worms, he flitted about the room filling seven trash cans while finding nothing. Disappointed, Lyle decided to take a break, so he sat on a velvety chair. His sense of anticipation slipped away, and his electric ripples vanished. This wasn't a lucky night after all. He'd just clean up the mess and go home. His eyes burned a little, so he rubbed his fingers across them.

The Grand Ballroom was silent and cold like a cave with its crystals hanging above and its mossy green carpeting underfoot. Lyle listened and closed his eyes. A gentle ripple twitched his toes as if spiders were tickling his feet and gradually slid up his legs and throughout his body. Alone with his feelings, Lyle knew his first instinct had been correct. This was his lucky night. All he had to do was be patient and good fortune would find Lyle Gdowski. Night janitors don't get many fringes, so fate had to make up for it.

Lyle opened his eyes and the trancelike euphoria subsided. Standing, he walked toward the ladies restroom. He'd look around before finishing the ballroom. A long ripple spasmed the muscles in his right biceps.

Lyle pushed the door open and entered the pink room. Inside, he thought everything seemed normal. He shoved each stall door open as he walked. He found nothing and

noticed the spasms had ceased. He grasped his right biceps with his left hand and squeezed the plump muscle. He felt no peculiar energy. Turning, he scanned the row of sinks. Nothing. And the room was fairly clean, too. That was good. Closing his eyes, he faced the long mirrors trying to reactivate his radar-sense to locate his treasure. Nothing. He'd lost the sensation.

Lyle opened his eyes and sighed. His face, reflected in the mirror, said, "So, where is it?" The face stared, accusing, tight-lipped. "You're so stupid. Get to work, you lazy good for nothin', and don't you steal any money from any desks like you did at the Hampton Building. You'll just get yourself fired again."

"Oh, shut up!" Lyle yelled at the face in the mirror which suddenly turned serene, expressionless, like a nun staring at a crucifix. Lyle looked deep into those blue eyes through the mirror into someplace he'd never been before. His mind moved in blackness seeing in all directions at once. He rolled over and over moving farther away from the mirror, his eyes and his body. He was weightless, formless, a ghost, dead or maybe alive for the first time.

Suddenly, Lyle's eyes blinked, and he was back in the pink restroom standing before the mirror. In the reflection, his smooth skin looked childlike. He brushed his fingers through his brown hair and noticed a slight twitch in his left cheek squinting his eye. He'd taken his pill. This was no big deal. In fact, the palsy was good. It signaled luck.

His face said, "It's jackpot. Just find it, Pal." He smiled at himself and walked to the lobby where he darted into the coatroom and surveyed the rows of empty hangers. Nothing. He strode across the lobby checking the chairs and small tables. Lyle bent down with his head inches from the floor searching for his treasure. Still nothing. When he straightened up, he stood before a gold-framed mirror.

"Keep looking, Buddy. You're warm," his reflection said. He whirled, ran into the ballroom, stopped, looked around and took a deep breath. The kitchen door at the back caught his attention. He sprinted across the wooden dance floor and slid into the entry, his shoulder cracking against it. Locked, he thought. He peered through the square window into blackness.

"I must be logical," he said. Gazing through the glass, he noticed he couldn't see his reflection. That meant this wasn't the jackpot.

Lyle realized the men's restroom was the only place he hadn't checked. That must be it. Confidently, he marched to the lobby. As he neared the doorway, he saw a tall man dressed in a gray uniform near the coatroom. Lyle stared, shocked by this intruder who gazed for a moment into the rows of hangers as if looking for something. Lyle read the insignia on the man's shoulder, Hotel Security, and as he turned toward Lyle, brown eyes darted and locked on their target. This man appeared tough and arrogant as he glared for a few seconds at Lyle who felt suddenly weak and small. A wobbly tremor slipped sideways across Lyle's hips and knees.

He knew he should run but couldn't. A moment passed and the evil cop grew taller and meaner and more powerful with each second. Lyle shrunk and dissolved like a wad of toilet paper in a rain storm.

"You the night man?" the security officer said.

"Yeah," Lyle heard himself say as he suddenly became fearful that this man had come to steal his treasure.

"You alone?"

Lyle noticed the cop's hand rested on a long flashlight hanging from his belt like a Greek soldier feeling for his sword before battle. "Sure," Lyle said.

"A woman upstairs heard someone slamming on a door or wall and screaming. You heard anything?"

Lyle shrugged.

The officer's eyes squinted a little. "You been making any noise?"

"Ju...ju...just cleanin' up."

"You new here?"

Lyle shook his head no.

"How long you worked here?"

"A year or so," Lyle said.

"I thought I knew everybody. I'm Joel Graves." He extended his hand toward Lyle who stepped forward and clasped the strong fingers. "A year and I've never even known you were here. Man, you must move around like a ghost. So, what's your name?"

"Lyle."

"Well, I'll have to come in here and say hello more

often. This part of the hotel sure is quiet. Good seeing you, Lyle. I got to get back." With that, the security man strode away and vanished through the doorway.

Lyle blew air out his mouth and felt powerful muscle spasms stiffen his legs and move up into his back. Panic filled his mind. He had to find the treasure quickly. He stumbled toward the men's room door, pushed it open and entered. Lyle gazed down the lane of toilets and had the odd feeling that he should throw a bowling ball toward that far wall. Instantly, a ball appeared and its weight strained his arms. His hands rose together chest high as he strode two and a half times, bent and delivered the bowling ball. Watching the phantom ball roll, he saw it crash into spectral pins that flew against the wall and disappeared.

"Steerike!" he shouted while clenching his fist in front of his face. Lyle examined the place on the wall past all the sinks on the left and stalls on the right. The ball had smashed through and made a hole in the plaster. Concerned, Lyle hurried to it and as he approached, he saw the hole extended many feet into a large empty space. Stretching his hands out, he touched the hole and his hand passed through the wall into the blackness. A pulse of tingling power poked at his fingertips and surged up his arm to his shoulder. Slowly, Lyle pulled his arm out. As he did, the wall moved in undulating waves closing down, healing the broken plaster.

This was a miracle.

What did it mean? Lyle stood confused until his eyes were drawn to his right to the last stall. Lyle pushed on

the closed door. It wouldn't budge, locked. Dropping to his knees, Lyle bent down peering under it. Black shoes, blue pinstripe pants? Bewildered, Lyle gazed at a man sitting on the toilet with his head slumped against the wall.

This was Lyle's jackpot? A dead man sitting on the toilet? He slipped his fingers under the door and yanked on the pant legs inch by inch tugging them down around the man's ankles. Lyle felt for the pockets and found a bump. Electricity pulsed through his body and gentle spasms twitched as he pulled out a black wallet that had lumps like warts all over its shiny surface. Made from a pimply cow, Lyle thought as he unfolded it and separated the sides displaying his treasure, maybe thousands of dollars. He sat against the wall and counted two fifties, seven twenties, a ten, four fives and three ones. Treasure! And it belonged to Lyle Gdowski.

Springing to his feet, he threw the money into the air and as it rained over his head, he charged the mirror, hands above his head, and high-fived his reflection who yelled, "Treasure, Pal, treasure!"

Suddenly, he scurried around grabbing the bills, flopped cross-legged and sorted them into piles on the floor. After counting the cash again, he noticed the wallet lying under the sinks. He collected the bills into a stack, folded it over and stuffed it into his pocket. Stretching to his left, he took the wallet, then crawled on all fours to the last stall. He slid the leather into the pants pocket and stood up. Laughing at himself in the mirrors, he

shadowboxed, punching and jabbing, as he danced toward the exit. His twitches and spasms had ceased. Finding the treasure released his senses and freed his mind. Lyle felt exhilarated and wanted to work. Bursting into the lobby, he grabbed the spray bottle and sponge and moved to clean some tables.

At three forty-five, Joel Graves marched up the eighth floor hallway past some of the most expensive suites at the Manley Hotel. All was quiet. Occasionally, he'd have to break up a fight or drag a drunk to his room or escort hookers out of the building, but this night had been dead. A computer programmers' convention occupied most of the first three floors, and they had concluded their meetings with a party in the Grand Ballroom. Shortly after two, it had broken up and the building had settled down. Joel sensed an easy contentment in walking the silent halls. He figured his job was mainly to provide a legal justification for the hotel in case anything really terrible ever did happen.

Joel reached the end of the gold carpeted hallway and stood before the elevator. One thought disturbed his peaceful feeling. Earlier the desk clerk, Olsen, had told him a woman on three had heard pounding, hysterical screaming and insane laughter. Olsen had figured the commotion must have come from the Grand Ballroom. When Joel had checked it out, everything was quiet and still. Only the janitor, Lyle, was around and that scrawny man didn't look or act as if he'd ever raise his voice, timid, a real nothing,

the kind of guy who turns invisible in a crowd of two.

Joel had done his job and found nothing.

But something about Lyle bothered him. How could they work in the same building for a year and never cross paths? Especially since Joel roamed all over. He'd been in the Grand Ballroom maybe a dozen times before, and he'd never seen Lyle.

Joel pressed the elevator button. That woman on three must've just been dreaming. She'd probably eaten some of the soup at the Palatial Square Pub. That stuff would give a billy goat nightmares. The doors opened and Joel stepped aboard. Pressing one, he decided to check the first floor again before settling into the office chair and taking a break.

When Joel entered the Grand Ballroom a few minutes later, he was amazed. An hour ago, the place had been a disaster with chairs and tables all over, junk on the floor and spilled drinks puddled on the furniture. Now everything was where it belonged. No trash was in sight. And a skinny Lyle wearing his blue custodian's uniform was soaked with sweat as he heaved a huge vacuum cleaner back and forth like a man dancing the jitterbug with a hippopotamus. For a little guy, he sure could work. Lyle seemed obsessed with cleaning. Joel figured this man had found his niche.

"Hey, Lyle, you wanna do my apartment next?" he yelled.

Lyle stopped vacuuming and jumped back one step. Joel felt silly for startling him. "How'd you get all this done so fast?" He smiled and raised his hand gesturing toward

the room and noticed Lyle pressed his hand against his right pants pocket as if gaining strength from a hidden talisman. Joel watched Lyle tug the vacuum around and push it in the opposite direction until Lyle's back was toward him.

"Real friendly guy," he muttered. Lyle continued heaving and hauling on the machine obviously more interested in cleaning the carpet than in socializing. "Well, it's been nice talking to you," shouted Joel sarcastically as he turned and walked to the security office.

When Lyle wheeled around, the Gestapo had gone. Good. He had finished the ballroom in record time. He deserved a break, so he switched off the vacuum, gathered the cord and then walked to the head table where he sat down and picked his lunchbox off the floor. Feeling a tingling sensation in his right hand, he dug into his pocket and pulled out his treasure. Carefully, he sorted the money into piles, the fifties together, twenties and so on. Laying them out on display, he popped open his lunchbox and took out his coffee thermos, sandwich, pudding and apple.

"A victory feast for those with wealth, riches, and a share in the American dream," he said to the money. After gobbling the sandwich and pudding, he reached into the box and removed a plastic bottle. He visualized Dr. Avery saying, "Lyle, always take your medication on time. It's important." Lyle didn't like the drugs at first, but now he'd grown accustomed, and he knew the medicine helped him keep his job. He rolled one pill onto his palm, flicked it into his

mouth and washed it down with a gulp of coffee.

As he crunched into the apple, a disturbing thought flickered into his mind. The thought grew stronger and more persistent. If he just left that dead guy sitting on the toilet until someone at the luncheon found him, Lyle's boss would think he hadn't cleaned that stall. He could get fired!

Slowly, Lyle placed the apple on the table, chewed and swallowed. "I must be logical," he said. Random ideas bombarded his mind as Lyle swept the bills with both hands, stood up and stuffed them into his pocket. "I could take him out, clean the stall and put him back." Lyle considered that. "I could say the door was stuck." His mind cleared. "What if they think I killed him?" Shocked, Lyle stepped back covering his mouth with one hand. "I didn't kill him!" Lyle shouted. He grabbed the apple and wanted to throw it hard. "Control, self-control is important." He lowered his arm and then bit into the fruit. "Maybe I should hide him," he said and smiled.

As Joel sat in the security office, his walkie talkie crackled, "Graves, this is Olsen at the desk. Please see a Mrs. Hendershot in room 312 concerning her husband." Joel dropped his magazine on the desk and scurried down the hall to the elevator. He hoped this wasn't the same woman who'd eaten the bad soup and had heard noises in her nightmares earlier. At least he had something to do.

When he reached the elevator, he pressed the button and the doors opened immediately. After stepping in, he

pushed three.

A few minutes later, Joel reached room 312. He gently tapped his knuckles on the door which cracked open revealing a middle-aged woman wearing a red bathrobe. Her face pressed into the three inches the chain lock allowed.

"I'm Joel Graves, hotel security."

The woman blinked. "I'm Lorna Hendershot. My husband didn't come to the room. Are you the police?"

"No, hotel security."

"I want the police," she said.

"I'll do what I can," Joel said.

She stared for a few seconds. "Well, my husband, Evan, is a computer programmer, and we came to the convention here. He had a little too much to drink, and I woke up and he wasn't here, so I called the desk to call the police."

"Has your husband done anything like this before?" Joel said.

She pursed her lips. "Of course not. He got a little drunk. Well, okay, a lot drunk. He was wandering from table to table asking people if they wanted to see his hernia surgery scar. No one did. Then he filled his mouth with caviar, went up to other tables, started choking and spit the caviar onto a man's pant leg. Well, the man jumped up. Evan thought it was funny."

"Did the man hit your husband?" Joel said.

"Oh, no, Evan's rather tall and brawny. The man just walked away. Well, Evan did that two more times, and I just couldn't stand it, so I came up here. When I woke,

I realized he hadn't come to bed, and it's after four-thirty." She paused and wiped a tear away.

"Where'd you see him last?" Joel said.

"The Grand Ballroom," Mrs. Hendershot said.

Marching into the ballroom ten minutes later, Joel felt powerful. This was a real case, detective work. He looked around. Everything was where it belonged. "Lyle?" Joel said. He scanned the lobby and strode into the coatroom. Joel had already patrolled many of the hallways and had found nothing suspicious. Either Evan Hendershot was in a room with another woman, or he was passed out dead drunk some place. Maybe Joel could find him? "Hey, Lyle, where are you?" He walked to the men's restroom, shoved the door open and entered. The floor glistened and smelled like cleanser. The white sinks glowed and the mirror was clear with no smudges, splashes or handprints. Suddenly, Joel noticed black shoes and blue pant legs sticking out from the doorway to the last stall. He stopped, startled, and then approached cautiously. As he neared the doorway, the feet moved. Joel jumped back as Lyle leaned his head out and glared at Joel.

"There you are," said Joel relieved.

"Don't you use any of these toilets. I just cleaned them. They're for the paying guests," said Lyle.

Joel felt amazed. This Lyle had gone from aloof to aggressive in less than an hour. "I'm here on official business this time." Joel watched Lyle's expression turn blank. "A woman lost her husband or more like he didn't

make it up to their room...."

"I didn't kill him!" announced Lyle as he rubbed a large sponge along the side of the stall.

Joel watched Lyle work. The man was a cleaning machine, absolutely amazing. "Have you seen or heard anything unusual?"

"Nope," said Lyle.

Joel turned toward the mirrors, admired the perfection of his work and slowly walked out. He could keep snooping around, or he could just tell Olsen to call the cops. This Hendershot guy had to be in a room with another woman. If Hendershot were around the ballroom, Lyle would've found him. Joel knew there was no use in searching any more.

Rolling and turning, aching and pounding, Evan Hendershot climbed up through his vodka martini numbness toward painful consciousness. Opening his eyes, he felt the cold tile against his cheek. Evan looked around at the pink walls and realized he was sitting on the toilet.

The blood swirling through his veins vibrated in his skull. Ears ringing, eyes burning, a hollow nausea echoed about his bones. Still drunk, his balance on the toilet felt unsteady as he remembered laughing and spitting something. He'd been asleep but couldn't estimate how long. After lifting his left arm and tugging back his sleeve, he read his watch, five-thirty.

At least he was still alive.

Until he saw Lorna, anyway. Pushing off the walls

with both hands, he stood which made him notice his pants had slid down around his ankles. Evan bent over and pulled them up. He shoved the door open as he hooked and zipped his pants. Stepping out, a wave of sickness swirled inside his stomach. The room was pink, he noticed, as he stumbled for the exit. Unable to locate it, he halted, glanced around and staggered in the opposite direction.

A hissing tone filled his head as if an angry cat were blowing a kazoo into his ears. With each step, Evan fought to keep balanced and meandered into the hallway. A woman pushing a metal cart that carried sponges, cleansers and bars of hand soap approached Evan. He watched her and realized he didn't know which way lead to the elevator. The woman passed Evan, and he walked up the hall hoping to find his room.

Evan thought he should be near the Grand Ballroom where the party had been. He wasn't. To his left a row of large windows displayed an indoor swimming pool. After turning a corner, Evan heard voices ahead and suddenly he stepped into the main lobby. He recognized it and felt somewhat relieved. Three men stood at the front desk. Two wore uniforms. The other behind the desk talked and then pointed a long finger at Evan who stopped as a hotel security officer and a city policeman turned and glared at him.

"Would ya look at what the cat dragged in," said the hotel security man.

The cop almost yelled, "You Evan Hendershot?"

Evan nodded.

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"You okay?"

Evan nodded.

"I'm outta here. See you later, Joel, Olsen," the cop barked as he whirled and marched for the exit.

"Your wife's worried about you," said the desk clerk. "You'd better get up to your room."

Evan tried to smile but couldn't, so he slid over to the elevator and pushed the button.

Record time! Lyle Gdowski had finished his work. The Grand Ballroom was perfect and ready for the luncheon. Lyle had some extra time, so he sat cross-legged beneath the crystal chandelier at the center of the room with his treasure on the carpet in front of him. He swirled his hand in a circle stirring the cash. After a moment, he closed his eyes, stopped the motion and picked up one bill. Without peeking, he felt the energy and guessed. "Twenty," he said as he popped open his eyes to see the bill with tight-lipped Andrew Jackson staring at his right shoulder. Suddenly, that stiff face turned straight ahead and focused on Lyle who felt those accusing eyes.

"You're a thief, a liar, a dirty no good scoundrel," said Andrew Jackson in a silky drawl. "And you're a murderer. You killed a man, robbed him...."

The voice stopped. Lyle crumpled the bill and threw the wad toward the lobby. "I didn't kill him," shouted Lyle. "I must be logical. Think things through." Lyle grabbed the cash and stuffed it into his pocket as he leaped to his

feet. He ran the night's events through his mind. He'd finished his work in record time. That was fantastic. He vaguely remembered a bowling ball but couldn't recall anything else. He'd found his treasure. That was tremendous. Patting his hand against his pocket where he'd hidden it, a dream popped into Lyle's mind as if played for him on a movie screen.

Lyle rolled a laundry hamper into the men's restroom pushing it all the way to the back. After flipping the hamper on one end, he slid it against the door to the last stall. Standing on the next toilet, Lyle stretched over the partition and unlocked the door. Shoving it open, Lyle grabbed a huge corpse and heaved him into the hamper which slammed over onto its wheels.

Lyle then saw himself in the ballroom pulling napkins, tablecloths, everything going to the laundry, from a pile and covering the dead man. With laughter in his throat, Lyle felt a chilling tremor of nervous energy vibrate throughout his body. He pushed the hamper down the main hallway and smiled at Olsen who said, "You're a good man, Lyle."

He proceeded past the laundry beyond the swimming pool to the restrooms still on the first floor at the south end of the building. Lyle knew second shift had cleaned these toilets before midnight. He could dump the corpse and then get back to finish his work. Moving to the far end of the ladies' restroom, Lyle uncovered the cadaver, muscled him into the stall and plopped him on the toilet. The body's

head thudded against the wall but then settled back. At that moment, an idea jumped into Lyle's mind. Maybe it wasn't dead. Hurriedly, Lyle touched his fingers to the side of its neck. Knowing there should be a pulse, he felt its throat, warm and moist, but no heartbeat. It was definitely dead, Lyle decided.

After easing the door shut, Lyle looked at his hands and held them up to his nose. They smelled rotten, contaminated by filthy death, so Lyle rushed to the sink, grabbed a bar of soap and scrubbed suds up to both elbows. After rinsing, he took a tablecloth from the hamper and dried off.

Time suddenly jumped ahead in Lyle's mind. He saw himself delivering the hamper to the laundry and then strolling back to the Grand Ballroom.

Awakening from his dream standing near the archway to the lobby, Lyle noticed a crumpled bill on the floor. He rushed over and swooped it up. More treasure, he thought as he unfolded it and stuffed the twenty into his pocket.

Lyle Gdowski's lucky night deserved a special treat. A chocolate bar sounded great. He had some change in his lunch box, so after getting it, he strode through the lobby to an arcade where candy machines displayed assorted goodies. He decided on a Snickers, slid his coins into the slot, pulled the knob, took the bar and began walking to the Grand Ballroom. He wanted to wait and enjoy his treat under the chandelier but couldn't resist, so he peeled the wrapper back and bit into it. Just then from the corner of his eye,

Lyle noticed something on the floor behind a potted palm tree at the far end of the lobby. Like a leaf washed downstream in a river current, Lyle rushed toward it. Ten feet away, he stopped and stared in horror. The corpse lay on its side, hands clasped together under its head. Lyle recognized its pale face and noticed the corpse's pants were pulled up. A rush of energy overloaded Lyle's senses. This cadaver was following him. It was punishing and accusing him. Lyle sprinted to the Grand Ballroom.

Bursting into the coat vestibule, he knelt beneath the hangers as a trembling moan slipped from his throat. That smell returned filling the room, covering his body. Death! Lyle's mind visualized the evil he'd seen. He couldn't cancel the thought. It remained a constant image of the demon inside Lyle Gdowski. Powerful surges tremored across his body. A pounding thud echoed in his mind. The electrical twitches bombarded and shook as a frenzied attack filled Lyle's brain with terror.

At ten-thirty, Joel Graves decided to patrol. It had been another dead night, but he wasn't complaining. As he marched through the lobby, he noticed someone lying on the floor behind a plant. Joel recognized Evan Hendershot dozing.

Joel said, "Hey, Hendershot. You can't sleep here." The body startled and twitched to life. Foggy eyes peered at Joel. "You can't sleep here. This is no bus station. This is a fancy place."

The man leaned against the wall. "My wife won't let

me in the room," Hendershot said.

"Get another room. You can't sleep here," said Joel.

Like a crippled dinosaur rising to its feet, Hendershot lumbered toward the front desk.

A few minutes later, Joel stood at the doorway to the Grand Ballroom. Even though Lyle hadn't been too friendly earlier, Joel decided to visit anyway. Now it was near quitting time. Maybe Lyle would feel more sociable.

At the entrance, Joel heard a low moan like the whimper of a hurt puppy. Surprised, he followed the sound into the coatroom. On the floor crumpled into a fetal position with his head pressed against the wall and his hands covering his face lay Lyle trembling with anguished spasms.

Joel felt astonished. Unable to think of any reason for this, he said, "Ah, you okay?" Bending down, Joel gently touched his hand against Lyle's shoulder. "Hey, can I help?" Shaking and crying like a terrified child, Lyle snorted and choked.

With strong hands, Joel clasped Lyle's shoulders and lifted him to a sitting position. He watched Lyle's head drop to the side. Red patches circled his eyes. His pale cheeks and chin quivered. After a moment, Joel hugged his arms around Lyle and patted one hand against his back.

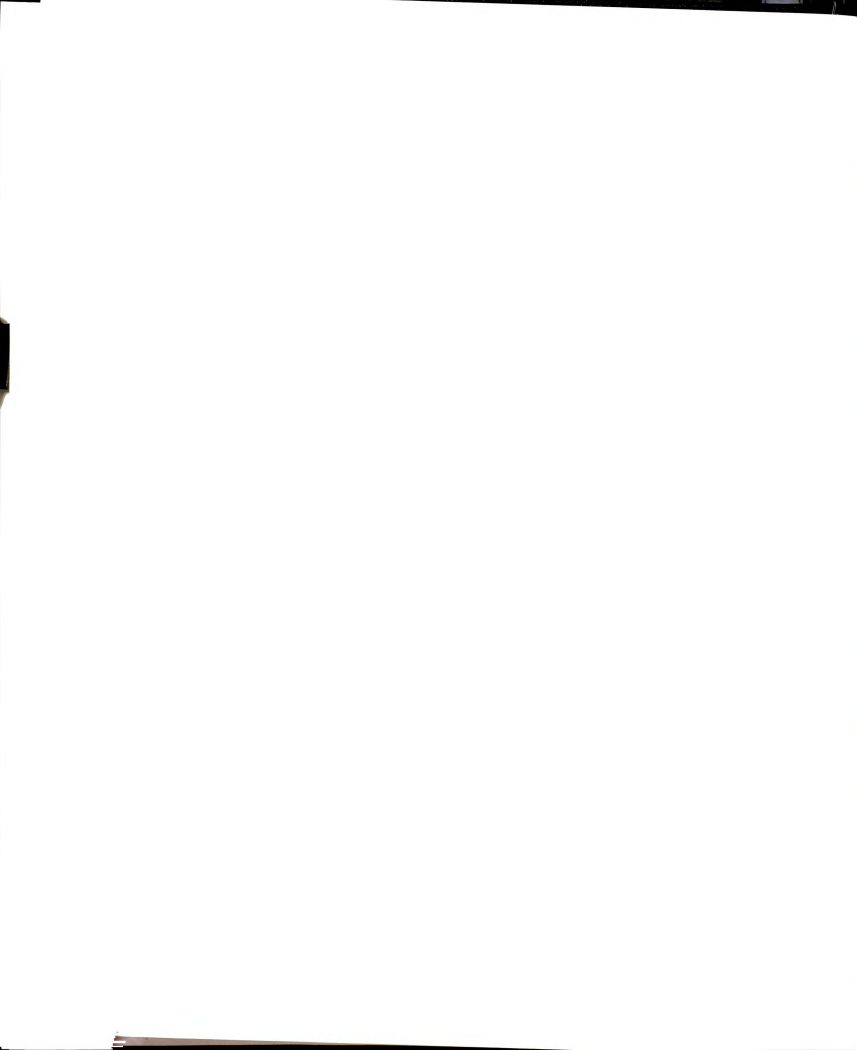
"What's the matter?" said Joel softly.

"He's dead! I saw him! Dead!" stammered Lyle in horror.

Alarmed, Joel said, "Who?"

"In the lobby. Behind a palm tree."

Thinking a moment, Joel sort of understood. "You saw



a big guy in a blue pinstripe suit lying on the floor in the lobby?"

Lyle nodded.

"He's not dead. He's Evan Hendershot. His wife was mad because he'd been with another woman, so she wouldn't let him in their room. He's not dead. Just drunk and stupid." Gradually, Lyle's trembling subsided as Joel consoled him.

"He's gone?"

"Oh, yeah, you won't see him any more." In Lyle's face Joel saw a childlike realization, and the fear seemed to ease away. "Come on, it's almost quitting time. Let's get some coffee and donuts." Joel lifted Lyle to his feet. The two men left the Grand Ballroom as the day crew entered carrying table cloths, napkins and everything needed for the luncheon.

A few minutes after eleven, Lyle stood at his bus stop. Dr. Avery's face kept jumping into his mind. If he had an extraordinary experience, he was supposed to contact Dr. Avery. Maybe his medication wasn't right. He considered that. What had been extraordinary? He'd talked to Joel Graves. He'd seen a dead body move. Lyle decided to stop by the County Mental Health Clinic on the way home.

An energy twitch flickered across his pant's pocket. He'd forgotten about the evil treasure. He still had it in his pocket. As he pulled the handful out, the smell of death filled his senses. Turning around, he noticed a trash dumpster overflowing with green plastic bags in

an alley. Lyle rushed for it and saw a dirty faced man lying on the ground who was covered with cardboard. The man wore a torn stocking cap and he snored a gentle wheezing sound. Staring at this strange person, Lyle looked around and then slid the cash under the cardboard against him. What a dumb place to take a nap, Lyle thought. "Hey, Pal, why don't you get a room?" Lyle said, but the man snoozed and snored even louder.

The evil feelings vanished, and his twitches stopped as he backed out of the alley. Just then, the bus parked at the corner, so Lyle ran to it and jumped aboard on his way to see Dr. Avery.

DEMON STEAM

Donald Summerset sometimes watched demons escape from the crowns of people's heads like puffs of steam from a boiling kettle. Occasionally, he would just feel the evil things vanish. He wondered where they went and why they would decide to leave when he was nearby. Donald couldn't decide if he had anything to do with it or if God had assigned him to witness the gradual vanquish of evil.

As he stood in the foyer of his girlfriend's house, he clasped Mr. O'Roarke's hand and saw three quick clouds pop from the older man's head. Watching the silvery phantoms fade, Donald noticed Mr. O'Roarke gasp slightly and then a contented smile slid across his face.

"Have a nice time, kids," Mr. O'Roarke said. To Donald, he suddenly looked healthier. The dark rings that usually

surrounded Mr. O'Roarke's eyes had disappeared. The cheeky jowls which gave him an eternal frown had lifted and smoothed making him look younger.

Donald often wondered if other people also saw the demon puffs, but like him, were afraid to mention it for fear everyone would think they were crazy. Did demons puff out of his head, too, he wondered? Not knowing for sure just gave him one more thing to worry about.

Releasing the handshake, Donald grinned and then turned toward Gina whose brown eyes darted from her father to Donald seemingly puzzled by all the sudden smiles. Had she seen the demon puffs? Donald tried to read her face but couldn't. He wasn't any psychic. He only knew it was Saturday night, he was taking his girl to a movie and her father had just been exorcised of three demons.

"Let's get going," Gina said. Donald nodded and pulled the front door open.

As they walked onto the porch, Mr. O'Roarke followed waving good bye. "Now, you two be careful and have fun."

Gina scrambled for the car and hopped in before Donald had a chance to open her door. As she slammed it, Donald lurched to the left and proceeded around the car to the driver's side. He glanced at Gina's dad who slowly lowered his hand as his smile slipped away and his usual expression, growling and nasty like a bulldog with hornets in its ears, reappeared. Donald guessed the demons had returned by sliding through Mr. O'Roarke's eyes or nose.

"Get in. Let's go," Gina demanded, so Donald climbed

in and started the car.

A few minutes later, Donald punched the gas and his Grand Am cruised onto the highway. "What movie do you wanna see?" said Gina.

"Oh, whatever you want," Donald said.

"If you were going all alone, what movie would you see?"

Donald thought a moment. "I'd try to see the one that you'd like the best."

"Not if I wasn't here," she snapped. "Donald, do you even know what's playing?"

He shook his head no and said, "There're three movies all starting at nine o'clock. When we get there, I'll ask you which you'd like to see and that's how we'll decide."

"But last time you hated my movie. You always hate the movies I choose," Gina said.

"I've never hated any movie you chose," he answered trying to sound a little amazed and hurt.

"Okay, I'll choose again, but this time I'm going to pick the movie I think you'll like."

"Fine," Donald said.

After parking, they walked hand in hand to the entrance. Gina looked cute dressed in light blue shorts, a pink top and sandals. Donald had worn blue jeans and a T-shirt, and he felt hot. This steamy June evening was made for shorts, yet he wore long pants, wool socks and tennis shoes.

People are gonna think I'm Gina's retarded brother, not her date, Donald worried. Whatever the social event,

Donald Summerset knew no matter how hard he tried he would always wear the wrong clothes. Sweat slid down his legs. He clenched his teeth as he pulled the door open for Gina who marched inside.

At the ticket booth, about a dozen people stood in line. All wore shorts. Donald turned to watch an elderly couple walk past. They wore shorts. Staring at his shoes, Donald felt Gina clasp her hand around his arm. "We're not seeing 'The Lusty Ladies'," Gina said with a giggle, "or 'Mr. Rabbit in Space'. So, it'll hafta be 'Demon Steam'."

Donald's chin popped up and his eyes shot toward the movie titles spelled out in black above the ticket counter. Just then, beginning with the man directly in front of Donald, a series of puffs like dominoes burst from the heads of the other people and meandered to the counter. Twelve puffs, twelve demons, maybe gone forever. Donald watched as each person took a deep breath and then exhaled contented streams of air.

"Sound good?" Gina said.

"Uh, yeah, sure," Donald stammered. He felt sweat slip from his hair down his neck. Everyone stepped forward. Donald listened to a middle-aged man speaking to the ticket girl.

"Well, me and the wife was gonna see those lusty ladies, but all the sudden I'd rather see the rabbit show. Is that okay with you, Honey?"

His wife nodded, and they bought their tickets. As the seconds passed, Donald realized everyone was buying tickets

for "Mr. Rabbit in Space." They were all adults happily going to a children's show. Finally, Donald and Gina stood at the counter.

"Demon Steam," Gina said. Donald pulled out his wallet, paid and took the tickets.

Entering the theatre was like stepping from June into January. The air conditioning was on full blast. Donald's sweaty patches chilled and evaporated immediately.

Gina grabbed his hand and yanked him down the aisle to their seats about halfway to the front. After they sat, Donald noticed maybe thirty others waiting for the movie to start. Glancing from person to person, he saw no demons puffing from their heads.

"Are you gonna sign up at JC for next fall? Did you decide?" Gina said.

Donald looked at Gina who hugged her arms around herself and crossed her legs. Goose bumps burst across her bare skin. "No, I don't sign up for classes till August. But yeah, I'm going. Are you?"

She nodded and smiled. "It's freezin' in here. You're the only smart one in this place, wearing jeans." Her eyes blinked slowly as she seemed to stare at the blank screen. "I hope they turn the air off."

Donald nodded just as an elderly couple sauntered by and sat in front of them. He was bald and wore a red and green Hawaiian shirt. His chubby wife's brownish hair flopped against the back of the seat. In unison steamlike forms oozed from their heads, floated up into the air and

disappeared. Two more demons, thought Donald. Other people believed demons were ugly monstrous creatures that drank blood. Donald knew better. Demons were puffs of smoky light that seemed to enter and leave humans at will, or maybe the demons were somehow invited in according to the person's mood or thoughts. Anyhow, they were real. Donald was sure of that. And they weren't ugly. In some strange way, he saw them as quite beautiful.

The bald man leaned toward his wife and said something. She chuckled and he joined her in obnoxious guffaws. Gina entwined her arm in Donald's and pressed her head against him. Every nerve and muscle in Donald's body eased, and his being filled with contentment. Life was suddenly easy. He had no problems or worries. His world was complete with Gina resting on his shoulder.

As the lights dimmed, previews appeared on the screen. None seemed interesting to Donald, so he stretched his arm over Gina's head and hugged her. Suddenly, an overly happy voice announced, "And now our feature presentation."

The screen faded to black and then gray foglike images appeared swirling in a blue tidal wave while whistling eerie tones. They spun faster and then slowed forming the words "Demon Steam," and then flashed white light like a camera bulb. Donald blinked and then watched blue and silver spots dance before his eyes. He couldn't tell if they were on the screen, floating in the air or inside his head. Closing his eyes, he felt a shiver tremble across his arms. The air conditioner must have kicked on again, he thought.

As he opened his eyes, the credits ran and the whirling vapors covered the screen. Donald clasped Gina's bare shoulder and his palm felt sticky. Carefully, he slid forward so his wrist touched her skin and his hand dangled in air. Gina whispered, "I'm really cold. I hope they turn down the air." Donald nodded in agreement and watched the opening scene.

A businessman sitting at his desk in a highrise office building talked on the telephone as an enormous cloud of steam flowed from his coffee. He laughed, hung up, lifted the billowing cup and slurped the brew. The steam shot up his nose. After the first sip, a crooked smile scratched across his face. His eyebrows cocked together as he lifted the cup and gulped the remaining coffee.

"At least he's got something to help keep him warm," Gina whispered to Donald.

The actor thought for a moment looking more evil and pressed the intercom button on his telephone. "Miss Anderson, please come in here," he said as darkness rimmed his eyes.

Immediately, the door opened and in stepped the most gorgeous blond on the planet. Her waist length hair swayed from side to side with each glorious step. She wore a skin tight dress that emphasized her bustiness and stopped about a third of the way from her hips to her knees displaying long firm legs. Posing before his desk, she put one hand on her hip and leaned back on her heels.

Donald felt Gina's hand sliding along his chin. "I'll wipe off the drool," she said and giggled. He closed his

mouth and smiled.

"How may I be of assistance?" said the blond.

The businessman grunted as bubbly froth splattered from his mouth. His voice turned hoarse and flat. "Have a seat, Miss Anderson." She sat in the chair before his desk and crossed her legs. Rising like Godzilla from the Pacific off the Japanese coast, the man lumbered around the desk until he stood behind the girl who apparently didn't notice because she seemed distracted by some problem with her fingernail polish. "Oh, I've got a chip," she cooed as if it were extremely important.

Lifting his hands high, the man pounced on her. She screamed. Then he held her form over his head like a big time wrestler about to body slam an opponent. In a superhuman rage, he heaved her at a picture window. She crashed through the glass and fell twenty floors to the cement below.

Gina quipped, "Miss Legs are dead."

The man strolled to his desk and pushed a button on the telephone. "Security, there's been a terrible accident." As he released the button, an evil satisfied smirk covered his face.

In the next scene, police officers filled the room. The businessman, pale and shaky, smoked a cigarette as he spoke to a fat detective. "She just jumped. I don't know why. She just jumped." The officer watched him seemingly unimpressed. The man inhaled the cigarette deeply, held it, choked a bit and then exhaled an enormous stream of

silvery particles that flitted around the detective's head and finally shot like a bottle rocket up his nose.

The officer gasped and said, "I'm sure you must feel terrible. It's just awful. Maybe you should sit and try to relax." The businessman nodded. "Men," the detective announced to the other officers. "Let's wrap this up. It's a suicide."

Acting a little surprised, the policemen moved for the door following the detective's orders.

Gina's hand patted Donald's arm. "Donny," she whispered. "Would you go out and ask them to turn the air off before I shiver my teeth out? We're not penguins. Would you tell 'em that?" Donald nodded. "I'll let you know what you miss."

No one sat between the aisle and him, so he hunched and stepped through the darkness to the doorway in the rear. The burst of light in the outer hallway made him squint. He felt as if he had just awakened after sleeping for hours. Up ahead, he saw a young man wearing an official looking vest. Donald walked to him.

"Could you turn down the air in 'Demon Steam'? It's really cold in there."

"Sure thing," the man said.

Donald wheeled around and headed back. When he reached the door, he opened it just enough so he could slip inside. Carefully, he eased the door shut, but it clicked anyway. Standing in the rear, Donald turned and on the screen the fat detective now held a meat cleaver as he marched robotlike

toward a cowering, sniveling brunette who stumbled and fell. Just as the meat cleaver rose into the air, Donald's eyes followed it and continued up above the screen where feathers seemed to float sparkling in the film's light. Donald blinked and heard the brunette's terrifying scream. He jumped and realized he was sweating again. The feathers remained stationary in empty air. After taking one slow step forward, he squinted and the feathers began moving slightly. As if by a pulley, they dropped just a little and stopped. Donald scanned the rest of the theatre and as a sunlit parking lot scene appeared on the screen, Donald saw bunches of these feathers hiding along the ceiling. They created wavy shadows in the flickering light.

Were these demons congregating at the Saturday night show, Donald wondered? Or were they something else? Occasionally, they moved and Donald could make out veins like on leaves. Some were silver. Others were purple. As the movie faded to black, the feathers dropped a notch, and when the lights flashed back on, he could see the hovering phantoms more clearly. They weren't still. In fact, they whirled like tiny tornadoes silently without stirring the air.

The screen darkened again and Donald watched them descend another notch closer to the heads of the people below. A single drop of cold sweat slid down Donald's spine between his shoulder blades. Trembling, he rubbed his left hand against his back. Gazing up the aisle, he could see Gina's head above the seat. Donald rushed down the aisle

to their row where he darted into his place and grabbed her hand. "Come on. Let's go." He tugged her arm, but she wouldn't budge.

"Are you kidding? I've got to see the snotty red head get axed," Gina whispered.

Donald stared at her, glanced at the screen where a mailman with an ice pick chased yet another long legged beauty who wore only a string bikini. Leaning back, Donald looked straight up just as the girl screamed and the feathers floated down another six feet. Turning toward Gina, he whispered, "We've got to go."

"Why?" she said.

"Because."

"Because why?"

Donald took a deep breath. "Look up there." He pointed above the picture where the feathers were easily seen.

Donald watched Gina squint. "See 'em?"

She shook her head no. "What?"

"Don't you see feathery objects?"

Gina pressed her lips together and smiled. "If you try to make me scream in here, I'll sock you in the nose."

Her little fist suddenly waved before Donald's eyes, but then she leaned over and pecked a quick kiss on his lips.

"Take that," she said.

"But I'm serious. We've got to get outta here."

"Sssshhh. There's another bimbo at the hotel. I wanna see her diced, too," she said. "Thanks for getting the air turned down. I'm warming up now." Gently, she slid her hand to

Donald's biceps down his arm tickling lightly until she clasped his hand.

Donald slouched in his seat and again looked up just as the feathers drifted lower and stopped maybe eight feet above their heads.

A purplish tornado spun sideways and gradually changed shape. Donald noticed the movement slowing and a violet frog's face drifted down. Like shark's teeth, it snapped at Donald.

"Aaah!" he squealed and covered his face with his arms.

"What's wrong?" Gina said.

"Demons!" Donald answered.

On the screen, two sexy girls wearing black lingerie lay on a bed in a hotel room. A greasy looking man with dark hair stood behind a camera tripod and took a picture. The demon steam flowed under the door and gradually filled the room. The photographer flashed the camera many times, and Donald's vision spotted purple and white. The swirling steam surrounded the girls, and Donald felt suddenly cold.

Donald's eyes felt hazy. As he looked around, a shimmering red aura glowed from each person's head in the audience. As he turned toward Gina, she emitted pink light. The screen turned black. In the darkness, a cold current rushed past. The air conditioning was on again, Donald thought. Then the air movement stopped, and the screen filled the room with light. Looking up, Donald searched the ceiling. He twisted in his chair. The feathers were gone. He glanced at the other moviegoers. All seemed normal.

Nothing glowed or moved. The film continued. What had happened, Donald thought as he leaned back? Where had the feathery tornadoes gone? He noticed the theatre felt warm. Gina slid her hand into his.

"I bet they throw the fat guy in a meat grinder," she whispered.

During the rest of the movie, Donald felt prickly along his chin and then down his spine as if an invisible veil were waving across his body. He rubbed his chin and occasionally scratched his chest which made him feel worse and more self-conscious.

On the screen, the demon steam finally floated from the corpse of a chubby elementary school crossing guard, who had just been crushed to death by a cement mixer, and drifted up the nose of an angelic kindergartener, whose shocked stare suddenly intensified into a pleased evil smirk.

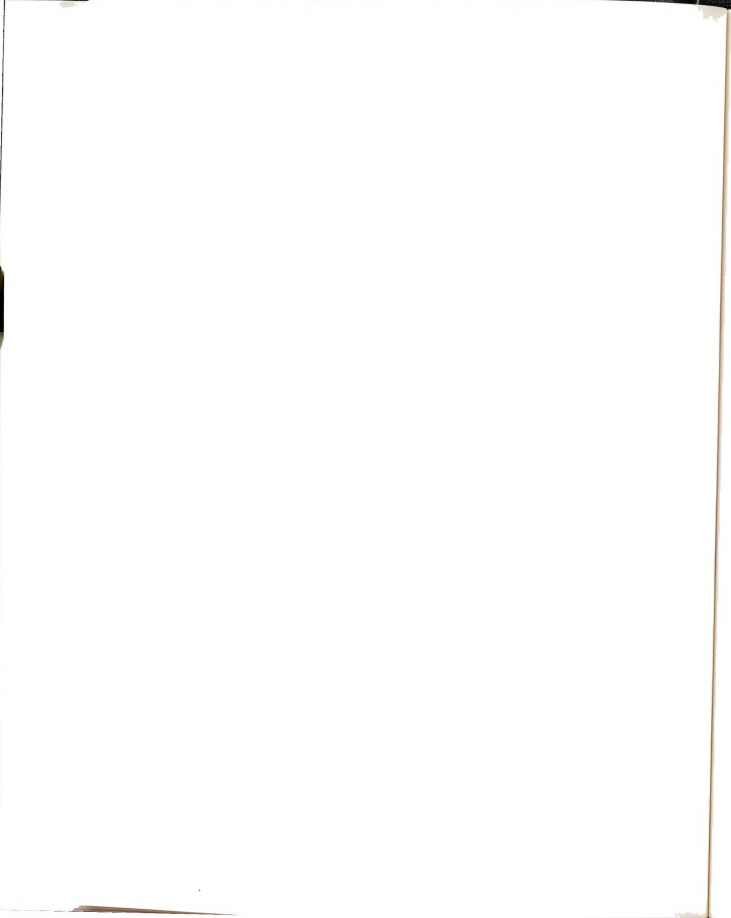
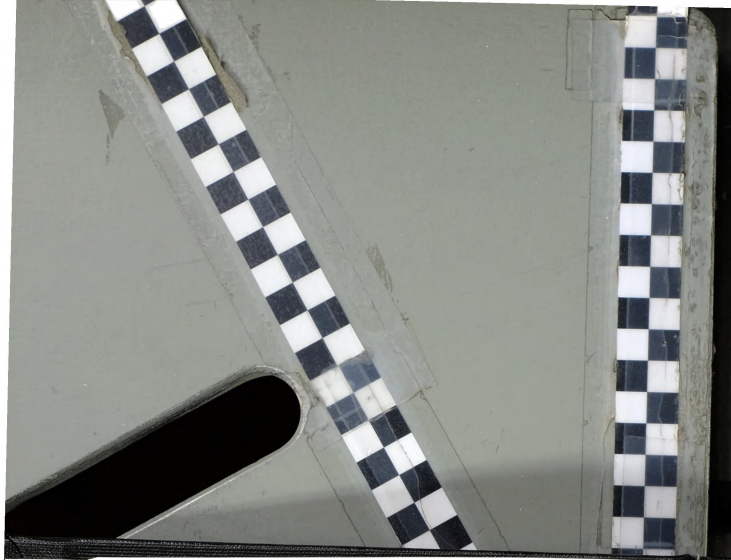
The End flashed across the screen as eerie violin music scratched. Gina stood and said, "Kind of a cliché ending. Now we'll be able to see Part II next summer."

The lights came on. Donald watched her stretch. He no longer felt itchy but was still anxious. As he stood, he moved into the aisle. The elderly couple who had been sitting in front of them cut in between Donald and Gina. The woman extended her left arm and elbowed Gina's throat.

"I don't care. So what?" her husband blurted.

"Come on. Just shut up and come on," the woman said.

As Donald moved out of their way, they stormed off. Gina clasped her throat. "You okay?" Donald asked.



Gina nodded and as her head rose, he noticed a marble-like glaze in her eyes. "What's that?" she said pointing at Donald's face.

"What?"

"That. You've got a rash all over your neck," she said. Donald looked down but couldn't see it. "Come on," Gina said in her most annoyed voice.

Without talking, they followed the crowd to the outer hallway. Donald entered the men's room. Standing before the mirror, he stretched his chin up and couldn't see any rash. Quickly, he pulled his shirt out and examined his chest. He didn't have any skin irritation, so he tucked it in and headed to the exit where Gina waited. As he approached, he noticed her squinting as if she were looking at a dead cat.

"What is that? Some kinda heat rash or allergy?"

Donald stopped and said nothing. Groups of moviegoers walked past and the silence seemed strange. No one was talking. The people leaving the theatre were acting as if they'd just left a funeral.

"Come on. Take me home," Gina said while shoving the door open and striding toward the parking lot. Donald followed. "I hope that creeping crud isn't contagious." Nearing the Grand Am, Gina blurted, "Don't get my door. Just get in. I'm not helpless."

Slam! He watched her. Moving around to the driver's side, Donald heard her muffled scream. "Hurry up!" Opening the door released her volume. "Get in, Donald! Let's get

outta here!" The dome light illuminated her fiery cheeks.

"Maybe I should drive. Can't you move any faster?"

Donald started the car and headed onto the main street. Gina rolled down her window so gusting air streamed across her face. Without any conversation, he drove to her house and stopped in the driveway. Gina's door snapped open, and she jumped out. "You hated my movie, didn't you?" Her voice crackled, and Donald realized she was on the verge of tears. "You always hate the movies I pick." She wiped the back of her hand across her nose. "I don't want to see you any more. You're no fun!" Gina wheeled and sprinted up the front steps into the house. Donald watched her and then the porch lights darkened. He didn't know what to do. She had never been so irrational. They had argued before but not like this. He didn't even know how this had started. Resisting the urge to charge up the steps and pound on the door, he eased the car into the reverse and backed onto the street. A tingling numbness ran down his neck as he started toward home.

Twenty minutes later, Donald flicked on his bedroom light. After pulling off his T-shirt, he marched into the bathroom and examined himself in the mirror. He couldn't find any rash or redness. His skin seemed smooth and clean. What creeping crud was Gina talking about?

Had those feathery demons possessed Gina? Had they made her say she didn't want to see him anymore? That marble-eyed maniac he had just left wasn't his Gina.

Focusing on his reflection, another startling idea

entered his mind. Maybe those demons were inside him, too. Both hands suddenly clasped the crown of his head and felt around. There were no bumps or anything unusual. He concentrated trying to puff those lousy demons out. No steam appeared from his head. There're no demons in me, Donald decided.

But what could he do to help Gina? She would certainly be at church tomorrow morning. He decided to see her there and try to solve the demon steam problem in a holy place.

At nine-thirty the next day, Donald Summerset climbed the steps to the Baptist Church. He wore navy blue dress slacks, a white shirt and a paisley tie. This was one place where he knew how to dress, and he always looked sharp. His shoes were shined. His hair was combed. Just inside the door stood a young couple eager to shake hands and offer a "Good morning." While being greeted, Donald noticed this man wore a suitcoat. Donald had decided not to take his because it was just too warm, but he noticed all the other men were wearing suitcoats.

After grinding his teeth a moment, Donald decided feeling self-conscious about his clothes was a waste of energy. He had to find Gina and straighten things out. Maybe she would have forgotten all about last night and be her usual happy self.

"Hey, Creeping Crud." Donald turned toward Gina's voice. "Why don't you see a dermatologist?" she hissed and darted into the sanctuary. Her father and mother strolled a good



ten feet behind her.

Mr. O'Roarke stopped, and Donald met his eyes which seemed to say "What's going on?" After shrugging, he led his wife after their daughter. Donald watched and decided to follow. He always sat with Gina, or at least he had for the last eight months. Before that Donald had attended the Methodist Church, but denominational differences didn't matter to him. His girl, Gina, made the Baptists the best church in town.

Well, except for today.

With a bounding step, Donald rushed to the row where Mr. O'Roarke seated himself next to his wife. Gina sat alone about five feet farther down the pew with her arms crossed and her eyes closed.

"Good morning," Donald almost sang. "Isn't it a gorgeous Sunday?" Donald watched Mr. O'Roarke slowly shake his head no, and Gina's mom lifted her hand, pointed at Gina and whispered something inaudible. "Well, excuse me. I'll just take this empty spot," Donald said as he slipped in front of them and moved next to his girlfriend.

Gina's eyes shot open and glared. "What do you want?" she grunted.

"I want to talk about last night. You don't understand. I wanted to leave the movie early because the...."

"What?"

Donald whispered, "Demons, floating around the ceiling."

Gina smiled and her teeth suddenly looked crooked and so did her nose. "You said demons, Crud Face?"

"Yeah, I can see them. I have always been able to. I don't know why."

Spasmodically, Gina's spine stiffened as a geyser erupted from her head. Gray steam shot as if from a fire hose into the air. Gina's face turned chalky and giant tears rolled down her cheeks. "I hate you," she blurted. "You're a crud face and you're ugly." Trembling, she lunged across the pew and bawled.

The Baptist Brethren, shocked and curious, watched as Mrs. O'Roarke lifted her daughter, hugged her and slowly paraded the crying girl up the aisle as her father stared at the floor and slunk after them.

A moment later, all eyes landed on Donald who hunched his shoulders and realized retreat was the best option. So, like a criminal being released from jail, Donald strode to the door, jogged down the steps and headed for home.

When he got there, his parents were still at the Methodist Church. Inside, he flopped on the living room couch and a sorrowful thought entered his mind. Maybe he and Gina were finished. This demon stuff might be incurable and even worse it might be contagious. He pressed his head into a pillow and lay down.

The morning newspaper sat on the floor just below Donald's head. "Murder Suicide Shocks Town" read the headline. Oh, great, Donald thought, more good news to brighten my day. He stared at the paper and Gina's smiling face filled his mind. A bleary sensation came over him as he realized he had no idea how to get Gina back. She



might go out and find herself a new boyfriend. That would be easy for her. She was good looking and fun. And she always had been too good for Donald.

A single tear dropped onto the newspaper. Below the headline, Donald then saw a color picture of a laughing elderly couple. The man was bald and wore a green and red Hawaiian shirt. The woman was chubby and had floppy brown hair. In the picture, their arms hugged around each other and their expressions appeared joyous.

They seemed oddly familiar. Donald examined their faces. Were they maybe teachers he'd had? Trying to recall them, he decided no. Then where had he seen them? While bolting upright, he snatched the paper and read the caption. "Carl and Lorraine Edgemont of South Bedford Street found dead in their home an apparent murder-suicide." Donald scanned the article and wondered how could this happen to such a prosperous, healthy couple? The police believed Carl had shot his wife and then killed himself. They had no history of marital problems and left behind six grown children and ten grandchildren.

Donald stared at the picture and then closed his eyes. "How do I know you?" he whispered. In imagination, he was sitting in the movie theatre. Gina had her legs crossed and her arms wrapped around herself, but she looked happy. "You goin' to JC" Gina said. Donald looked to his left and there stood the couple wearing shorts. He remembered now. They had sat in front of them. Lorraine's hair flopped wildly like a pom pon over the chair. Carl spoke to her

and they laughed. He snorted in a goofy manner, but his wife just chuckled.

Donald's memory raced forward to the movie's conclusion. Lorraine swung her arm at Gina and punched her throat. The couple seemed furious, and Gina was hurt.

Slowly, his eyes opened. In a moment, Donald read the rest of the article which stated the shock and dismay of neighbors, friends and relatives who thought the Edgemonts were the happiest people in town. Phrases like "community service, wealthy retired couple, churchgoers, always friendly" jumped off the paper, and Donald trembled. Not for himself, but for Gina. He had to do something right now.

Fifteen minutes later, Donald stopped his car on the street in front of Gina's house. Her parents' Oldsmobile was parked in the driveway, so Donald guessed they were all home. What should he say? How could he get inside to talk to Gina? With a snap, he pushed the door open and climbed out.

At that moment, the sun broke through the cloud cover and instantly he felt better, more confident. Things were going to be just great. He was sure. It must be vitamin D, a real miracle, he thought as he walked up the steps to the porch. He pressed the bell and waited a few seconds before the door whooshed open, and Mr. O'Roarke, a little pale and sweaty, stood there.

"Oh, Donald, uh, have you seen a doctor?" Mr. O'Roarke said.

"What?"

"A doctor, have you seen one?"

Donald watched Gina's father scan him from head to foot. "Why would I need a doctor?"

"Well," he said as he eased the door partway shut and stood back. "Gina told us you're ill."

"No."

"She said you're contagious with something she calls the seeping sludge."

"Creeping crud?" Donald said.

"Yes, that's it."

"I'm not sick. I don't have any rash. It's all in Gina's mind. Could I talk to her?" Donald said.

Mr. O'Roarke seemed to be deep in thought for a moment. "Uh, Donald, this may be odd, but could you lift your chin up?"

Donald looked at the porch ceiling and then back at Mr. O'Roarke. "Okay?"

"I don't see any rash. Did you use a little Calamine Lotion?"

"I don't have any rash. I'm perfectly fine. Could I see Gina now?"

Mr. O'Roarke yanked the door open and gestured for Donald to enter. As he stepped near Mr. O'Roarke, a spray of blue steam exploded from the middle of the man's forehead. Donald jumped back and witnessed the cloud's vanishing act.

"This is getting just too weird," Donald muttered.

"What?" Mr. O'Roarke said.

Donald just shook his head and followed him into the

living room where Gina sat on the couch with mascara smeared all over her face.

"Gina," her father said as if he were speaking to a preschooler. "Donald's not sick. He's all better, and he'd like to visit a while."

When Donald sat next to her, she turned but didn't seem to recognize him. "Hi, Gina, how are you?" She glanced down and then her head slowly circled like an aerobic warm up exercise. "I have to tell you something about that movie last night. Do you remember the couple who sat in front of us? That lady who hit you with her arm? They're dead. He killed her and himself last night after the movie. It's because of the demons that were floating around the ceiling. That's why you feel so bad. You've got demons in you."

Gina's head stopped circling, and then she looked toward him. "Donald, that rash is sick. It's all over your face. Why don't you go to the clinic and get some medicine?"

Donald grasped her arm and held tightly. "I don't have any rash. It's the demons."

"Don't touch me. You're probably contagious!" Mr. O'Roarke rushed to the couch, so Donald let go of her arm. Just then from the crown of Gina's head, a purple spray shot into the air. Donald watched and glanced toward her dad who occasionally burst a blue puff. Gina hollered, "I hate you, Donald. You always hate my movies. I don't want you here."

Her ranting continued and after a few seconds, Donald felt a hand on his shoulder. Turning his head and opening

his eyes, he realized it was her father. "Maybe you should come back tomorrow," he said.

Gina suddenly became silent as Donald stood and plodded for the door. Mr. O'Roarke opened it and waited as Donald exited. When the door slammed, he started thinking. He needed a new plan, something powerful.

Arriving at home, he realized his parents still weren't there. The telephone was ringing, so he answered it.

"Hello?"

"Donald?"

"Yes," he said and recognized Gina's voice.

"Donald, I'm so sorry," Gina snorted.

"Gina, it's okay. You've got to get rid of the demon steam."

"But how? Donald, can you help me? I'm so sad," she cried and then blew her nose into the phone. "Could you come back over here right away?"

"Sure, Sweetheart, I'll be there in ten minutes," Donald said.

"I'll be here," she said.

Donald raced his red Grand Am across town. He didn't know quite what he was going to do when he got there. At least Gina had come to her senses. Maybe the demons had left on their own.

As he wheeled around the last corner, Donald spotted Gina, wearing a black bikini, standing in her front yard next to a wheel barrow. Totally confused, Donald parked along the curb and hopped out. He heard a ting and then he

turned toward Gina. She reared back her skinny arm and fired a golf ball size rock at his car. Smack! It hit the windshield leaving a chipped spot. Donald saw her reach into the wheel barrow and pull out more rocks which she flung madly at him. Ding! Clack! They dented his car's finish.

"Gina!" Donald yelled as another stone cracked the windshield and a big one struck just below his left eye. "Ouch! Gina!" Ducking down, he crumpled into the car and slammed the door. Thud! Crack! Thud!

He started the car and hit the gas. As he sped away, he watched Gina in the rearview mirror waving good bye.

At home, he counted seven dents and chips and two cracks in the windshield. Donald knew he had to do something. Seeing Gina in that black bikini, even throwing rocks, made him more determined. The car could be fixed. Now he had to fix Gina!

His watch read eleven forty-five. Midnight seemed appropriate for this sort of thing, and he hoped the rain would stop. All evening angry black clouds had blown in and stopped right above Donald's head. The rain started in sprinkles and had grown in fury as he drove again to Gina's house which was completely dark.

When he parked in the driveway, he searched for that wheel barrow. It was gone, so Donald decided to go ahead with his plan. At eleven fifty-nine, he picked up his Bible and stepped out of the car into the wind and blasting rain. Donald slammed the door and then walked to the front steps

where he lifted his hands, closed his eyes and said, "In the Name of Jesus of Nazareth, demons be gone...and don't come back!" Donald expected a bolt of lightning or maybe a loud rumble of thunder. Instead, he saw and heard nothing. Dropping his hands, he stumbled to the car. In the raging storm, he heard something, a gentle hissing.

"Not the tires," Donald yelled and ran around the car. The tires were fine and after a moment, the sound stopped. Donald climbed inside the car and dropped his soggy Bible on the passenger's seat. "Well, good bye, Gina," he said as he backed out and drove home.

From his bed, Donald smelled coffee, bacon and eggs. His parents loved breakfast. He slipped out of bed and headed into the bathroom where he flicked on the light and examined his face in the mirror. Yesterday's red, puffy spot had turned hard and black under his eye. He should have put ice on it but hadn't and now it was too late. He dreaded having to explain his black eye to his parents. What could he say? Gina shmucked me with a rock. Naw!

The clanging telephone made him march for it just to stop the noise. "Hello?"

"Donny, hi."

Donald didn't recognize the voice. "This is Donald. Who's this?"

"Why Gina, of course. You sure sound guilty. Do you have another girl callin' you I don't know about?" she giggled.

Dumbfounded, Donald swallowed hard. "Uh, are you okay? I mean are you yourself again?"

"Oh, that. I'm sorry about church and the rocks, but you outta know all girls get like that every once in a while. Do you forgive me?"

Donald thought for a few seconds and realized her demons were gone. "Yes, I forgive you."

"Oh, great, now I was thinking," Gina continued, "why don't we go to a movie tonight." Donald choked. "But after that last one, I'd rather see 'Mr. Rabbit in Space'. How's that sound?"

"Great," Donald said. "Just great."

THE HEALING

George McElroy sat on his front porch and worried about his subluxations. They weren't as annoying as his fallen arches or swollen hemorrhoids, but almost. He'd had his Friday crack at the chiropractor's but wasn't convinced it was doing any good. After all, his knees still twinged and his feet hurt. George's daily headaches were less regular, so maybe all the twisting and snapping was worth it. At least the chiropractor didn't use any needles or require any fresh body fluids for analysis.

"Relax," twist, tug and crack! "See you next week. Pay at the desk," the chiropractor would say.

Twenty seconds of treatment for a lifetime of health, thought George. Perfect. But did it do any good? It sure beat that lousy podiatrist and that stinking urologist and

that stupid proctologist. Never trust a doctor, of any kind, ever. Maybe his subluxations were better. He knew getting his spine in proper alignment was important. Subluxations could be deadly, and George wasn't ready to die.

The tall oaks in his front yard displayed red leaves that would soon fall, and George would hire the neighbor kid to rake them. It'd probably cost him fifty bucks, but he didn't care.

He'd lived on Grove Street for forty-two years and only knew three of his neighbors. They weren't really friends, just acquaintances, people he'd say hello to if he passed them on the street.

His Victorian home, built during the 1870s by a rich lumber baron, was the most impressive building on the block. Most of the other historical houses had either been converted into apartments, condemned and demolished, or torched for insurance. George had seen some dandy fires during the last decade.

He loved his home, and he took care of it. Being too old to do much himself, he'd hire the best workmen to keep it perfect just the way his Marilyn had insisted. He missed Marilyn. It was hard being a lonely, old man.

His subluxations were better, he decided. Maybe he should skip his afternoon appointment. This was a new kind of treatment, a reflexologist his friend Sam Hauser had recommended. Sam, also a widower, usually joined him for lunch after the Sunday service at the Baptist Church.

"Mrs. Kathleen VanderVeer is the best doctor I've ever

known," Sam had said. George had made an appointment but didn't know exactly what a reflexologist did.

"She squeezes your feet to fix your heart valves," Sam had said.

Makes sense, George decided. It couldn't be any worse than that damn rectum examination. He shivered at that memory and then looked at the furniture. All were expensive antiques Marilyn had bought. Some she'd refinished herself. The porch was spotless. Even the windows were clean. He'd have to give the maid a raise, he thought.

George's attention span shot across the street. His new neighbor drove her Impala, a rusty junker, up the driveway and stopped. She popped the door open and as she stepped out, her dress slid above her bent knee exposing a leg that made George squint. She slammed the door, strode to the house and disappeared around the side.

George exhaled. What a woman. She reminded him of Raquel Welch. Not skinny like those TV commercial Barbie dolls, and not phony like those Dr. Frankenstein Miss Americas.

Her name was Renee Olmstead, and, like Raquel, had brown hair, dark eyes, and lips, oh those lips, and not skinny. Renee was certainly bigger than Raquel in some places, but George liked that. A woman needed a little meat on her bones. George guessed she was about forty. He knew she was divorced and had four kids. Renee Olmstead was one sexy lady.

While taking a deep breath, George closed his eyes.

Feeling tired and weak, he considered lying down for a long nap. He had already slept most of the morning, and now he was thinking about wasting the rest of the day. Might as well be dead if you're going to sleep all the time, he thought and became a little angry with himself. Going to his appointment with this new therapist or doctor or whatever she was would at least get him off his porch and out of the house.

As he opened his eyes, he pushed both hands against the chair and gradually stood. His back ached and his head hurt. He looked across the street again at the Impala and Renee Olmstead's house. "You're an old fool," he scolded himself as he made his way into the living room.

At three in the afternoon, George parked his Cadillac in a driveway. He stared at the building and felt puzzled. This was not an office or a clinic. It was a brick and cedar house. George took the slip of paper where Sam Hauser had written the address and checked the numbers. This was the right place. His body might be a wreck, but his vision and mind were perfect, so he climbed out and as he walked to the door, his knees creaked and the muscles up his back seemed to stretch and sting. George's left ankle snapped. He coughed on the cold air, limped to the front steps and pressed the bell.

Immediately, the door opened. Inside, stood an elegant woman. Her brown hair and eyes, beige dress, string of pearls, and confident smile impressed George. He figured she was about fifty-five, maybe sixty.

"Mr. McElroy, please come in," she said. "I'm Kathleen VanderVeer. Let me take your coat." He slid it off, and she hung it in a closet. "I hope I can be helpful. Your friend, Mr. Hauser, has been very satisfied with his treatments." She handed him a clipboard and pen. "Now then, please fill out this medical history form."

After sitting on the couch, he wrote the information, handed her the sheet and glanced around the room. This was no doctor's office. On the wall hung a family picture, the VanderVeers, mom, dad, and five grown children. George looked through a doorway into the dining room and then back to Mrs. VanderVeer who, while reading the sheet, creased her brows.

"Uh, are you a doctor?" he said.

She looked up. "No, I'm a reflexologist. I design treatments by interpreting complex reflexes. I help your body's natural healing powers cure your ailments." She stood and stretched an attractive hand toward George who grasped it as he rose. "You see, Mr. McElroy, most doctors treat only symptoms. I treat causes...."

A few minutes later, she led him into a bedroom. "After you've removed all of your clothes, put this robe on and come into the next room through that door." She pointed and then exited leaving him alone and puzzled.

Take off my clothes? Here? Is she crazy? he thought as he looked around the room. On three walls hung paintings of peaceful lakeshores. The closet was empty except for a few hangers. He tugged the window drapes open a little

and saw a built-in swimming pool, covered with a black tarp for the winter, enclosed by a stockade fence.

To disrobe or not to disrobe? What had he gotten himself into? He really didn't know Sam Hauser all that well, and some of the people at that Baptist Church seemed strange at times. He unbuttoned his shirt. After all, he was no young, calendar hunk. So what the heck. This procedure couldn't be worse than that damn colon biopsy.

As he took off his clothes, he hung them on the hangers, put on the robe and then walked into the next room. Mrs. VanderVeer, standing next to a huge tub of water, said, "This Jacuzzi will help you relax before the treatment. After I leave, hop in and enjoy the bubbling water. I'll turn on some music. When the music stops, get out, wrap up in this towel and I'll come back, okay?"

George looked at the tub and then at the massage table across the room. He nodded and she left. She certainly seemed professional. Nothing here was threatening, so he began to relax.

Suddenly, enchanting piano music overlaid with the sounds of ocean waves filled the room. George slid off the robe and hung it on a wall hook. He climbed, cold and naked, up the three steps and into the churning hot water. After stumbling a moment, he caught his balance and gingerly sat on a step. Steam filled the air and the heat massaged his pains.

His subluxations felt better already. His knees stretched straight out in the churning tub without snapping.

George slid lower into the water. His neck muscles eased and gradually he felt soothing heat move down his back across his hips and throughout both legs. He exhaled and closed his eyes. After a moment, he imagined Marilyn, young, his smiling bride dressed in white, and then Renee, his lovely Raquel, appeared. She looked serious and sexy....

"Mr. McElroy?"

George's eyes shot open. He saw Mrs. VanderVeer standing next to the tub. Had he been asleep? No. He was just thinking. He moved his arms and legs under the water. She hit a switch and the churning stopped.

"It's time for your massage."

George noticed the music had ended. He felt embarrassed. How could he get out modestly without giving her an eyeful?

"I'll be back in a few minutes," she said. "Wrap up in this towel and then lie face down on the table." He watched her walk through the doorway. Getting out of the hot water into the cold air was a shock to his system. He stumbled down the steps, grabbed the large towel and wrapped up. Water dripped down his legs onto the green turflike carpet. Was she trying to save money on the gas bill? The room was freezing. He crawled onto the table and hugged himself into the towel.

"Now for your treatment," echoed her voice from the doorway.

As George was about to ask her to turn up the heat, two hands wrestled around his neck, half-nelsoned his shoulder blades and pinned his spinal column. George couldn't breathe.

Her grip choked every muscle, pinched every cell.

"Doesn't that feel good?" she said in a babysitter's voice. George tried to push up onto his elbows to escape but wasn't strong enough. Her fists pounded his vertebra, hammered his buttocks and kneaded his skinny legs. He felt like a piece of bread dough. Filled with panic, George tried to cry out. Just then, she strangled his throat. "Oooh, so good," she moaned.

As suddenly as the attack had begun, it ended. George gasped. He had survived.

"Roll over, Mr. McElroy, and I'll complete the treatment."

George protested, "I think...."

"Come on. Roll over. Don't be a baby." Taking his shoulders, she twisted him onto his back. "It's time for your feet." She gently, oh so tenderly, caressed a hand along the top of his foot. Slowly, with great care, she rubbed his arches. George exhaled and felt his muscles relax.

With the force of ten thousand wrestlers, Mrs. VanderVeer clamped onto George's left foot, squeezed and twisted as if she were wringing out a dirty mop. Barking once like a hurt puppy, George yelled a clipped high note.

"Now, don't be a big baby. Doesn't that feel good?" she cooed. "You may feel a little stiff for a few minutes, but I guarantee after the shock wears off, you'll feel twenty years younger."

George nodded and pressed his trembling hands into the table as he attempted to sit up. His strength had

retreated. She had won. He lay flat on his back, eyes open and watched her exit through the doorway.

Half an hour later while sitting in the Cadillac, George tested his body parts, assessing the damage, and pondered which law firm to hire. He'd given that quack a check for eighty-five dollars. He simply hadn't had the strength or the courage to argue. He stretched his fingers and then closed his fists. He pressed his head down so his chin touched his chest and then rolled his head around in a circle. His neck wasn't broken, he decided. He swayed his shoulders back and forth and then twisted first to the right and back to the left. His spinal column was intact. Turning to the side and lifting his feet onto the seat, he stretched his legs flexing his knees. He heard and felt no snapping. George moved his feet around in little circles. His arches didn't ache. His legs weren't broken. He couldn't find any damage.

He started the car and while driving home, his anger faded and was replaced by bewilderment. Did he feel worse or a little better? George couldn't tell. His knees were still sore, but his headache had gone away. As he steered up the driveway, George noticed the Impala across the street. After parking, he looked at his house, a huge building, ridiculous for one person. His and Marilyn's home suddenly looked unfriendly, not a place to live, instead a place to die. But the problem wasn't just the house.

It was George. Blaming Marilyn for his loneliness was stupid. He'd been doing that for years. He noticed

the rosebushes along the front. Marilyn would have trimmed those thorny branches back. Why did that matter now? And why did he think about her every time he looked at those bushes?

Maybe that therapy session had rattled his brains as well as his bones. He popped the door open and stepped out just as the sun slid from behind a cloud. He strode for the house and stopped. George glanced at his watch, four-thirty. What was there for him inside? Pictures, the television, dinner alone, bed and sleep. He couldn't go in.

He had felt pain at Mrs. VanderVeer's, and dead people don't hurt. He was alive but was afraid he'd die if he went inside right then.

Maybe a walk around the block would help him become rational. How could an empty house kill him? It couldn't, right? The way his legs usually ached, he wasn't sure he could make it all the way around the block anyhow.

He stared across the street at that Impala and decided he wasn't going to die. Moving faster than he had in years, he marched down the driveway and crossed the street.

At her house, he rang the bell. The door opened and there stood Renee Olmstead dressed in jeans and a fuzzy blue sweater that clung in just the right places.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," said George. She wagged her head no. "If you're free tonight for dinner, I was wondering if you'd accompany me to the Chambourg?"

"Oh?" She rubbed her hand against the left side of her head. "I've never been there. Uh, that'd be great." She

smiled.

"If you need a sitter?"

"Oh, no, they're with their father this weekend."

Her smile slid away, and he looked into her eyes seeing that same serious expression, seemingly puzzled but also interested, he had visualized in the hot tub.

"Well, great, then I'll come get you at seven-thirty."

She nodded. "See you then."

Three and a half hours later at the restaurant, George held an oak chair for Renee as she sat. She wore a red knee length dress, a simple gold necklace and matching earrings. George felt people watching and wondering if the old man had his daughter with him or a date. He saw a few women his age scolding him with their eyes and tight lips. George liked the attention. It was fun being thought a dirty old man.

Renee didn't seem to notice any odd looks or maybe she just didn't care what people were thinking. Her face beamed a joyous expression.

"This is such a nice place," Renee said and patted George's hand as he sat. She glanced around and her dark eyes glowed. George watched her and forgot the others in the restaurant, and he began to relax for the first time in many months.

"I hope the menu's in French," Renee said. "I took four years of it in school. Do you speak French, George?"

He shook his head no. "It's in English. Sorry."



"That's fine," she said. "You know my kids, Ray, Sarah, Johnny, and Billy?"

"I've just seen them a few times."

She pressed both hands against the table and leaned forward. "Well, I'll tell you. Raymond is my oldest. He's ten, so big already. One day they're babies and the next they're so big...."

George had always been a good listener, and he had plenty of opportunity to use that skill while they ate. Renee was happy, so she talked. George was contented, and he listened. He thought she really enjoyed being all dressed up in an elegant restaurant as if she hadn't had many dinner dates lately. In fact, George began to realize she might have some of the same lonely feelings he had.

But she was young and pretty, and he was a broken down old man. Or was he?

George straightened his shoulders and sipped his wine. While setting the glass on the table, he noticed his hand, smooth and firm looking suddenly strong. Pulling his fingers into a fist, he then stretched them out. Usually, sitting for more than fifteen minutes gave him a backache. Tonight he'd been in the same chair for an hour and a half and he felt great.

It seemed as if Renee emitted some kind of invisible healing energy that relieved George's pains. Or maybe he'd been so busy listening, he had forgotten about his physical problems.

Whatever it was, George realized his body was completely

free of soreness. As he watched Renee eat her dessert, George knew he needed to figure out exactly what had made him feel so good. Was it the pounding at Mrs. VanderVeer's? Was it being out of his house? Or was it Renee?

He couldn't decide, and after a moment, he knew it really didn't matter. His life was not back with Marilyn at the house or sometime in the future when he was dead. Life was then at that table with Renee. The past and the future didn't really matter, only the present. And George knew that his present moments were up to him. He could either see and feel his body decaying, or he could believe life was joyous whatever the circumstances.

"And when they put Johnny out in right field, he lost track of the game and was swatting bugs when the ball was hit out there. Well, everybody scored and the Bulls lost, but Billy handled it pretty well. Even though some of the other boys razzed him, my little trooper ignored 'em and played the next game. He paid attention and even caught a pop up," Renee said.

George felt dizzy. "Your children sound truly wonderful," he said. She grinned and sipped her coffee.

Thirty minutes later as George drove Renee home, he knew dinner had been pleasant for her but not tremendously romantic. When he stopped in her driveway, George hopped out and walked her to the door.

"Tonight was fun. Thanks, George," she said. He just nodded and watched her enter the house.

After getting to his place, George stepped into the

bathroom and flicked on the light. While examining his face in the mirror, he decided he looked no different, still an old man. But he felt different. Maybe he should have kissed her good night. Naw! He was too old for romance. Or was he?

During the next few days, George shopped around at the hot tub and Jacuzzi stores. He got what he thought was a good deal on an enormous Jacuzzi identical to Mrs. VanderVeer's. Wednesday two men installed it in the heated sunroom at the back of George's house.

That evening, George telephoned Renee and asked her to dinner and a play on Friday. She agreed and George became excited.

Thursday morning George made an appointment to have Mrs. VanderVeer pound him again. He didn't know if her treatment did any good or not, but he was sure that his life had changed for the better last Friday, so he went again and this time he relaxed his muscles and her hands caressed and kneaded, and he felt even better.

It was the touching, he decided. Mrs. VanderVeer's hands could work miracles. He felt no pain, just an occasional twinge. Afterward, as he drove home, he remembered how he'd behaved a week earlier like a baby, a sissy, a wimp! And he laughed at himself.

The days zoomed past and suddenly it was Friday evening. George dressed in his blue pinstripe suit and his freshly shined black shoes. He combed his thick gray hair and

realized how fortunate he was. Over the years, his hairline had receded some but there was no baldness in his family. In the bathroom mirror, he looked into his clear blue eyes surrounded by pure white. His skin was pink and clean. Feeling handsome made him stand straighter.

Tonight was going to be fantastic.

The telephone rang, so he marched into the living room and answered it. "Hello?"

"George, this is Renee. I'm real sorry, but Sarah is sick, throwing up and all, and I can't leave her like this with the sitter, so I'm not gonna be able to go out tonight."

George felt a numbness slip across his stomach. "I hope she'll be okay soon. Do you think it's serious?"

"Probably just the flu. I'm real sorry, George. Maybe some other time."

George thought for a moment and then said, "Uh, Renee, would you maybe like to just come over here tomorrow. I've bought a new Jacuzzi for my sunroom and since it's getting so cold out, I thought you might enjoy it."

Renee didn't say anything for a few seconds. "Well, George, tomorrow's pretty busy, but I could make it in the evening after eight."

George trembled slightly. "I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Okay, bye, George."

As he hung up the telephone, feelings long forgotten filled George's body and mind. He hopped into the kitchen and checked around for a bottle of champagne. Unable to find

one, he wrote on a slip of paper "Buy Champagne" and left it on the table.

As George's anticipation rose, the hours slowed. All Saturday morning and afternoon, he fussed. At least twenty times, he checked the Jacuzzi, made sure the clean towels were nearby, wiped off the wine glasses and felt the champagne bottle in the refrigerator to make sure it was cold.

At seven-thirty, George put on his swim trunks and a Polo shirt. Maybe he should have bought some barbells and lifted weights to bulk up a bit, he thought.

He checked the Jacuzzi again. Everything was ready. On the dot, eight o'clock, the doorbell rang. George fluffed his hair and marched to the entry. As he swung the door open, he spotted Renee looking very happy.

"Why, hello, come on in," he said.

Renee tilted her head to the right. "Go on," she said. George glanced down as three children stared at him. "Mr. McElroy won't bite. Go on."

George slid to the side as the children and then Renee strode past. "Ray is at his friend's so we have to get home by ten," she said.

"You can change in the bedrooms through there," George choked and then pointed. The two boys entered his bedroom while Renee and the little girl headed for the other one.

This was no time to let foolish anticipation spoil his evening. These present moments were going to be fun. He darted into the kitchen, grabbed the champagne and a

bottle of root beer, took three plastic cups and walked to the Jacuzzi.

Just then, the boys sheepishly appeared in the sunroom. "Let's see, you're Johnny and you're Billy," George said. The boys smiled. "Well, climb those steps and hop in the tub." He hit the switch and the churning began.

Renee, holding the girl, entered the room. "You have a beautiful home, George," she said. "You met Johnny and Billy?" George nodded. "And this is Sarah. She's all better today."

George pulled off his shirt and climbed into the Jacuzzi. "Better get in before the boys wear out the water," he said.

Renee set Sarah on the edge where George took her in his arms and slid down. "Hurry up, Mom, the water's hot," yelled one of the boys.

Renee stepped to the Jacuzzi and George approvingly eyed her shapely form wrapped in a yellow flowered swimsuit. "Whew," he whispered.

Renee eased into the water. "Oooh, this is great," she said.

George focused on Sarah who sat on his lap. "I'm glad you're not sick any more," he said. The little girl stuck out her lower lip and then splashed water into his face.

THE DWANA CULT

Barry Milligan was bored. He had been listening for more than five hours sitting on a grassy field near a farm and his attention span had been spent long ago. As the full moon appeared on the horizon, his eyelids felt heavy and he yawned. He clasped his hand against his face and suddenly felt Beth's fingers grasp his arm. Barry turned toward her. Beth's dark eyes stared intently at the speaker. Occasionally her chin nodded in agreement.

They had been going steady all through their junior year of high school and during that time Beth had been normal. Ever since summer vacation had started, she had changed and had been talking about stuff like past lives, the transcendental nature of all matter and her eternal vision. Barry hoped this was just a phase that she'd soon outgrow,

but in the meantime, she had insisted he accompany her to this kooky meeting. He wanted to please her, so there he sat.

The lecture had gone far past its usefulness. Barry had heard the early section about focusing the mind and alternate planes of reality, but the last hours were a muddle of incoherent nonsense.

Who is this Dwana Klumhol? Barry thought. Looking toward the speaker who sat crosslegged wearing a brown dress with red, purple and green beads sewn in a random pattern, Barry watched Dwana's smooth face while she talked.

"Fear and doubt will always limit your ability to achieve goals. By overcoming fear and doubt, you will become free and nothing will be impossible."

Barry pondered that idea.

"Now, you must prepare your minds," Dwana said and then she bowed her head and remained still and silent. Barry glanced toward Beth who had taken the same pose. His eyes darted around the group of twenty people. All seemed to be praying, so Barry bowed his head and closed his eyes.

How old is Dwana? he wondered. She wore no make up and that baggy dress made her look frumpy. But her perfect skin and clear eyes made her appear young, mid-twenties maybe. On the other hand, she might be sixty. Barry couldn't tell.

"The time is right," Dwana whispered and Barry's eyes shot open. Dwana was standing with her head tilting back, eyes shut and arms stretching toward the stars.

Everyone silently stood. Beth's hand tugged on Barry's

arm, so he got up. It felt good to stretch. He'd been sitting for too long. The others lifted their hands to the sky. Barry did also. These people are weird, he thought, but Beth seemed into it. Barry just went along and prayed the meeting would end soon.

Dwana's head slowly lowered as her eyes opened. "This was to be just an introductory session, but I believe the vibrations are right for this group to advance to the next stage in experiencing an alternate reality. After the ordeal, you will be prepared for healing and psychic work."

She paused a moment and seemed to examine each person's face. "I sense no objections."

The group had agreed, and Barry wanted to ask, "What's the next stage and what did she mean by ordeal?" But no one else said a word, so he remained silent.

Dwana floated in her long dress from the field to an area in back of an old barn. The rest followed. A wheel barrow sat next to the building and one man rolled it toward the group. Barry realized there were eight twenty-five pound bags of Kingsford charcoal on the wheel barrow. The man stopped, grabbed one bag, sliced the paper with a pocket knife and dumped the coals on the ground. He emptied the other bags, took a shovel and spread the coals over an area about four feet wide and six feet long.

"What's this for?" Barry whispered to Beth.

"The firewalk," she answered.

"What's that?"

"We'll walk across the coals once they're hot."



Barry heard himself gasp, so he clutched his hand against his mouth. No one seemed to notice. The rest watched the man lighting the coals.

"I can't do this," Barry whispered.

"Sure you can. Anyone can," Beth said.

"I wasn't listening during the lecture. I don't know what to do."

Beth pressed her lips together as if annoyed. "Don't be silly." Her hand slid down his arm and slipped around his fingers.

Charcoal smoke filled the air as a wind gust turned the coals red. "No way," Barry said aloud.

Beth squeezed his hand, and he saw her eyes blazing at him. "Don't be ridiculous. You can't chicken out."

The word chicken stuck in his throat and then eased down to his stomach where it sat like a thrashing electric wire.

Dwana announced, "Prepare your minds." All walked away from the fire. Beth tugged Barry's arm, and he followed. Some people headed back to the field. A few wandered toward a wooded area. Beth sat right in the middle of the lawn still in sight of the barn and fire.

Barry flopped next to her. "Let's get out of here. You said we'd just listen to the lecture. Walking on fire! It's impossible."

"For you it is," Beth interrupted. "Didn't you hear Dwana say as long as your belief is consistent so will be your experience in the objective world?"

"But I can't...."

"I'll do this for you then," Beth said. Her eyes closed and she seemed to be deep in meditation. She stayed that way for a long time. Barry decided he'd just watch. No one would say anything. These people usually talked about the power of unconditional love and stuff like that. They wouldn't care if he didn't walk on the coals.

Feeling a little better, he wondered what he could say to talk Beth out of it. She had always been extremely head-strong. Barry knew there was no use. She'd firewalk and nothing he could say or do would keep her from it.

"It is time," Dwana's voice proclaimed.

In a few minutes, the group assembled near one end of the pit which had turned white. Beth and Barry, wearing shorts and T-shirts with bare feet, waited as the others removed their shoes and left them in a pile. The rising heat irritated Barry's eyes and the smudge made him choke. He could taste smoke.

"Walk the fire when you decide you are ready," Dwana said. "Don't stand in one spot for long. Move across the fire and you will not notice the heat. Know you will not burn and you won't."

Dwana turned toward the coals, lifted her dress above her knees displaying firm, smooth legs and sauntered across the coals. Her bare feet made occasional crunching sounds, and she didn't burn. At least, she didn't seem to. Barry watched her step onto the grass, turn around and smile lovingly at the group.

The man who had spread the coals, wearing blue jeans he'd rolled up to his knees and a Detroit Pistons T-shirt, casually walked through the fire pit. After five short steps, he stretched out his arm and Dwana took his hand. Barry stared at their feet which should have been seared to the bone with blood gushing out. Their feet appeared unharmed.

A middle-aged woman wearing a purple sundress strode across the coals. At the other side, she giggled and hugged Dwana. One by one the people moved to the pit and crossed it. None sizzled or even complained of any pain. Barry stood ten feet from the fire and the heat seemed to be scorching his cheeks, lips and eyelashes.

Beth released his hand and calmly walked to the pit. She paused and turned toward Barry. When he didn't join her, she marched the few steps across the fire and hugged Dwana. The group embraced and kissed celebrating their courage and power.

After a few moments, some looked back at Barry standing alone, the outsider. Three people danced across the coals again. Barry watched feeling amazed and a little weak. They could do it, so why couldn't he?

Tugged forward Barry stumbled as Beth squeezed his hand and headed to the pit. At the edge, the heat rose in powerful waves. Just as Barry began to protest, Beth interrupted. "You can do it. Now walk."

His will vanished as terror numbed his mind. He couldn't move. He was going to scream and cry. Beth stepped onto

the coals. "Walk!" she commanded.

His bare foot swung over the fire and landed. His other foot moved forward. He felt the hairs on his legs scorching. A man gripped his left arm and pulled. Barry heard gentle crunching, and someone touched his shoulder blades. He pinched his eyes shut expecting burning pain. He felt heat all around and smoke surrounded him.

Beth laughed and hugged both arms around his neck. All the people crowded nearby. Dwana held her arms across Beth and Barry.

He stared back at the pit. "I can't do it," he yelled. "I was daydreaming during the lecture!" Everyone roared in laughter as if he had just told the funniest joke.

"What do you mean can't? You just did," Beth said into his ear.

While the others walked the fire again, he examined the soles of both feet. Barry accepted the fact that he really had walked across the fire without getting burned. Somehow he had understood enough of Dwana's talk to do it. Maybe his subconscious mind had taken charge or a guardian angel had slipped some invisible asbestos booties onto his feet.

Beth seemed excited and happy. Barry felt bewildered and wanted to share her emotions but couldn't. It all was so bizarre, he wasn't able to express joy.

During the drive home, Beth said nothing. She stared out the window. At her house, she said a quick, "Good night," kissed Barry on the cheek and hurried up the walk.

As he drove to his house, Barry wondered about tomorrow afternoon when they'd attend Dwana's second lecture. He hoped sword swallowing and cobra charming were not on the agenda.

The next morning, Barry sat in the kitchen with his fourteen-year-old brother, Carl. Their mother had left sandwich fixings, so they piled on ham, turkey, cheese, lettuce and tomatoes. Barry slurped a Coke and watched Carl bite into his lunch.

"What did you do last night?" Carl said with his mouth full.

"Oh, I was just wondering," Barry said and then reconsidered. "Just hung around Beth's." He wanted to tell Carl about last night but wasn't sure his brother could resist telling their parents whom Barry was sure would label Dwana as Satan and Beth as a witch.

"She's cute," Carl said and then took another bite. "Great legs."

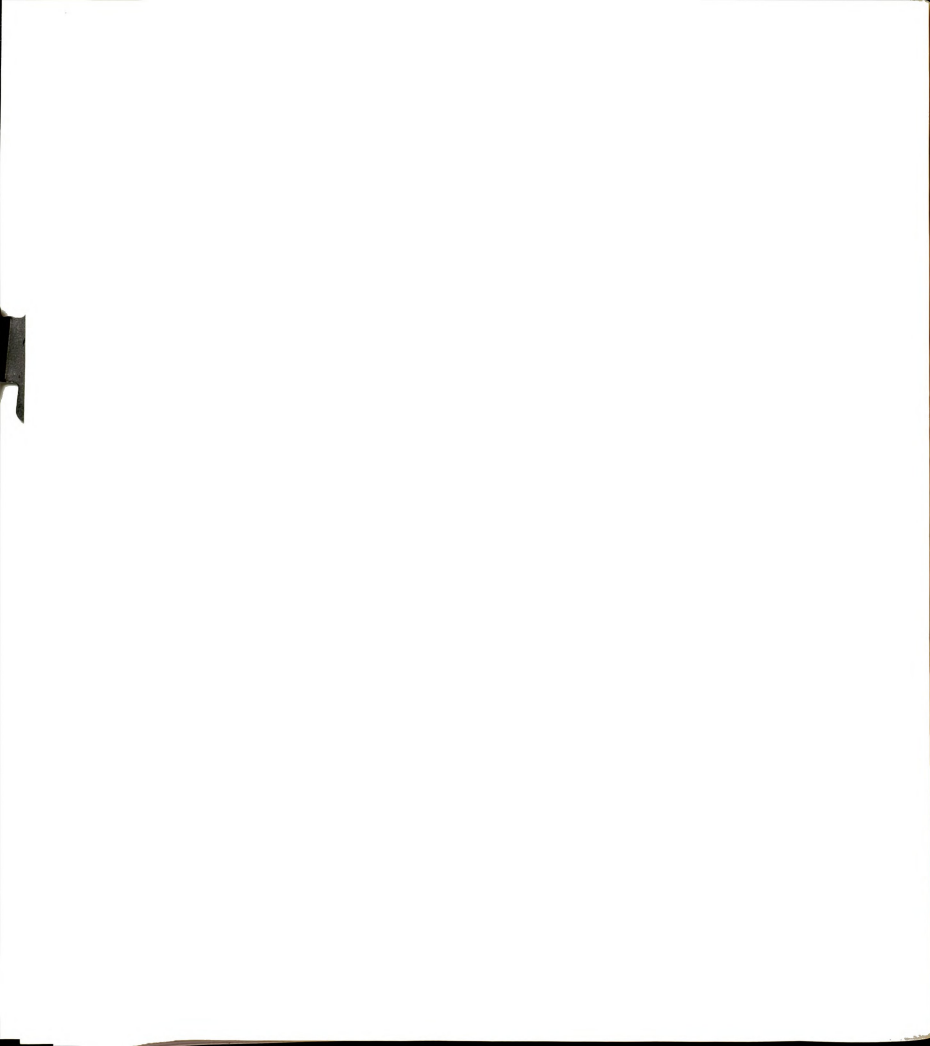
Barry didn't care to answer that except to nod in agreement and keep eating. After finishing, he put his dishes into the sink, said, "Later, dude" to Carl and slammed out the door.

He drove the six blocks to Beth's and found her sitting on the lawn waiting. Barry stopped on the street, and she hopped in the passenger's side.

"Hello, how are you?" she said.

"Great, so what's the meeting about today?" Barry said.

"Healing. It's gonna be amazing. I'm still shivering



with excitement about last night. Did you tell your parents? I wanted to tell mine, but I'm afraid they'd ship me off to some girl's school at a convent and I'd miss my senior year."

"I didn't even see my parents," Barry said. "And Carl might tell 'em."

Beth leaned over and smacked a big kiss on Barry's lips. "I think I'll call you Firewalker from now on," she said.

Barry just looked at her. Beth's glowing eyes made her face even prettier than usual. She wore a yellow Polo shirt and blue shorts. Barry started to hug her, but she shoved him back to the driver's seat.

"Come on. Let's get going. We don't want to be late," Beth said.

Barry hit the gas and drove back to the Muhlenberger's farm. After parking his car along the dirt road that led to the house, he climbed out and walked with Beth to the field. On the way, they passed the charcoal pit now powdery white and cold. Ahead, some people waited electrified with anticipation. Dwana, looking serene and beautiful, strode toward them embracing first Beth and then Barry who clumsily touched his hands around her waist.

In an airy whisper, Dwana said, "Peace be with you" into Barry's ear. She wore another baggy dress which was gray with blue and silver moons and stars on it. Tacky beyond belief, thought Barry. Dwana's brown hair was tightly braided and hung down to her shoulders. If she'd been blonde,

she would have looked like the perfect Swiss milk maid.

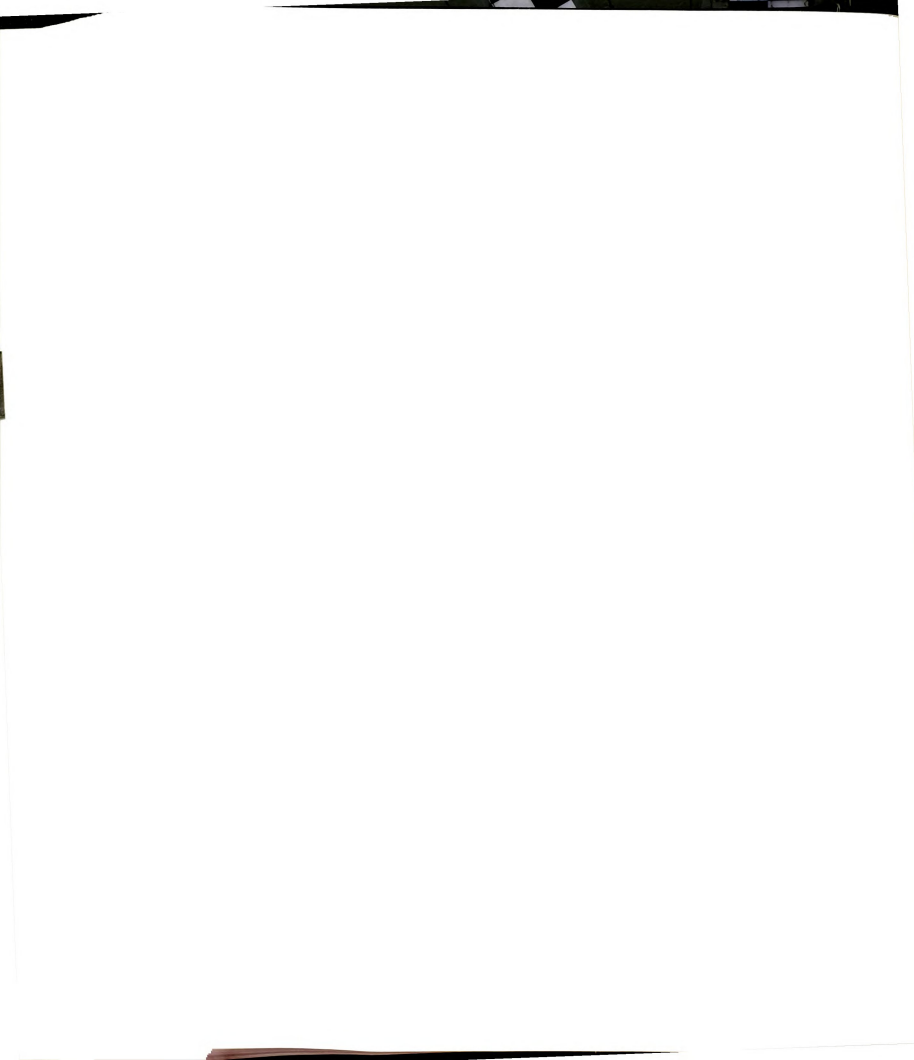
Others arrived and Dwana hugged them. All twenty were now present. Without any instructions, the people sat crosslegged on the grass in an orderly semi-circle with Dwana seated in front.

"Welcome, I'm sure you slept well," Dwana said. Barry had, so he nodded. "Today, we will focus our cosmic energy for healing. This will involve some mental training...."

At that point, Barry tried to concentrate. After a moment, he glanced at his watch and began thinking about taking Beth to the lake. Dwana talked and talked and talked. She was worse than Mr. Edwards, Barry's American history teacher, who could talk non-stop for fifty-five minutes five hours a day five days per week without taking a breath or blinking. Dwana made Mr. Edwards' speeches seem like chit chat.

"Any questions?" Dwana said and Barry awoke from his daydream. No one said anything. Barry thought it was probably prayer time again, but Dwana said, "Joe, would you sit at the center of the circle and face the barn. We must sit in male female order to balance the yin and yang." Some people moved to different locations, and Dwana sat next to Barry. Beth took one of his hands and Dwana grabbed the other. "The cosmic energy will go around the circle through each person until it builds up and heals Joe."

Barry stared at Joe. He didn't look sick. Well, maybe he was a little skinny but heal what? Barry wanted to ask, "What's wrong with him?" but didn't. All closed their



eyes and became silent. Barry heard a bird whistling in a nearby tree. He tried to spot the bird but couldn't.

So ask, he decided. "What's wrong with him?" Barry blurted.

No one moved except Dwana who opened her eyes. Her face seemed kindly and her warm hand felt so gentle.

"Cancer," Dwana said and then closed her eyes.

The silence lasted a long time. Barry wanted to check his watch but couldn't without disturbing Beth who seemed to be asleep sitting up. Barry's palms became sweaty, and the sun eased out from behind a cloud.

Joe, sitting in the middle of the circle, turned pale as sweat droplets slid down his face which looked like a marathon runner's approaching the finish line.

Barry was bored. He suddenly pulled a huge load of air into his lungs and sighed. Just then, the others' eyes opened, and they all sighed contented breaths. A few stood and stretched. Barry released the girls' hands and wiped his palms on his shorts. Beth jumped up and pulled on Barry's arm helping him stand.

"Wasn't that fantastic. I could feel the energy pulsating through me," Beth said. "You had to feel it, didn't you?"

Barry nodded yes and smiled, but he knew he was lying. He didn't feel anything unusual. "So, is he healed?" Barry said and pointed at Joe who still sat on the grass.

Beth turned toward Joe. "Isn't it wonderful," she said.

From the corner of his eye, Barry noticed Dwana walking

toward the barn. She disappeared behind it. Probably going up to the house to use the bathroom, he thought.

The people took turns embracing Joe and offering words of encouragement. After Beth hugged him, Barry stood there feeling ridiculous. He didn't want to hug anyone who was sick, so he pushed his hand out and Joe shook it with a tight grip. "I hope you're doing better," Barry said.

Joe nodded and then hugged a woman. The embracing went on and on. Barry finally grabbed Beth's arm and headed for the car.

"Is that it?" Barry asked Beth.

"For now."

"When's the next meeting?" Barry said.

"Not until next weekend."

That information brightened his attitude. Five days with no boring lectures. Fantastic, he thought.

On Monday afternoon, Barry took Beth to Hamilton Lake. She wore a pink bikini and looked gorgeous, but she kept talking about Dwana and the meetings. Barry had decided all of this Dwana stuff was just fantasy acted out for an audience. The healing performance for Joe couldn't cure him, and Barry was sure that guy would probably die or at least be hospitalized very soon.

Sitting in the sun watching children play as people swam, Barry understood Dwana and her cult. Even the firewalk had to be a trick, a magician's scheme that trapped the weak minded. The longer he thought about Dwana, the more

sure he became. Even though she hadn't mentioned money yet, she was a con-artist who would eventually expect them to pull out their wallets and make a donation. That's all she wanted.

The hot sun gave Barry an idea. He took Beth's suntan lotion and poured a line down her back. She quivered with surprise or maybe it felt cold. Barry then gently rubbed it over her shoulders and back.

"This weekend's meeting will be even better than last," Beth said. "I can't wait."

Barry stopped rubbing her back. "I thought we might skip this weekend. I mean, why sit and listen to some lecture when we could be here?"

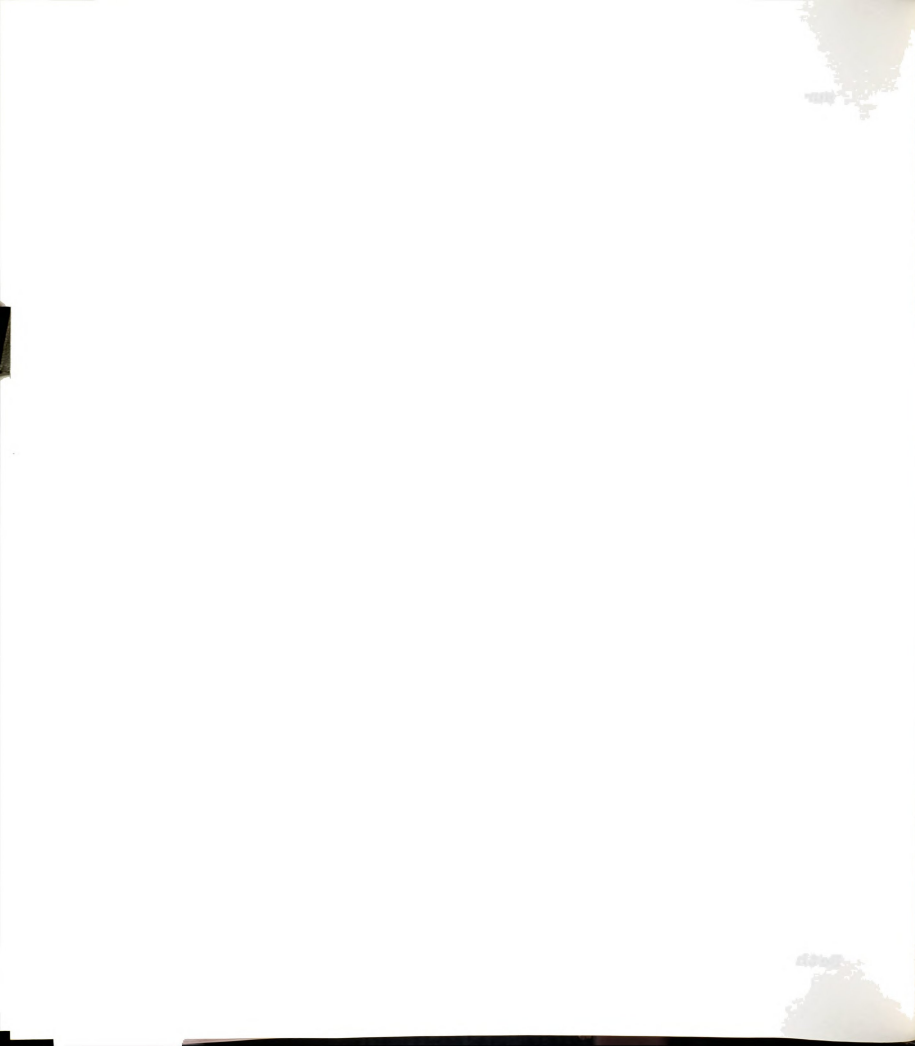
Beth flipped over and sat up. "How can't you be excited after the firewalk and the healing?"

He stared out at the water where three kids playfully splashed each other. "Well, it was interesting in a kooky way, but it's just not something I think we should get too deeply involved in. It's a cult."

"After this weekend, Dwana won't be here any more. She's doing these lectures because she cares about people. There's no obligation or membership. It's no cult. It's a group meeting based on love."

Barry didn't want to argue. When he looked at Beth, she almost glared. "Well, it sure has filled our relationship with love," Barry said sarcastically.

"I don't care what you say. I'm going this weekend," Beth said and then her teeth clenched, and Barry could see



her jaw muscles rippling.

"Fine. You can go by yourself."

"Fine," Beth said. "The people there seem very friendly."

After a few silent moments, she stood, lifted her beach towel and sprayed sand over Barry. Momentarily, he got up and followed her to the car.

Feeling aggravated, he drove her home. Dwana was going to ruin their summer. Maybe enduring one more weekend would salvage some time. Barry thought it over and finally said, "How about if I can prove Dwana's a phoney, you won't go next weekend? If I can't prove it, then I'll go with you."

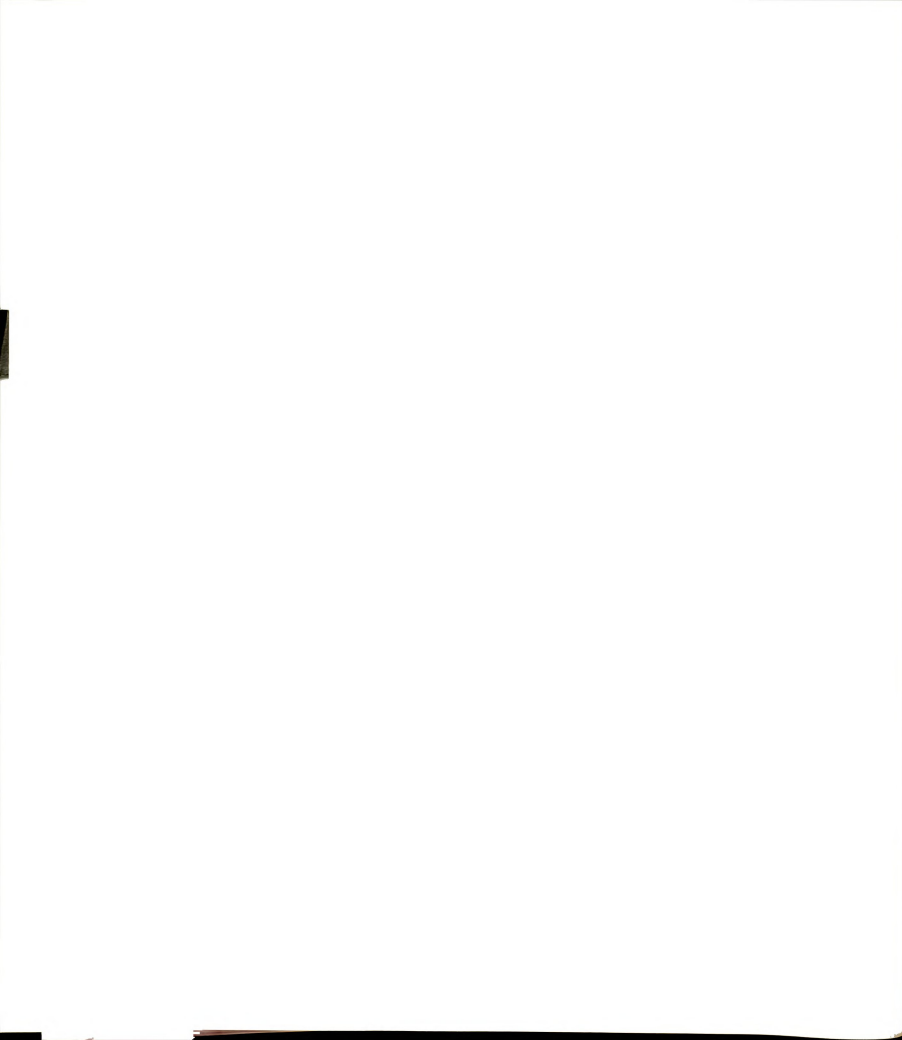
"How are you going to do that?" Beth said.

Barry stopped in front of her house. Her mother's car sat in the driveway. "I don't know yet. If I can maybe prove that guy Joe isn't really cured, then you'd accept Dwana's a fraud?"

Beth frowned. "His disease might still be there, but he was healed spiritually."

"Spiritually might be hard to prove or disprove," Barry said.

That evening at supper, Barry sat with Carl and put together more sandwiches. Their parents were out at a business dinner and reception for a new company. Carl had spent all day watching television. "Did you rent some videos today or just watch the networks?" Barry said trying to start a conversation.



"Yeah," Carl answered as he chewed. "What'd you do today?"

"Took Beth to the lake." Barry decided to see if maybe Carl had any ideas that could help him prove Dwana was a phoney. He had to make sure it sounded casual and not too important. "So, Carl, why do you think this stuff where people copy primitive rituals is so popular nowadays?"

Carl looked up from his plate seemingly bewildered. "Huh?"

"You know like walking across a fire in a deep trance and not getting burned. It's a fad. It started in California. People go to lectures."

"Firewalk, oh yeah. I saw a story on television about it," Carl said and then took another bite of sandwich.

"What about it?" Barry said.

Carl swallowed. "People learn mind control and walk across charcoal. In fact, Mr. Hessmann, my science teacher, talked about that." Carl took another bite.

Barry didn't want to sound too interested but said, "What did he say?"

"Conductvee," Carl mumbled and then swallowed.

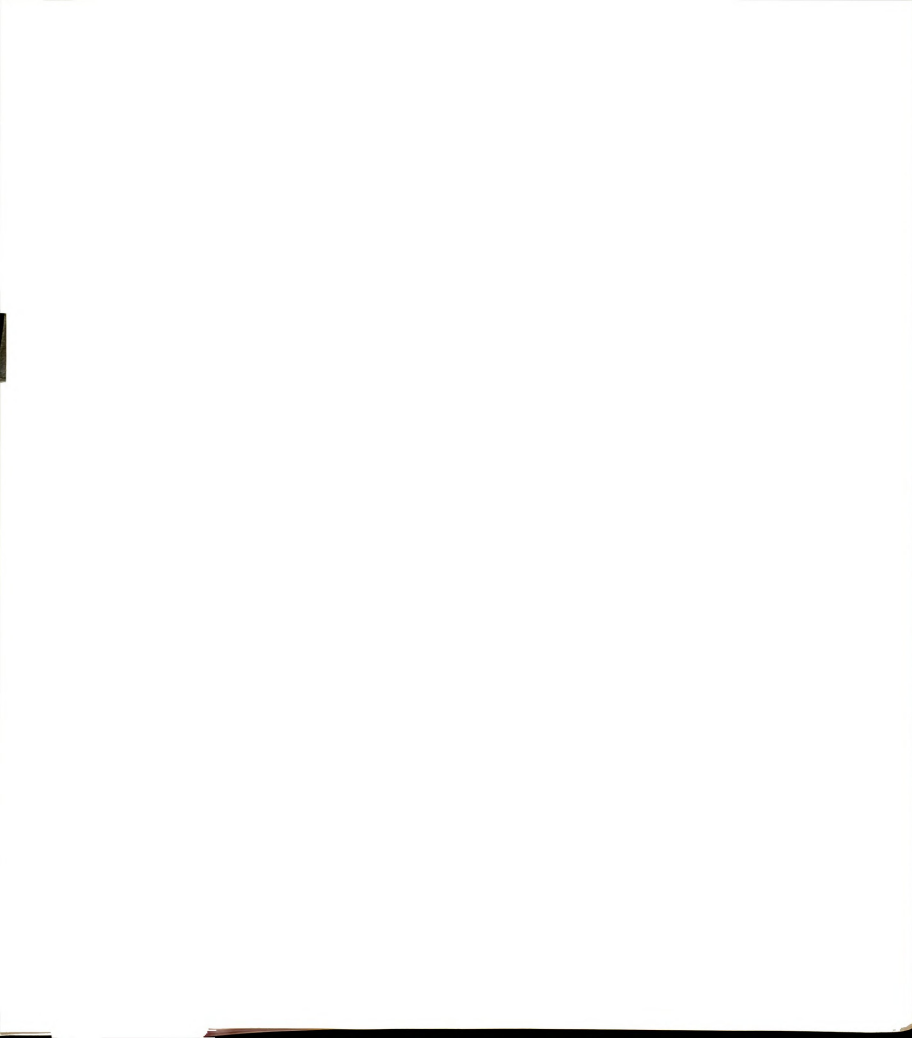
"What?"

"Conductivity," Carl said slowly.

"What's that?"

Carl smiled. "It's the ability of a substance to hold or conduct heat energy. I remember that. It was on the exam."

"So what's that got to do with people walking on hot



coals?" Barry said.

"Everything." Carl seemed smug. "Mr. Hessmann said firewalkers don't walk on the coals when they're flaming. That's the trick. They wait for the coals to burn down so there are no visible flames. The embers are made of light fluffy material which has low conductivity. See, something metal or a rock has high conductivity because it's a solid material."

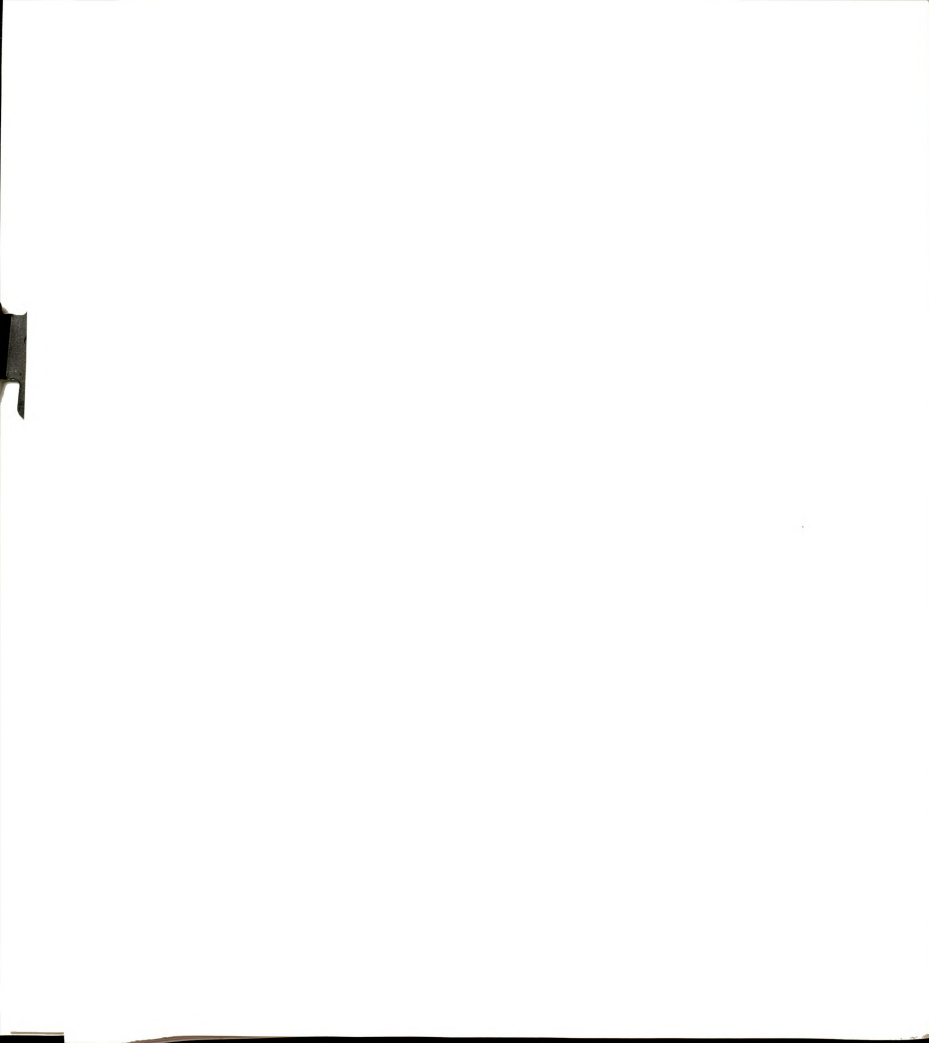
Barry thought this was good stuff but still didn't understand. "Why don't the firewalkers burn their feet?"

Carl sighed. "The firewalkers move across the coals quickly. If they stood in one spot for more than a couple seconds, they'd get burned. As long as they keep moving, the heat from the coals is not conducted into the soles of their feet which are also poor conductors. It's the same principle as putting your finger through a candle flame. Or a cake baking. You could stick your hand into the air in an oven that's at four hundred degrees or even touch the cake for a second, and you wouldn't burn. Cake and air are poor conductors. But touch the metal pan and it's sizzle city."

Barry wanted to hug Carl. "It's just a trick."

"Explained through the laws of physics," Carl added.

In his mind, Barry heard Dwana's voice, "Don't stand in one spot for long. Move across the fire and you will not notice the heat." Also they had waited a long time between lighting the coals and walking on them which let the flames die down. Barry now knew Dwana was a fraud, but how



could he convince Beth?

Immediately after dinner, Barry rushed to the store and prepared the backyard. Carl helped, and when Beth parked her bicycle on the driveway at eight o'clock, she seemed to follow her nose into the back where a white and red charcoal pit glowed and fumes filled the air.

"What are you doing?" Beth said pointing at the fire.

"Carl and I are going to prove a point. In a few minutes, you will accept the fact that Dwana is a phoney baloney."

"You're not going to firewalk," Beth said. "Carl, you can't. You haven't undergone the proper mental preparation."

Barry said, "You'll see in a moment that this requires no mind at all."

"I'm not going to argue that. Barry, the only reason you did it before was because the group sent out powerful vibrations which protected you," Beth said.

"Bah!" Barry popped. "This is a trick explainable by the laws of physics."

Beth turned toward Carl who said, "Thermal conductivity."

Barry felt a kind of high. He was tripping on his own self-righteousness. He strode to the pit's edge and turned toward Beth and Carl. "You know, this time I'm positive I won't get burned."

"Stop it, Barry! Don't!" yelled Beth just as he swung his bare foot over the white coals. His other foot landed and a searing pain flashed across his legs.

"Aaaaah!" screamed Barry as he hopped sideways off the



coals onto the grass where he fell. His burning feet sent agonizing sparks throughout his body until a sick numbness entered.

Beth knelt next to Barry. "Oh, your feet. We better go to the hospital."

Carl appeared behind Beth. "It didn't work the way Mr. Hessmann said, huh?"

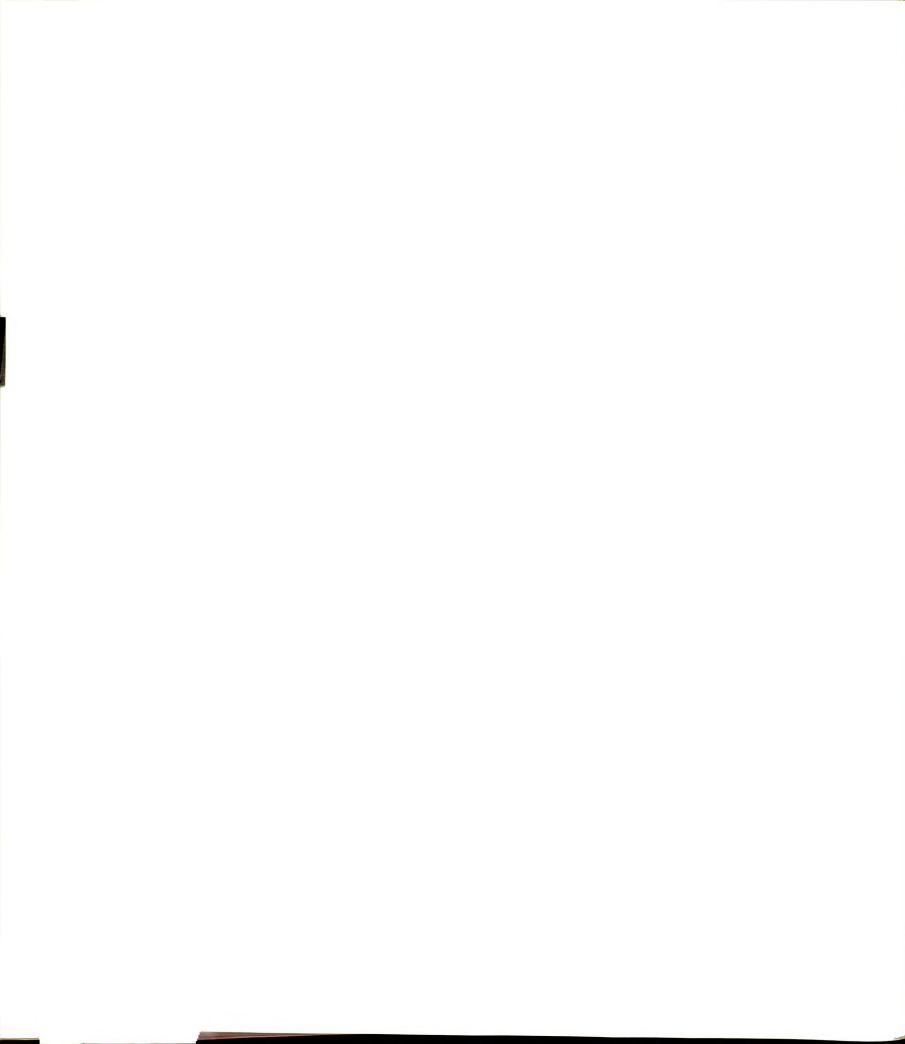
For Barry the hospital was white and pain and some cream on his feet which eased his suffering. The doctor wanted to know what had happened, so Barry told him he had accidentally stepped on the coals dumped from their barbecue. The doctor then suggested, "Maybe get a gas grill with mesquite next time." Barry didn't try to smile. He felt too stupid and sore.

When Beth and Carl were allowed to enter the emergency room treatment area, Barry closed his eyes. "We finally contacted Mom and Dad," Carl said. Barry wanted to melt and disappear forever.

During the next week, Barry helped Carl watch television. Beth came over each day with a gift. On Tuesday, she brought a box of chocolate covered cherries Barry loved. She didn't say anything about his injury except to ask how he was feeling. Barry didn't think he deserved any sympathy, so he told her, "Good" each time.

Wednesday's gift was a large deluxe pan pizza. Barry, Beth and Carl ate it as they watched "Another World."

Thursday evening, Beth showed up with a yellow T-shirt



with Firewalker printed in big black letters across the chest. Barry didn't like the joke but thanked her anyway. His feet were hurting much less, and the blistered skin seemed to be falling off.

Friday afternoon, Beth presented Barry with a wrapped gift. He could tell it was a book. He unwrapped it and thanked her. It was The Miracle of Mind Power by Dan Custer.

During a commercial, Carl went into the kitchen. Beth said, "You know tomorrow's the last meeting with Dwana."

Barry did not want to argue about who had lost their bet. "What time?"

Beth smiled. "We should leave here about one. Could I drive you in your car?"

"Sure," Barry said staring at a Tide commercial as Beth smacked a kiss on his lips.

The next day, Beth parked the car on the dirt road. They walked the path to the meeting area in the field. Barry felt like an idiot. As he hobbled, his sore feet ached with each step. His burns were heavily bandaged, and he wore thick wool socks and sandals.

Dwana, wearing a plain blue dress, embraced Barry. "Peace be with you," she whispered. Barry nodded and stared at the ground. After sitting, the pain in his feet was replaced by occasional bursts.

As the lecture started, Barry managed to pay attention for a while but then found himself gazing at the trees and barn and listening to the wind and birds.

Finally, Dwana stopped talking. The people stood,



formed a circle around Barry, held hands and did their healing meditation. Barry watched Joe who held Dwana's and Beth's hands. Joe still looked skinny, but he wasn't so pale.

Knowing he was supposed to feel some blast of cosmic energy which would miraculously heal his feet, Barry opened his mind to the possibility. He felt nothing except occasional wind gusts.

As the meeting ended, all the people hugged and kissed again. Dwana gave her final blessing and walked to the farmhouse. The men helped Barry back to the car, and as he slipped into the passenger's seat, he noticed Joe puffing on a cigarette.

After dinner that evening alone in his bedroom, Barry carefully removed the gauze from his feet. The blisters were pretty well gone and except for pink skin and some rough peeling chunks, his feet looked okay. When he pressed them against the floor, the familiar pain returned. He wasn't healed. He wanted to telephone Beth, have her come over and show her the result of Dwana's ritual. Beth would probably say his unbelief had kept the miracle from happening. He didn't call.

Barry was sick and tired of being so depressed. As he lay on the bed, he said to himself, "Think about something happy." The Dwana meetings were over for the summer, and maybe Beth would forget about that kookiness. Even though he'd acted like a total buffoon, she was still his girlfriend. He pictured himself on the beach rubbing suntan lotion on Beth's back, and as he did, he noticed that his feet suddenly

felt better.



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