

The Keeper of Dreams:

Volume II

By Matthew Keefer

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I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding

-Walt Whitman

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A House Burning

As appeared on No Extra Words

What would you take, what would you leave?

It's a large house. It's an old mansion: the old wing has collapsed, no one ventures there anymore; the new wing, that has been vacant for years; the servants' quarters, crowded, where we live now.

Or used to. Until the fire came through.

We're adaptable creatures, ultimately. But to a point. You can't bring cattle into a desert; a bird does not fly through the ocean. Inside, there is fire: outside, what is there? Is there anything to adapt to?

Have we even seen that world?

Food, clothing, each other. We're staring at the fire, but we didn't know it would be dark; outside the fire it is dark. Candlesticks –but no, it's too late to go back. Shelter, too: something more than the overcrowded caves, off in the distance. Shoes, perhaps.

A House Burning

It is dark out.

We were used to a lot of things. A lot of conveniences we took for granted. Food, clothing; each other. We definitely took each other for granted. Especially when it grew dark, when the mood was right to tell stories in that dark, lying back, propped up on a pillow. When I thought of the comfort that might come if you'd only cross over, come off your bed into mine.

But that is long ago. It is the fire now.

It's what there is. What is left. Its thick lips and long tongues, licking and biting what was once ours. It is hungry; it is always hungry. It is light, too, pain to our eyes, pain to see it flicker out and die in the coals, I am sure. I turn away. The fumes ...

When will the sun come out?

The bureau, the fights, the dancing. There won't be dancing, anymore. That isn't true, that can't be true; but there is no floor to dance on, you know?

Things we should have left: the money, our IDs. We know who we are. We know where we're from. We know what we've been through: trudging, dragging feet through thick muck; the insults, the insinuations, the sneers; fingers, wagging, heads, wagging. We've heard it all, and it's passed through us. Sometimes it's just easier to believe.

Easier than seeing what's really going on. The fire: it has always been there. It started in the corner, that old wing, but no one ventures there, no one but ghosts and mice and flames. We were too busy keeping our heads down, telling ourselves the black smoke was harmless. Trying to drag through the muck, like a dance partner, listen to those shouted insults, pretending them music. And here we are. The fire. More of us are turning away, now.

It's out there. Out in the pitch. Was the sun always like this?

Faith, hope. Ourselves. We failed individually; we are individual failures. They never mentioned history: bands of hunter-gatherers; families of farmers; a phalanx of soldiers. Failures together are even bigger failures, apparently, each individual failing balled into more. They never mentioned that failure balled into failure balled into success; but they never had to say that. We just assumed the opposite.

They let us assume.

We can blame a lot on them. We can blame them those haughty looks beaming down from those portraits; we can blame them, yes, for that old cigar that never quite put out in the old wing. We can blame and point and shout.

Not that the dark would listen. Or the flames, either.

But here we are, the last turned away from the fire, from the

A House Burning

all-consuming. Burnt in our eyes; burned in our hearts. A true heart never came from anything more than ashes. There is that, at least.

Do I know the answer? Do you? We don't, either.

But I do know a direction. And a purpose.

There is a pace.

There is a lot to accomplish, yet. Too much. But there is a joke, too.

How do you eat an elephant? (It is my mother's.)

One bite at a time.

Perhaps that joke will last the first mile, perhaps you will think of something next (something mean, something dirty? It doesn't matter, something you). But there is a pace, and with that, hope and riches and fears. And love, if there is time.

Can you smell it?

It is dark out.

But already the air breathes cooler ...

Pressure

what does not break
shall bend
a stone's igneous beauty
warped and glassy
fog-lifted
a black mirror
pitching dark reflections
what does not bend
shall break

The Prisoner

Gray desert sand swirls beneath the skeleton of my vehicle, a hollowed-out SUV. It had shed doors, metal skin, anything extraneous it needed to drop for this journey. Somewhere, back there, I know they're following. There's a name for that, that feeling of ominous unknowing, where something hits you hard and fast and you're in the dark, you know something else is coming at you but you can't see what. And over the horizon, a flame in that dark, some fenced-in complex. I don't know how long I've been driving, or why I need to get there. I also don't know, but somehow I do, that I'm going to die there.

I stop the SUV far enough away, I hope, so it won't get noticed. My gut aches, maybe it's a bit of fear, maybe it's tossed by the ride. I pull myself out, a mess of dust and riding sores, and plunker down to the sand. I'd forgotten how difficult it is to walk in the damned stuff, but now I'm too far away from the car to go back to it, and besides, that isn't the plan. I don't admit there is much of a plan. But this is no time for regrets.

My thighs are sore. I remember those movies, the ones where a

pilot is stranded in the desert and forced to find civilization, failing that, an oasis; miles and miles of sand dunes and oppressive heat beating down; and I think: how can a human being even stand ten minutes of that? It's your brain, not the sun, that beats you down, the idea of never making it back, of having no discernible plan that lay ahead. But also it's the repetition of your feet, the left-right-left, the sand shifting beneath, making everything harder, everything that grinds and wears you down soft and raw, like waves beating on a piece of foggy sea glass. Should I turn back? No, it's too late for that: I make out the other vehicle searching my car, off in the distance. I pick up my pace, as I'm no longer that far away, and I start to make out the chain-link fence clearer, the almost bare grounds, and a building within.

When I make it there, almost nothing stirs. It looks like a prison, except with no prisoners: vast concrete grounds, a fence with a couple openings in it, a guard tower. Almost no prisoners. The one, perhaps, sits on a bench. A couple of guards, dark blue uniforms, gold tassel and markings for rank, on the other side of the grounds, walk without a care. For a high-security installation, it's pretty lax. Though I guess being out in the middle of nowhere affords some natural sense of protection.

"Hi, I'm Sami," the man says as I sit down on the bench. He extends a kind hand toward me, slightly hirsute. His foreign accent almost catches me off-guard, except that it is followed with a

congenial, grandfatherly smile, and rather American civilian clothes. I dust myself off before returning his firm shake.

“I’m Al,” I reply.

“Good to meet you Al. What brings you to here?”

“I’m not sure,” I say, “Where’s ‘here?’”

“This,” his hand waves around, as if he had dominion over it, “is the Institution. It is where dreams are made, cradled, and smashed.” He chuckles. “What is it you’re looking for?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s a difficult place to start,” Sami says, “but I suppose we all start off not knowing. Questions are the best place to start.”

“What is that building?”

“What building?”

I point out the only building for miles, probably in the whole damned desert.

“Ah,” he smiles, “that is the Director’s building. He overlooks each aspect of this compound. Some say he built it by hand, but I don’t think that is the litter—what is the word?—literal ... He has strong connections. It is dangerous to approach that building unannounced.”

I look around. There’s nowhere else to go. “Thanks Sammy.”

“Sami,” he says, “and you are welcome. Do take care.”

The sand grit everywhere on the compound, and as I walk toward the building, my shoes grating against the concrete seems

to be the only sound here, save for the pitch of the wind against the building. The other two people in the distance, guards apparently, take notice, and stop their pacing, turning a curious head towards me. I walk a bit faster, keeping up with my heart, and the guards start to walk towards me, more intent. I pace faster, eventually running, and the two guards chase after me.

A klaxon sounds.

“Security Breach,” echoes over the intercom. That aching fist grabs my stomach again.

I make it into the building before the guards can reach me. Apparently they abandoned their posts, as the whole first floor, a single room, is nearly empty except for a couple screens and some other security equipment. I find the weapons cabinet, but it’s locked, and there’s no way to get into it unless I shoot the lock off. On the screens, the two guards multiply by two more: another pair of guards are coming through the other opening in the fence. I haul it up the stairs.

I look around the second floor. It’s bare, as if someone had not finished furnishing it. I look out of a window, and a contingent of guards from all over the grounds are flocking towards the building. An insect-like instinct carries them to me, swarming all over the concrete, and I run toward the stairs to the top floor.

“Halt!”

Before I can make it, those first two guards arrive, their rifles

drawn. I'm beat. I raise my hands and stop.

"You got me," I say.

They keep their weapons aimed at me.

"I'm unarmed," I tell them, "what do you want me to do?"

Still nothing.

"Where are we going?" I swallow. That weird danger is in the air.

"You," one of the guards say, "are going nowhere." They open fire and gun me down. I remember my last thought being that I'd never get to see my infant son again, and being desperately angry at the guards for that.

And I die. What I'm not prepared for what lay next.

Sand grit against my teeth. I spot the complex again, the guard tower and the Director's building. I stop the SUV, an overheating pile of sand and slag, and reorient myself.

"Okay," I say so I can hear it, "I'm pretty sure all that happened."

What happened isn't a premonition or anything—it's too specific—but on that assumption, I get out of the truck and look around. It's desert, everywhere, and the only things in it are the tracks leading back from where I came, and the compound that lay

ahead. I'm not going to last much longer out here, and I suppose I have no other choice. I have to go for it again.

I hide the SUV behind a sand dune. I'm a little closer this time—but damn!—walking all the way there is still a small eternity. I make it, and two guards are still walking the grounds, not a care in the world; an older gentleman on the bench. I take a seat beside him.

I extend my hand to him. "I'm Al," I say, "Al Perault."

He shakes firmly. "Hello Mr. Al." He turns to look at the two strolling guards.

"You're Sami, correct?"

"*Sami*, but you're close. Better than before."

"So we do know each ...?"

"I'd like to think," he turned that grandfatherly smile towards me, "that we've all met each other, and have been meeting each other, for quite some time now. But that's only the belief of a silly old man."

I look at the building. "That's the director's building," I say.

"It still is."

I think better of storming it again. "So, what should I do then, announce myself?"

He hushes his voice. "You don't want to do that. I have heard: the Director wants your name."

"What?"

“He needs your name,” Sami says. “Don’t let him trick you out of it. He is rather cunning.”

He sees the expression on my face; even I feel it. “That is okay. It is sealed with me, my friend. On my honor.” He puts a hand on his heart.

“Why? Just my name?”

“Don’t be—humm—naïve,” he says. “It is who you are, is it not?”

“Well, I suppose.” I think for a second. “So, about my name, can he ...?”

“He, too, is only human,” Sami frowns, “and does not possess a dog’s hearing.”

“I mean, he has cameras in the compound.”

“No, he does not,” Sami assures me. “He has eyes and ears, but I promise you, I am not one of them.”

I sigh, still uncomfortable with my mistake. “Okay, then how do I get in there?”

“Why do you want to get in there?”

He has me there.

“I don’t know,” I say.

“What don’t you know?” Sami says.

And I’m not sure what he means by that. I think for a bit.

“I’m not sure,” I say.

“They say the wise man knows what he doesn’t know, but even

I know I am not wise enough to understand that.” Sami dusts some of the sand off his legs, as if it would matter.

I look a bit flabbergasted, I’m sure.

“You have a question,” Sami says.

“What am I doing here?”

He smiles. “Let’s start simpler. ‘Who are you,’ for instance. ‘Here,’ that is complicated.”

I stare at the nutcase. But he has a point. I can’t really answer that right now. I can barely make out my infant son’s face.

“Sometimes when we prepare for a journey,” he’s saying, “we forget to pack our clothes, our wallet. Keys to get back home. You, Al, prepared for a journey without your self!” He laughed.

I stood up. “This Director probably did it,” I say.

Sami shakes his head.

“Then he’ll get me out.” I turn to the building, but Sami touches my arm.

“We are all put here to help. The sun, the sand; the street, the prison. Perhaps even the Director. But do not ask the Director for his help. He may find his own way to assist. If you ask ... he is that kind of person. He is too cunning for you.”

“Thanks.” I turn away. Sami lets go and goes back to some humming.

There’s not enough time to play games. Those two guards are still strolling. I have to find my way out of here. Apparently the

Director has some power over this place, and that's the only place to start. I go toward the Director's building.

Those guards start following me again, but this time I'm walking. I get to the door, and they yell at me to halt. I turn around to face them. The dark wool uniforms, sweat beading on their foreheads and down their necks. One of them unbuttoned halfway, damp collar, fanning himself. Guns at the side. Real pros.

"Who is it that wishes to see the Director," one of them say.

"It is I," I tell him, "Andrew Dupont. I am looking to speak to the Director."

And now their rifles are up. "The Director has no time to trifle with liars. Who are you?"

Beads of sweat drip down my temples. I'm pretty sure I won't die, not really, but it's a half-brained notion in the face of a couple of full-auto rifles. "Sorry, I'm Al. Where is the Director of this place?"

They lower their rifles and both wear a similar, childish smile, as if it is part of the uniform. "He is right in here," the other says. "If you would come this way, Al."

They sit me down in the security room. There are a few more monitors now, and another guard sits inside, rifling through the weapons cabinet.

"So who did you say you are?" The unbuttoned guard asks.

"I'm Al," I said.

“Okay, Al, I’m going to let the Director know you’re here.” He pats me on the shoulder and buttons up. Then he climbs the stairs. The second guard keeps watch over me.

“So,” I say to the second guard, “how are things?”

“Good.” He nods.

“Who is this Director?” I say.

Doesn’t look like he heard me.

I try another tack. “Where are we?”

“This is Complex 127.”

“What’s that?”

He ignores my question again.

“What does Complex 127 do?”

He turns to me. “Complex 127 is a high-security facility that engages in active area defense.”

“What does that mean,” I ask. “Is that code for a weapons testing base? Is it part of the government?”

“No,” the guard explains, “it is the Director’s unique vision to hone this invaluable and vital defense facility fully before deploying it to wherever it is needed, regardless of government. And we do not deal in ‘weapons.’”

“Then how do you defend anything?”

“We deal strictly in the most valuable of assets: information.”

Then Sami is right. But what can they do with my name?

“Thanks for the talk. Is there anything I should call you?”

The guard stares at me blankly. “Excuse me ...?”

“Do you have a name and rank?”

“My rank is Fourth Green.”

“And your name ...?”

The other guard slams the cabinet shut and grabs at the pistol on his side. “You will remain silent while detained. Any further conversation with Fourth Green will be met with hostility. Understood, prisoner AI?”

I shut myself up. Two more guards come in, dressed in dirty robes. They look like the men who followed me in the truck. They hang up their robes and reveal blue, tightly buttoned uniforms, the same material and gold embroidery as the other guards except for the large, dark circles beneath their armpits. They go to sit at the monitors and plug away at a couple keyboards.

Guard Fourth Green stares at a screen of an empty courtyard. The two new guards enter furious information into the one system, and then stare at the screen. Then the other guard returns to fiddling around with the weapons cabinet again, and I shuffle unnoticed forward. There’s a picture of a house in some familiar suburb on the screen. I wonder where that camera’s connected to.

It’s quiet, like before a funeral. Ten minutes pass before the first guard clomps down the stairs. He’s popped a few buttons again. “The Director’s ready to see you,” he says.

Even the stairs are gritted with sand. The second floor is still

bare, and the guard stops to wait in front of the next flight of stairs. I almost walk past him, but some unseen signal wakes him up and we continue. The third and final floor is furnished, but barely.

There is a man at a dark wood desk.

“Sami?”

“Why hello, Mr. Al,” he speaks without an accent, “I believe you know my compatriot, then. He’s helped you get this far; don’t worry, we’ll pay him a visit.” He motions to the guard. “What can we help you with?”

Two cabinets flank the desk, and a flatscreen stretches behind him. “I want to go home, that’s all. I’m sorry if there’s been any misunder—”

The screen flickers on. “Here, then?” It’s that same picture of the house downstairs. He turns slightly to face it.

I shake my head. “That’s not where I live.”

“Regrettable,” the Director says, “but there is a fix for that, too.” Children come out of the house and play outside; I recognize one of them as a friend’s daughter. “Sign your full name to the deed, Al, and it shall be yours.”

“That’s not what I want.”

“Then what is it you do want, Al?” The screen shut off, and the Director steps out from behind his desk. He sits on it uncomfortably. “Because I know you don’t want to be here. Nobody does. But you know, or maybe you don’t yet, that we’re fated to be here as long as

you want to be here. We can make this easy, or not.”

Air conditioning or not, it’s hot as hell in the office. “Why am I here?”

The Director shakes his head. “I don’t know. But Complex 127 is a high-security facility designed to engage in active area defense.” He leans a bit closer. “They sent you to me.”

“‘They?’ Who are ‘they?’”

“A road crosses a bridge crosses a rail crosses a runway,” the Director’s walking around now, losing his mind. “A lot of crossing to do. It takes careful navigation not to cause a commotion.”

“So I’m at ... what, a crossroads?”

“Essentially, AI, yes.” He offers me to sit down. “A very specific type. A very complex type. Very expensive. But you know this rather immutable fact: nothing comes free. Certainly not an active area defense facility.” A smile crooked on his lips. “But yes, we’re here for *you*.”

I remembered Sami’s words. “Why should I trust you?”

“We are not open to debate,” he says. “A yes or no will suffice. You are in no position to question or weigh our trust. But know that this is not a one-sided deal; we ask each of our clients to leave something behind. Staffing, training, technology upgrades, other expenses. Things like that to consider.”

There’s something I can’t quite figure out about this. “How much?”

He laughs. “You’re not ready yet. But remember this: I hold the power of death over you for as long as you remain in this place. Once I release you, I no longer hold sway over you.” He snaps his fingers. “Third Red,” the second guard marches up, “give Al time to think about his decision.”

I turn around in time to see him level his weapon on me and blast away.

The desert’s grime is without cease. It crunches in my teeth, and my mouth’s too dry to spit it back out. The SUV is overheating again, but maybe it has enough life left to take me somewhere else. Worth a try.

Backtracking isn’t an option. So I turn to the right, keeping the sun and the compound by my left shoulder (that would be south, right?). I’m driving carefully enough to make the car last, but it doesn’t (naturally), and the damned thing strands me in the middle of nowhere. I jump out of the car, a few more sores than I had before, and walk in the new direction. It’s plodding, miserable progress, if I call it that, but maybe that palm-tree oasis is out there—again, maybe a movie-inspired fantasy—and in my luck, there’s a little blur over the horizon. It creeps closer, one miserable footstep at a time.

As the sun cast overhead, I make out the Director's compound, the single, small building, the probably empty guard tower. A sinking feeling cast into me as I made out a couple of guards strolling the grounds, and the possibility of it being some other compound in the middle of the desert is finally obliterated. My clothes are nearly rags now, my hair tattered and sand-swept, and the sun nearly setting by the time I make to the infernal place.

"Welcome, Al," Sami said. He extends his other hand as his right arm is in a sling. "I thought you'd forgotten about this place." A wry smile overcomes his face.

"Are you okay? What happened?"

"Oh, this?" He lifted the sling slightly. "It is nothing. I got the better of the argument."

"Hard to believe."

"It is good to see you again, friend." The wryness on his face melted away into something kinder.

"Sami, I'm sorry, I didn't realize—"

"Oh, I'm not *Sami*," he shakes his head. "You have me confused. He was never here. They call me Jonah."

I probably show disbelief. "It's okay," Jonah says, "you'll come to understand."

"Jonah," I tell him, "I'm lost. Why am I here?"

"You are right," he said, "you are lost. Why you are here. 'Why' is a big question. We are but small creatures. 'How,' that is

something we are made to understand.”

“Umm, okay.” I shook my head. “How did I get here?”

Jonah smiles.

“Jonah ...” I say.

“Al, my friend, you are here to learn that.”

I shake my head and he laughs. I am about to say something, but somehow, the smell of smoke, or maybe its image, flickers in my eyes, and a truck ...

“Do not worry,” Jonah tells me, “for the ‘how’ will come, too.” He sighs. “But do listen to me, Al: do not lose faith. Evil waits for that day, for hope to be extinguished; but when hope endures evil, then—”

The guards from the other vehicle push aside the two strolling on the concrete.

“Halt!” They sound in unison.

They’re pointing their weapons at me from the far side of the compound, as if they can really hit me from two hundred yards half in the dark.

“Al,” one yells, “you are to come with us.”

Jonah and I watch from the bench. It’s ten minutes of their creeping slightly closer (weapons still drawn, as if I might pull a small infantry unit out of my pocket), and they bring me into the compound, where I wait again. There are a few more monitors installed and another weapons rack this time. The one guard inside

stares at that picture of the house on one of the monitors. It is now dark at the house on the monitor.

The other two guards, Red Three and Green Four, rush in almost panting. “The Director wants to see you.”

“What if I don’t want to see him?” I say.

They look at each other in bewilderment. The guards from the vehicle, still in dirty white robes, drag me up the stairs regardless. They sit me down at the third floor and leave, despite the fact that the Director’s chair is clearly empty. His flat screen is still on, an eagle’s eye view of a familiar-looking neighborhood. I sit in the chair for some time, expecting the Director to come in, but he doesn’t. I look through his desk.

“What the ...?” I sort through the first drawer, packed with useless trinkets and those bubbles like the ones kids get from toy vending machines. There’s even a plastic capsule with what looks like a real wedding ring, and looking over the items closer, they look less like toys than on first sight: keys, probably to a house; dentures; loose paper clips, bent at strange angles; a fistful of pens from different banks encircled by a couple old rubber bands; mints; other items that you’d find in your old jeans pockets, if that includes some wind-up toys.

“I see you enjoy my little collection,” the Director says, almost out of nowhere. “Go ahead, you are wondering what is in the other drawers.”

“A little.”

“By all means, I have nothing to hide.”

I close the first drawer and check the other two. Literally nothing.

“By now, you know we’ve eliminated Sami,” he walks toward the desk, and I feel my gut grip again, “your friend and confidant. You have no friends left, Al. Come, sit down.” He motions for me to sit in his chair. I sit down. The Director takes a seat at the chair across the desk.

The Director starts to lean forward with an elbow in the air; he realizes he is no longer at his side of the desk, and adjusts his arm on his lap. “You see, Al, we have all the time in the world. We do. Do realize that I’ve never lost a battle of wills.” He sits forward again, but the desk isn’t there to support him. “Never.”

“So what is it you want?”

He lightens a bit. “A game of chess?” The Director gets up and searches a new bookshelf to my left. He frowns and pulls out a board and a drawstring bag. He places the board on the desk and starts setting up a game of checkers instead, except the pieces are on the light squares.

“I’m not interested in playing a game.”

The Director scoots the chair closer. He presents two closed fists to me. “Pick one.”

“Neither, I’m not playing.”

He almost pouts and puts the translucent chips back into the bag. He puts the game away and sits down again, now terribly close to me, in a chair next to me. There's a zit on the right side of his face. "What is your game of preference?"

"I have none."

"Then what should we do?"

"I'm fine sitting here."

"I," he stands up, "unfortunately am not. Perhaps you're forgetting your manners as a guest."

It'd still be nice to know something. "You know my name, but I'd like to know ..."

He sits down again. "Twenty questions? That would be acceptable."

"No," I say, "what's your name?"

"You may refer to me as the Director."

"But you have a name, right?"

"Of course I do," he smiles, "and I believe you already know it. Besides, you are in no position to be making impositions upon your host. We have other business to attend to." He points to the screen. It is a security truck. My security truck. Smoking. Police taped it off, and there is a body lying next to it, my partner. My stomach is gripping again.

"What did you do?"

"I told you," the Director does not contain his amusement, "in

here, I hold the power of *death*, but outside of this place ...” His smile is something snakish. “Think of me as a hand: a quick shake, here and there, but no eyes, no brain. What I need is information: your information. Now, let’s start with what you know, and we’ll work on what you don’t.”

The fog is starting to lift. My partner, Joey Wess. And there was a group of them, too, masked ...

“Something stir in those brain juices? Together, we could get those bastards. Just one word.”

I shake my head. “This doesn’t seem ...”

“Do you really have time for what seems,” the Director asks me. “No? Make a decision, or one will be made for you. Rule number one of the world. The Silver Rule.”

“I want to get out,” I tell him.

“There are many ways out. Do you prefer head or feet?”

“What?”

“The tuckus is another choice, yes. Note that how you get out is not inconsequential. Perhaps we can solve this question.” He pulls a pack of cards from somewhere and shuffles clumsily. “Pick one.”

I shake my head. “No, I’m not here for games.”

“Games? All this careful preparation, and that’s what you ... Well.” He clicks his fingers. “You’ve spent my time, and more tragically, my patience. Prepare to die, Al.”

Guards appear with drawn guns, and wait for the Director to

move out of the way. When they see he isn't moving, they march closer and shoot me through.

Desert sand is difficult to spit out of your mouth, especially when your mouth is dry, and especially when you wake up lying face-first in it. The SUV is gone now, and apparently I have to make the whole distance by foot. And now my stomach is pounding worse, where the guards shot me. Dammit.

And the sand. The sand gets in everywhere. My feet burn with sweat and sand, my shoes are more desert, and I make out the Director's complex over the horizon. It's too far. This is it.

It's all over.

I lay flat. Heat exhaustion feels like a painful way to go. You burn up, like you're in a fire; sunburns, heck, blisters, I ... I have no idea. I shade my eyes, like it matters.

I cough out more sand.

Off in the distance is the sound of a motor. I turn to see the two guards who are following me. It's something. I get up and stick a thumb out.

"Halt," one of them yells from the truck. "Stay where you are." I keep my thumb out. One of them gets out of the truck.

"You thought you could get away, Al," he says. "How foolish,

because now you're coming back with us."

I sigh. He points me into the back seat with his gun, and I cooperate. As the complex draws nearer, I'm able to gather my sun-cooked wits. Maybe I can grill them a bit more. Maybe there's a way out.

"So you know my name," I said, "but the Director, he's got one, too. Right?"

"Of course," says the guard next to me, white tatters of a robe blowing in the air. "We all do."

"Of course," I say.

He looks at me like it's a silly question. I guess it is.

"Do you know what it is?"

"We report to the Director," he says. "It is not our place to know him personally."

"True."

"Indeed," the other says.

Something's not right. "Then you don't think it's strange you don't know his last name? Like Director Roberts or something?"

He gets offended. "Don't ever," the guard whispers harshly, "ever pretend to know the Director personally. If he knew we're having this conversation ..."

The truck stops. He sighs, and the driver shoots a disgusted look at us. The guard next to me shuts up. The driver shifts into gear again, and we drive the rest of the way in silence.

They let me out at the gate to the complex. It's as if they're dropping off a child at school, something that I'm going to have to do with Michael when he gets older. I can start to see his face, now: the small bud of his nose, the pudgy, grasping fingers and brown eyes. The wailing, pitched voice as it struggles to mimic my words. Maybe I gave up too soon. I still have something worth fighting for.

Jonah's on the bench again, and the guards in the truck dismount and converse with the other guards. After all that ride, they don't bother paying any interest in me consorting with my ally.

"You look determined," Jonah says. "As if something will break through."

I sit down. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about," I said. "How do I get out of here?"

"I do not know how you get out of here."

"That's not what I—"

"But in all things," he says, "patience is key. Children, art, the universe. The self. The greater part of acting is patience. Preparing. Acting is simple; knowing the right moment to stay put is difficult."

"I'm confused. Then when do I act? What do I do?"

"We are crickets of limited time, but the universe, it is built upon patience, upon waiting, upon time. We are lent a part of that time, and a part of that time we may give to action, and a part of that action—is it to give us more time? Foolish, isn't that?" He shakes his head. "Some believe our actions are already written down,

before we know them. That is not my belief, no. But what to do? I cannot say what you will do, Al, only to act with conviction and to act toward your beliefs. Act toward good, if that is your belief, or evil, should that be your—”

“Jonah, please, I remember something about a robbery. You’re confusing me, and I can’t ...”

“I apologize, but it is not my fate, so I cannot tell you exactly what you want to know. I am, after all, a foolish old man waiting for the bus to arrive.”

“There’s a bus that comes here?”

“It comes for all my friend,” he says. “We all hope some wisdom by the ride, but remember: a bus is mere conveyance. Quiet moments in the seat, waiting for the bus, sometimes that is the bigger journey.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I say. “What do you mean by that?” Guards hook their arms around mine. “Wait! How do I get out of here? Help me!” Jonah sits there, smiling still, watching them drag me into the building.

They throw me at the desk. The Director’s shuffling through piles of papers—apparently he does some work beyond setting up a board game—and signs a hundred documents before looking up.

“Hello Al,” he says. “Glad you could make it.”

I dust off some sand.

“So Al,” he says, “have you made your decision? Or should

we play this little game a little bit more? I never really tire of the struggle. I've always wondered what it is you want."

"I want to go home," I said.

"Of course," the Director stood up, "of course they all say that. But there are so many other things to get out of life, now, aren't there? Take, for instance, Mr. Michael Jones." He turns to the screen and it flickers on. "This rather tasteless McMansion is where he currently resides. Hate the faux zebra carpet. Tasteless. Do you know where he was before he came here?"

"No," I say.

"He'd lived in a little apartment in the middle of nowhere. Roaches, repairs, and rent. Now, he lives like a deluded little king—and let's face it—who doesn't want to be their own king?" Even though it's barely evening, the windows are dead. "And now, my favorite," it clicks to a tall apartment building, "one Mrs.—I mean Miss—Genevieve Travers. Abusive husband, dead-end job, all the trappings of a life gone awry. And now she makes payments on an entire floor in this little building I helped put up on the East side. That's part of the New York skyline, if you aren't familiar. By the time she gets out, she'll be her own queen, working on her second book, hopefully, which should feature—"

"What do you mean 'get out.' She's trapped in here too?"

"Of course not," the Director smiles. "That isn't up to me. I merely showed her the most profitable way out of her situation. The

subsequent trial and—here’s the beauty—autobiography merely ensures that her eventual homecoming from prison shall be one of joy, and not of desolation. Most assume I play some part in the courts and lawyers, but in truth, they work themselves out.”

“Then you’re—”

“One-hundred percent at your service, Al.” He bows. “All we need you to do is to paint your John Hancock here,” he shows me a brief, typewritten page, “or here, or here, or anywhere you want. Name it, and it shall be yours.”

I thought. “Out.”

“Perfect.” He pushes the paper toward me. “Then sign this, and I’ll give you the tickets. The bus arrives at four.”

“Bus ...?”

“Yes, we’ve made a deal with some bus line or another, though the details are of little consequence. Truly.” He sniffs a bit and sneezes. “Desert allergies. If you need a pen, I believe I can offer you one. Or pull one out of your pockets.”

I check my pockets. Apparently I have a fancy cartridge pen—my father’s—a couple paper clips, a squirt gun, and a folded sheet of paper.

“I’ll be taking that,” the Director snatches the squirt gun from me. “And if you don’t need those?”

I offer him the paper clips. He bends them around, frustrated, and dumps them in the top drawer. “Anyway, here’s the contract.”

He gives it to me. “Read it at your leisure.”

ONE PEN FOR ONE ROUND-TRIP TICKET, it says. And there’s a place to sign. I check the back, too, blank, and sign it “X.”

“And here you go,” he says, offering the tickets. “This one’s back if you don’t like your destination,” it’s marked “BACK” in felt-tip pen, and the other has no sensible markings. “And now, Mr. Perault, one last thing and you’re free to go. The back pocket.”

I search through my pockets again. This time there’s a folded piece of paper clipped in there. “Your receipt.” the Director says.

It’s a bill. For services rendered. Most of the items don’t make sense; there’s a “highway robbery” fee.

My gut is getting tight again. I don’t know where this ticket will take me, but what choice do I have? He waves his hand for me to go, and a guard escorts me outside the building. The other guards are conversing, perhaps it’s an off day for them, and one of them sits down on the concrete, apparently having a good time of it. I sit down on the bench with Jonah.

“I did it,” I tell him, “I fucked up.”

“What do you mean?” he says.

“I think I ...” I can’t hold back anymore, it’s too much. All for a couple damned tickets. “I knew I shouldn’t have, but I’m so tired.”

His eyes lit. “These tickets—do you know how precious they are?” He sighs. “This is where I’m going. It’s a shame I’m still here and waiting for—”

I jab the tickets at him. Fuck it, if he can make use of them ...

“I’ll take this one, if you don’t mind,” he gives the “BACK” one to me. A large smile overcomes him; now he’s on the verge of crying. “Thank you, Mr. Al, this is really ...” he offers his hand. “Thank you.”

“Okay ...?”

He stares at the ticket for a while. And the bus does finally come. The windshield is tinted. Jonah climbs on board, and doesn’t seem to notice me he’s so ecstatic. He doesn’t even wave goodbye when they leave. I sit at the bench like an idiot.

Maybe I should have used it. But the klaxon sounds before I can give my gift more thought.

Guards swarm around me, rifles drawn, not even telling me to halt. They’re standing there, sirens blaring, and after a while the Director pushes through the crowd.

“You,” he’s seething, “you shouldn’t have done that. Those tickets are meant for *you*.”

“What do you mean?”

He breathes harshly. “We made a deal, and you spat in the face of it.”

What can I do? I shrug. “Oh well. What are you going to do, kill me?”

“Worse.”

He pulls the squirt gun from his pocket and aims it at me. It burns my stomach through and through.

“The flames of my passion ...”

The lamp overhead is cooking my scalp. I'm locked into a chair. Handcuffs. I open my eyes a slit and make out a dark shape humming to himself in a warehouse. “Fucker had to throw the fucking keys ...”

It takes me some time to reorient myself. The dull fist in my stomach aches. Probably a bullet. I slow my heart and make shallow breaths.

Another man yells something about my truck. “Cleaning up,” the hummer says back. I hear him glug some gas around the warehouse. The fumes in my nose. I don't have much longer left.

Curiosity makes me feel my back pocket. A receipt paper-clipped in.

I close my eyes and pretend to be dead. This is it. I work at the paperclip, hearing Jonah's calm, insistent voice.