

IN A FIELD OF GHOSTS

BY

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All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream.

~ Edgar Allan Poe

What were the figures? Robert Rouan asked himself. He had to get them right, then he would be believed. And once believed, released. Freedom, he could think of nothing else. A free man, after all, can walk out at night and gaze up at the moon and the stars, but he could not. For him, the moon and the stars no longer existed. Time existed. The Earth existed. But the moon and the stars had been blotted out, lost. Even so he preferred to stay up and write at night when most everyone was asleep. Since it was winter, he huddled beneath a green blanket with just his hands and forearms exposed to the cold air. For light, he used a small battery operated reading lamp clipped to the top of a legal pad. He made notes in longhand and wrote using the stub of a pencil. When the lead broke, he peeled away the wood with his fingernails and sharpened the tip on the wall or the floor of his cell.

To assure maximum effect the bomb would have to be detonated from a height of about one thousand feet possibly in the belly of a small aircraft. After the blast, human skin would burn from even a mile away. Buildings within the radius of a football field would vanish. Vaporized. And just beyond that flying debris and death by asphyxiation. What would the casualties be in Los Angeles, New York, London or even Washington DC?

I must hurry, Rouan thought, morning prayers will soon begin.

During the day prayer rugs were set down. Over half the inmates in the Santé were Muslims originally coming from Pakistan, Tunisia, Algeria, West Africa and Morocco, in the last generation or two. Prayers were said throughout Block C five times daily. Many of the inmates studied the Quran. Most of this activity was clandestine; it was not approved of by the prison authorities; catholic chaplains were made available but very few imams were officially sanctioned and made available to the prison population. Located just south of the Sorbonne on the Left Bank, the poets Paul Verlaine and Apollinaire had once been incarcerated behind its towering walls as had members of the French resistance during the second World War. It now housed the assassin, Carlos the Jackal, and an assortment of thugs, petty thieves, murderers, rapists, psychopaths and even transvestites. This was not what Rouan's fellow countryman in the United States imagined when they thought of visiting Paris. It would be hard for them to picture what life was like in that graying fortress, built in the nineteenth century and designed more like a castle than a prison with its turrets and oval passageways. But after one became more familiar with it—and with its rats, moldy bread, lice, bed bugs and depravity—it began to feel more like the prison that it truly was.

Rouan was older than the majority of his fellow prisoners, but looked younger than his actual age and was quite handsome. But his eyes contained a deep sadness and weariness. Since he was of North African descent and spoke Arabic, he was placed in block C with the other North Africans. He shared a cramped cell with Abdullah and Karim. Abdullah, a large ugly man slept in the bunk above him. Karim (thin and effeminate, with the physical frame of a child) was consigned to the bottom bunk across from them. Karim was the latest arrival after being transferred from the tier below, replacing two others who had recently been released. They all shared the same toilet, and ate in the cell. They had just a tiny sink in which to bathe and brush their teeth, and were allowed only two showers per week in the communal shower three tiers below. They were permitted a maximum of four hours a day outside their cell, and from five-thirty in the evening until eight in the morning were confined to it.

Karim had been watching Rouan intently from his bunk for some time. But Rouan ignored him in the hope that he would go to sleep. But it was clear that Karim was wide awake and would not sleep. He watched Rouan like a cat, his eyes flashing in the dark. Rouan found it unnerving.

Finally he glanced in Karim's direction and Karim took this as an invitation to speak: "Robert, are you working on your novel?"

"Sh, you'll wake him up." Rouan put his index finger to his lips and pointed up towards Abdullah in the bunk above.

"Nothing can wake him, he's stoned."

"How? Where did he get the drugs?"

"Don't be so naive," Karim smirked.

"But how did the drugs get in here? How could they get past the guards?"

"The guards," Karim shook his head and laughed. "They are the ones who brought the drugs in. No one else could."

"Well I'm finished with all that. I've had enough of drugs."

"Are you going to the library today?"

"Yes."

"Can you help me with my case today?"

"Sorry, not today."

Rouan had helped Karim with his research of French law (Karim had been charged with possession of heroin and was facing a long stay in prison after having been convicted of the same offense in the past).

"But why, will you be busy with your novel?"

"I'm seeing my new lawyer. Let's talk about this later."

"Read to me something from your novel." Karim sat up and looked directly at Rouan like a child trying to get the attention of a self-absorbed parent.

Rouan felt there was something false about Karim, something not quite right. He felt Karim was playacting, putting on some kind of show, and not just with Rouan. Rouan had observed Karim interacting with the other inmates. Karim wore a mask of innocence, of open friendship, but Rouan knew that Karim was hiding something. Rouan was well aware that behind that mask, Karim could be quite cunning. Karim was like a baby shark with razor sharp teeth.

"I'm not finished with it, Karim. It's not ready. I still have a lot of work to do on it," Rouan replied.

"Maybe I can make some suggestions. Maybe I can help."

"No, you can't help me with this."

"Are you embarrassed by what you are writing?"

"No."

"Then why won't you show it to me?"

"Come on, Karim. Lay off."

"I'm just saying. Is it a secret? Do you have a secret, Robert?"

"My thoughts are private. There are spies in this prison. You know that. Everyone here is paranoid about spies."

"Is it a confession? Are you going to show it to your lawyer?"

"Possibly," Rouan mumbled under his breath.

"I am lucky to have someone like you to share the cell with."

"What do you mean someone like me?"

Karim smiled and said, "you must understand you are so different than the others here, educated, so intelligent, handsome, with some charm, with you I have someone to talk to, someone who understands things."

"And what do you think I understand?"

"That's what I want to know. I'm sure you know things that can help me."

"I have things on my mind. I don't want to talk right now."

"Are you depressed?"

"No, I'm just cold, cold and tired. Man, I'm freezing my ass off to be honest."

"Do you know what the Prophet said about winter?"

"No."

"He said winter is the best season for the believer. Its nights are long for him to pray in, and its days are short for him to fast in."

"Well he'd fit right in here with the food they serve. Better to fast than eat what they dish out to us."

"Are you a believer?"

"A believer in what?"

"In the Prophet, I know your family is Algerian."

"My mother and father were raised in Algiers; my mother is an Arab, my father was French, a black foot. He died a few years ago. He did not believe in God or anything like that. He considered such things as a crutch for weak minds, the fabrication of poets. He was an Astrophysicist. His religion was the stars."

A fable about God was nothing compared to the vastness of the heavens, his father would say. He would explain that infinity and nothingness were two sides of the same coin, a problem of physics, a paradox and a riddle, yes, but not one that religion could solve; one that could not be explained by a fairy tale, by a superstitious myth. And on that, his father and he agreed, the stories of religion were the work of the poets, nothing more than illusions. Still, the things of the human heart were a mystery to both his father and to himself. Rouan sighed. He desperately missed his father at that moment.

"What do you mean, his religion was the stars? I don't understand. How can that be? He believed in astrology?" Karim asked.

"You should study Astrophysics," Rouan replied.

“Did you study Astrophysics?”

“That was a long ago time ago Karim.”

“Do you believe in Allah?”

“I'm not religious. I was not raised Muslim, Karim.”

“Robert you piss away your life. You must study with me. I read the Quran every day. It is the only way to become free.”

“What do you mean, the only way? Mohammad said that Abraham and Moses were great prophets and they were Jews.”

“This was long ago. Now the Jews do not follow God. They worship money like their friends in America. Do you know what it says on the money in the United States?”

“In God we trust. I know.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?” Karim asked.

“Yes.”

“What's her name?”

“Marie.”

“Do you have a lot of sex with her?”

“Come on Karim. What kind of question is that?”

“Do you think about her? Do you think about having sex with her?”

Rouan knew that to put an end to these questions, he would have to go on the offensive. “Do you have a girlfriend?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Robert have you ever sucked another man's cock?”

“Come on Karim. What kind of question is that?”

“Have you ever thought about it?”

“Have you ever sucked another man’s cock?”

“It is forbidden by the Quran.”

“That’s not an answer. Many things are forbidden but are done every day.”

Karim did not respond. Rouan knew that Karim had only embraced Islam since coming to the Santé. Before that he had been Muslim in name only. Rouan worried that the bizarre brand of radical Islam that Karim had adopted (popular amongst the inmates) was ill suited for him both because it was a sham and because Karim was homosexual. He was also aware that Karim had a crush on him.

“Do you want to pray with me today? I will set another prayer rug out for you.” Karim asked.

“I will think about it. It’s late. Bonne nuit.”

“I cannot sleep.”

“Try.”

“C’est très bizarre when you speak Arabic it is with a Algerian accent but when you speak français it is with an American accent.”

“What does it matter?”

“An American accent is very dangerous here.”

Rouan froze when he heard this. He knew it was true, of course, but hearing it brought out into the open caused him to shudder. “Look, Karim. You must be quiet and I must work.”

“If I lose my religion, I will have nothing.” Karim leaned back and closed his eyes.

Rouan knew he would have to be careful with Karim. That he had to keep his opinions to himself. That Rouan wasn’t buying any of the radical rhetoric—the hatred of the West in general, and the hatred of the Jews and the United States in particular—that floated about all around him. Rouan saw how the inmates in Block C indoctrinated each other, or rather passed on their twisted ideology of hatred and intolerance like a virus,

contaminating each other, after being seduced into its misbegotten theology of death by bin Laden and his cohorts.

It was an old trick, twisting religion to one's own political agenda, Rouan thought. Christians had done the same for hundreds of years. How was it that the study and practice of religion had become the study and practice of war and terror? The question baffled Rouan. But then again the followers of bin Laden were typically impressionable young men from humble beginnings. Rouan thought that Osama bin Laden was no different than any other politician. His ideology was built around his own ego. He was idolized and worshiped by his followers like a Rock Star or TV evangelist. But instead of miracle cures, he preached jihad, and after death, martyrdom, the promise of virgin brides. Rouan had nothing but contempt for bin Laden; he had shamed the Islamic world with his false teachings and mindless rhetoric. But Rouan knew history was full of such examples. Is this what happens when the intelligentsia gives up on the notion of God? Rouan asked himself. Was that vacuum then filled with fanaticism and ignorance? When the heart, mind and the soul gives up on religion and God, what was there to take its place? Satellite TV? UFOs? He wasn't sure what to make of it at all. He didn't know what to believe. He was flying blind. Somewhere along the line, he didn't know when exactly, he had flown into a dark cloud, a fog. He was so far out into the darkness that he could no longer make anything out that resembled land; he didn't know which way was up or down; he had no point of reference. If he pulled up on the controls he might plunge to his death. Death, that would be a way out, he thought. But would that be the definitive end of it all? Or would it be like sleep where only a portion, a fragment of it, was remembered? Or was this life the dream from which one awoke? He didn't know what to believe about this life or the next. He thought back on his fall from grace, his descent into the darkness. A fall that could now be easily documented, easily traced, but could not be changed. It was too late to turn away, he was trapped. The door behind him had slammed shut and he could not escape the prison walls that held him captive.

He went back to work. If only I had the notebook, he thought, it would all be so much easier. Then they wouldn't laugh. Not that he was unaware how ridiculous, comical even, he must have looked to the folks at the American Embassy. He'd been strung out

for some time. His skin was bad, his clothes unwashed. His hair was matted down and uncut. He was nervous. He had foregone his first shot of dope for the day. He didn't want to nod out during the interview. Still he had the faraway gaze of a junkie obsessed with his next fix. Rouan resented that he'd been turned over to a young American case officer, Jim Sinclair. Sinclair was just a kid; his one qualification being that he spoke French fluently. When Rouan told Sinclair about the plans he'd discovered, Sinclair just smiled and ushered him out of his office as if he were an unwelcome relative in from the hills. Sinclair couldn't have been more transparent. Rouan was just someone who had to be dealt with and then written off in a report to be filed away and forgotten.

Later after several visits and calls by Rouan, a meeting was arranged with a graying bureaucrat and one time ballet dancer man by the name of Devon Andersen. Rouan was actually quite surprised that his request had been given the green light. Andersen had power, authority, however, he treated it all like a bad joke and stated that he had only agreed to the meeting to insist that Rouan leave Paris and seek treatment for his drug addiction. (Rouan had admitted he had a drug problem to Sinclair in an earlier interview.) Andersen went on to say that claiming to have proof that Al Qaeda intended to use tactical nuclear weapons was like saying one had seen plans for a car bomb hidden in the apartment of a Palestinian terrorist. Homeland security, the CIA, the FBI were all looking for wayward nuclear weapons. Had he found a missing warhead? Had he found a plutonium trigger? No. Anderson declared that what Rouan claimed to have seen was either the result of a drug induced hallucination, or worse than that, a deliberate fabrication concocted by a sick mind. Rouan rebutted his remarks by calling him an idiot. Andersen then slapped the papers out of Rouan's hands (notes done in a childish scrawl that he had too hastily prepared).

After that humiliation, Rouan began to question what it was he'd really seen. Was he jousting with windmills once again? Was this just another way of avoiding looking at himself, at looking at the monsters buried within? Had he fabricated the whole story in his own mind? Was he that far gone? He'd been diagnosed with a bipolar disorder a decade before and had been on and off various medications for just as long. He often stopped taking the pills. He didn't like the side effects. His highs and lows would

disappear and his world would turn to stone. He tried to manage his illness by taking illicit drugs in an ill-fated search for his own customized pharmacological solution, to find his equilibrium, to find mental, spiritual and emotional balance, and ultimately his place in the world. But in the end he found only sporadic moments of peace (for the most part in the beginning of his drug use) and found his life enshrouded in desperate and futile attempts to find that magic moment when all was bliss. The serenity he found with heroin was short lived. And off the drugs (in particular the opiates) he alternated between states of depression and mania. So without any medication of any kind, he was subject to severe and debilitating mood swings. On the prescribed pills, he thought himself as an impostor, a fake, with no true human emotions, a zombie. He'd lose track of what he believed was his true self. Nothing would really register. No strong feelings at least. He hated that. Off the medication, however, his mania would kick in. He hated the trip back down. (Re-entry could be tough. It burned him to the core.) He dreaded the eventual crash. It was jarring, violent. He loved the rocket ride up when there was no time to think of the crash, no time to think of the long fall back to earth. All he could think of was climbing higher. If things got bumpy on the way up, he would use heroin to take the edge off. But ultimately the drugs would fail him and he would be back chasing ghosts, burned out, strung out and depressed. This left him vulnerable to delusions and fantasy. His grandiosity distanced him from the pain, from the guilt, his delusions providing him with a sanctuary, a refuge from reality (which was at times just too hard to bear). So he dreamed of saving the world (if only he could save himself).

Rouan turned his mind back to the task at hand. He continued with his attempts to replicate what it was that he'd seen; if he could just recreate it in detail, he would be believed, vindicated. He desperately wanted to be believed. He told himself nothing else mattered but that. But deep down he knew it wasn't true. He was thinking of himself. His discovery was the key to his freedom and freedom is what he craved. He felt that once the Americans and the French realized what he'd discovered, he would be released; he would be a hero, his reputation restored. And rightfully so, he thought, after all, he'd doggedly pursued leads from chatter that he picked up in the Arabic speaking sections of Paris. He had heard that a Doctor Ahmed Azur, a retired Egyptian professor, was

staying with an imam with extremist views in the eleventh arrondissement. It was said that they were both part of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad. Maybe it was nothing. But Rouan thought it worth checking out. Foreigners in Paris had a long history of fomenting revolutions back in their native countries. Rouan was a historian of a kind. He knew revolutionaries had on more than one occasion plotted a course in Paris for revolution back at home: from Thomas Jefferson to Khomeini, from Mao, and even those born a generation after Mao (their studies in Paris eventually leading to the introduction of free enterprise in Communist China). That al Qaeda was seeking tactical nuclear weapons was no secret to anyone, least of all to Rouan. He'd become increasingly obsessed with the idea. He thought of himself as a great patriot and spy; he imagined plots and conspiracies as he gazed up at the clouds, as he floated on his most recent dose of H. He didn't have to look far to find people opposed to the United States, enemies of the homeland; in his paranoid and drug deluded state, he considered all of this, over and over again in his mind. What was to be done about it? He would discover and foil their plans. He would take action. These fantasies allowed for him to momentarily forget how pathetic his life had become, how desperate his situation actually was.

He began attending services where the imam preached. Between shots of dope—high doses of heroin that would put most men in a coma—he stalked the imam and the doctor, putting them under his own kind of self-styled surveillance. It seemed that except for his drug use, his obsession with Doctor Azur was all he could think of; he had room in his life for little else even at times completely ignoring his girlfriend Marie. Actually, he would have fallen deeper into the wormhole of drug addiction without his obsession with Doctor Azur and the imam to give him some balance, to help him from going completely under.

One day, after his curiosity got the best of him, he decided to investigate further. He found his way into the inner courtyard of the building. He noticed the garbage chutes and followed them down into the basement of the building. Who knew what he might find? After making his way down the staircase, he found where the garbage chutes emptied out. But how could he sort through all that? After looking around (and into a few sacks), he realized that he was getting nowhere. He went through the remaining

garbage but found nothing. He was down to the last of his heroin and was trying to make it last. He had begun to feel the effects of withdrawal. He went back up the stairs and waited.

He remembered waiting for hours for the imam and the professor to leave, trying his best not to look too suspicious, chatting in Arabic with some Algerian men in the courtyard, playing ball with some of the children. Still, no one came out of the apartment. He felt dope sick. He remembered checking his pockets and pulling out a small packet of heroin, pretending it was a note of some kind. He needed a shot of dope badly. They might not ever come out, he remembered thinking. Even if they did come out and he was able to somehow pick the lock on that heavy steel door and to get in, what could he hope to find, a few incendiary speeches written by the imam, speeches that everyone already knew about, including French Intelligence? Finally the imam and Doctor Azur came out of the apartment, followed by a young Pakistani and walked toward the street. After they left the area, Rouan walked to imam's door and rang the bell. He rang the bell several more times until he was sure no one was home. He remembered wiping away the sweat from his brow.

The door was a large steel monstrosity. However, Rouan had acquired a set of picks that if used skillfully enough could open most any door of this type in Paris. He'd been taught by one of his junkie friends. He fumbled with the tools that served as makeshift keys. The door had no handle and had to be pushed open once the lock turned. Rouan inserted the long pick into the lock followed the thin one that he manipulated in an attempt to turn the lock with a twist of the wrist. He had practiced this in the past but it took all of my concentration and strength of will to open the door with a final twist of the wrist and then one big push. He was in. He remembered how proud he was of himself, of that accomplishment, of that masterful act, even if it was a petty and criminal one at that.

He was quite surprised that there wasn't a computer to be found anywhere in the apartment. In the guest bedroom there was a small library for the most part devoted to the study of the Quran. On the nightstand were several notebooks lodged behind

several heavy volumes of applied physics. The notebooks were full of writing for the most part in Arabic. If anyone had glanced at them they would have noticed nothing special but Rouan did. On several pages there appeared crude diagrams. The labeling of these diagrams struck Rouan as odd. What he saw was in Arabic, numbers and symbols, a kind of code that at first he was not been able to interpret. He saw two drawings. Oblong sketches done in pencil that he took to be a container for the warhead and as he glanced further, he concluded that he was actually looking at the components of a tactical nuclear weapon.

Rouan remembered putting the notepad down and pulling out his last packet of heroin. He then went to the kitchen and found a spoon. After he fixed, he remembered letting out a sigh of relief. He nodded out for a moment but shook it off. He then heard the door open, and realized too late that he should have gotten out before doing that last shot of dope. The imam, Doctor Azur and the Pakistani had forgotten their umbrellas and had come back for them after it had started to rain. When they came in, he panicked. He should have hid and waited for them to leave. But he didn't. He ran for the door, notebook in hand. The Pakistani came toward him and tried to tackle him. Rouan hit him directly under the jaw with the bony end of his palm, knocking him off his feet. Rouan then pushed the imam and the Doctor Azur aside and ran out the door. But he dropped the notebook.

Now he had to recreate what he'd seen, what he left behind, that rainy day. For the warhead Doctor Azur had substituted the word in Arabic for Bride and for the trigger, Uranium 235, Doctor Azur had used the word Bridegroom: a weapon the size of foot locker that could take out a major portion of a city. The figures flashed before him as if in a vision. He began to write faster. He saw the weapons in his mind's eye exactly. The design was ingenious. He paid little attention to the individual letters that he was putting down on paper; he used a kind of short hand that he would go back to and correct later. He wanted to get it down this time before it all vanished from his mind, from his grasp, once again. The second diagram showed how the components found in the first diagram could be broken down, transported and then reassembled at the target zone; a weapon that could be duplicated a dozen times over, in a dozen other cities. Rouan knew that

the components could be purchased on the black market for the right price from former rogue states of the Soviet Union.

"Why are you writing so fast?" Karim asked.

"Wait." Rouan lifted up his free hand indicating to Karim that he was occupied. "I can't talk right now." He wanted to get every detail written down while it was still fresh in his memory. He carefully copied in a fine legible script what he had written and added a note and then placed it all in a large, brown envelope, holding it in his hands as if it were some kind of lifeline.

Rouan walked in step with several other prisoners (who were also on their way to the visiting area), a guard followed closely behind them. The guard was older than most of the other guards and had already gone gray. Rouan had been told that he had worked in the Santé for over twenty years. It was hard to believe that someone could tolerate being behind those walls for that long even if he could go home at night. The thought of spending years in this place or one like it caused him a great amount of anxiety, worry. He wanted out. Even the thought of doing the time was a kind of punishment in itself—it was designed that way, Rouan supposed.

As he walked along the catwalk outside his cell, the rows and rows of pale yellow reinforced steel doors reminded Rouan of the drawers in a morgue. He was escorted through several locked doors and then a long set of metal stairs. From there he walked under the big glass skylight that stood in the center of the prison. Rouan had been remanded to custody with the expectation that he would be brought to trial for the killing of a West African, Abbas Kali, and for drug possession (drugs were found at the scene). He wasn't sure of the exact wording of the law in France; he was, however, aware that it had taken two magistrates signing off on his detention order while his case was investigated.

Without recognizing him (this was their first meeting), Jean-Marc Frenot looked down at his shoes and touched his finger to his tongue and wiped off a smudge. He was

young, fit and wore the pink badge given to all lawyers. After he realized that his new client was standing before him, he stood and greeted him. He regarded Rouan closely. "Bonjour, Je m'appelle Jean-Marc Frenot."

"Bonjour," Rouan smiled and shook his hand firmly. "Anglais, si' vous plait. I prefer that we speak English. I requested an English speaking attorney."

"I speak English." Frenot was taken aback. Rouan wasn't quite what he expected.

"I've been assigned to your case following your request for representation to the authorities here at La Santé."

"There are some things we need to get out the way. Some things I need to tell you."

"Of course, that's why I'm here."

"As you probably know, I fired the other lawyer."

"He did not speak English? Monsieur Rouan, you are not a tourist in a café."

"No he reminded me of a waiter who I disliked immensely." Rouan said sarcastically. He realized too late that he was being cocky at exactly the wrong time. This was the wrong approach. So he dialed it back and stated in perfect French what the real problem was: "The lawyer assigned to me made an appearance for the record only. He had no interest in me or my case. When I asked him a few questions such as how long the process might take, he didn't seem to have even a basic understanding of my case. I don't think he reviewed it all. I think he simply showed up at the prison and asked to see me since I was on the list of prisoners he had to see for that day. After that, he missed several appointments, a no show. I then asked for a new attorney. He did not like that. He took great offense. So here you are."

Frenot seemed sympathetic. "When someone is facing such serious charges, there is often some bitterness misdirected at one's lawyer. But I can assure I will do my best." Frenot eyed Rouan and squinted as if trying to bring him into focus; it was clear that he didn't know what to make of Rouan.

"Like I said, the guy was a no show. It was obvious he wasn't going to do anything for

me. My anger wasn't misdirected. I imagine he spent less than five minutes reviewing my case."

"I misspoke. Sometimes the work load for public defenders is heavy. It is not easy to grasp all the facts from a single case upon first meeting a client with such a heavy case load."

"Let's drop the discussion about the old lawyer. You seem to be bright and have at least reviewed the basics of my case."

"Yes I have."

"Then you can see that these charges never should have been brought against me in the first place. That was his knife. He stabbed me. I almost bled to death. I'm sure you have the report from the hospital."

"Yes I have that report from the hospital. But I also have another report. The problem is your dependence on narcotics. While there is no arrest record for you here in France, the medical report states that there were fresh needle marks on both of your arms and quite a bit a scarring. It appears you have had a drug problem for quite some time. And the man that died was a drug dealer. This is all known. Is this not correct? I don't understand. Help me please, Monsieur Rouan. Why would a drug dealer want to kill you?"

"Yes, I have a problem with drugs. But that is not why he tried to kill me."

"I don't understand. Help me please, Monsieur Rouan."

"There was a struggle. Did I stab myself? He was trying to kill me." Rouan was becoming increasingly desperate.

"Self-defense, it's possible."

"No, no, that character was sent to kill me. It was a premeditated attack on me."

"Sent to kill you, for what reason?"

"To get revenge for me telling the authorities about the terrorist cell at La Courneuve." Rouan knew this wasn't true, that it was a lie. He hadn't discovered the

terrorist cell in La Courneuve (actually he had spotted French Intelligence in the area but that was all). The images of the raid in the Cite des 400 were still vivid in his mind: pictures he'd seen on French TV of timers and detonators found in a washing machine. More than a hundred police and a thirty member SWAT team stormed a housing project, carrying assault rifles with laser sights. Images of chemicals, two empty propane canisters, cash, fake passports and a computer were shown.

"I remember reading about the raid at La Courneuve. So you are saying that you were an informant leading up to the raid?" Frenot asked.

"I'm no informant." Rouan's ego was bruised by being relegated to such a low position on the food chain. Though there was truth in what Frenot said. French intelligence often used Arab speaking junkies for tips, a practice that often brought results.

"I don't understand. What are you saying then?"

Rouan blurted out, "I'm CIA. I was sent here to Paris on a job. I was assigned to the Alliance Base, a joint task force of American and French intelligence headquartered in Paris."

"Monsieur Rouan if you persist with these fabrications, you will have to get a new lawyer. Maybe you can dream one of those up, too."

"I don't understand."

"The CIA, retaliation for La Courneuve, Monsieur Rouan if you were really CIA, you would not be here, calls would have been made on your behalf to secure your release. Even if it was suspected that you were CIA, your life would be in danger here. So please cease with the spy stories and let us get down to the facts."

"You don't understand. I was booted out because of my heroin habit. I pissed a lot of people off. Because I speak Arabic, I was recruited to work with the Alliance Base. I traveled back and forth to North Africa, Spain and the south of France. But after my drug use escalated, I became a liability. We parted company."

"Monsieur Rouan, please. Half the North African inmates here are informants for

French intelligence. The other half are terrorists. Some are both."

"Okay sometimes I made up stuff and gave it to French Intelligence to help pay for a fix. Okay. You're right. I did not have anything to do with the raid at La Courneuve." Rouan needed Frenot. He said what he had to say to keep Frenot on his side.

"Bien sur, thank you for your honesty." Frenot said condescendingly (Rouan thought) in the manner only a Frenchman could.

"Bien. Nous faisons de progrès. We make progress. N'est pas."

"Oui. Nous faisons de progrès."

"Oh. You speak French very well, Monsieur Rouan."

"My father was French; he helped put a man on the moon. He was there in the control room when Neil Armstrong first walked on the moon."

Frenot smiled. "With you, it is always the tall tales."

"It's true, he worked for NASA."

"A man on the moon, more nonsense, please come down to earth, this is a serious situation." Frenot lifted up his hand as if to say enough. "Monsieur Rouan, please stop."

Frenot was skeptical. Rouan could see that. Frenot was troubled by their conversation. He did not know what or who he was dealing with. When Frenot asked questions he not only listened but seemed to ponder and weigh Rouan's every response. Rouan was well aware that he had been caught Frenot off guard; that Rouan was not what he expected. Rouan knew that Frenot had expected just another junkie who had been sucked into the whirlpool of his addiction and while it was clear that he wasn't buying what Rouan was selling, still somehow Frenot was disturbed by it all. Rouan was hard to categorize, he did not readily fit into any preconceived box. As his story unfolded, Frenot began to look unsure of himself. It was clear that he didn't know what to make of Rouan.

Rouan felt an emptiness inside. He needed Frenot if was ever going to be released. He'd been abandoned by the American Embassy. He was a man without a country. No

one wanted anything to do with him. His former associates considered him toxic and ceased any communications with him. Rouan was away from his family. He'd mixed pieces of the truth with lies. Once the words came out of his mouth, he wanted to take them back. But how could he? His credibility was shot. He'd made a big mistake. He should have told the truth or flat out lied and not claimed something that fell somewhere between the two. Rouan was hoping Frenot would use this as bargaining chip. Rouan's intention was to muddy the waters with spy stories. But it was a mistake.

"It is clear to anyone, it was self-defense. It was his knife. My girlfriend was there. She will tell you."

"I have the statement by her that the police took. But she is biased. As you say, she is your girlfriend. Our system is quite different than the American system. The examining investigator is quite close to charging you with murder. This is why, of course, you were transferred here after your stay in the hospital. The examining investigator is quite a hard case as I'm sure you may have already have guessed. You can be held for up to four months without being officially charged in the case of a death such as this. Let me ask you if there is anyone who could testify and say they saw this knife in your possession before that night, before the death of that unfortunate man."

"I never saw that knife until he pulled it on me."

"What is this?" Frenot pointed to the envelope.

"It's a letter for my mother." Rouan lied. He certainly was not going to show Frenot what he'd written. Not now. He could see that would be a mistake. "It's in English so I don't know how much of it would be understood here by the authorities. As you know they read everything. It's private. I thought you might mail it for me. But I've decided rewrite the letter. So I'm not ready to send it yet."

Rouan was afraid Frenot would open it and discover its contents. Rouan wasn't sure what his reaction would be. He could not take the chance and give it to Frenot. Rouan thought that he should have not brought the notes. He should not have lied to Frenot about La Courneuve. Rouan felt he had already lost all creditably with Frenot.

“Please tell me that you haven’t made any of these wild claims to anyone in authority.”

“No, I haven’t.” Rouan lied again.

“Very well, I will speak to the examining investigator that this was a clear case of self-defense. This character you stabbed has quite a nasty reputation.”

On Frenot's second visit he had a proposition for Rouan: "I think I can get you out of here. A deal that eventually would lead to involuntary manslaughter and your release. They have been trying to clean up the Place de Stalingrad for years. I believe this is what the prosecutor wants to talk to you about. He's preparing a case against some associates of Hassan Mustafa. But he needs someone to testify against Hassan Mustafa to help leverage the case, to exert pressure on Mustafa. The examining investigator was quite close to charging you with murder. Let me ask you something. What can you tell him about Hassan Mustafa?"

"No one," Rouan's face flushed with anger. "If that is what he wants, forget it."

Frenot looked to the ground and shook his head. "Who is he? Did he sell you drugs?"

“He helped me out. Okay. But finally one day he told me he was finished. It was tough on me. But I respect him for turning his back on all that. I won't betray him. He's free of all that. I won't become a rat.”

* * * *

Marie Loire smiled nervously as Rouan entered the visiting area. She wore a white badge given to visitors on her blouse. Surprisingly, beneath the unwashed, bleach blonde hair and ragged appearance was a beautiful woman still in her twenties. Normally detainees were allowed three visits a week from family but Marie was not married to Rouan, so getting permission to visit meant filling out a lot of paperwork. Both the visitors and the detainees were given a number marked in invisible ink that could only be seen under an ultraviolet light. In addition they were both searched: the visitors beforehand; the detainees before and after. Visitors were not allowed to bring anything into the visiting area. Each inmate was assigned to an individual booth or stall—the

visitors on one side and the prisoners on the other. The booths were monitored by video cameras, a sophisticated surveillance system that could zoom in on their every movement.

Rouan kissed Marie. (It was tolerated by the guards.) Somehow she seemed heavier—she was such a small girl. Only now and again were there flashes of the old Marie, her eyes sparkling when Rouan told her how much he missed her. He knew she had begun selling herself for a fix. She hadn't held a job in over two years. Shortly after they got strung out, he was making enough to pay the rent and keep them in drugs. So she quit working. But without him, while he was locked up, she was left without any choice but prostitution. Rouan couldn't stand the thought of her prostituting herself. Finally he asked her. "Marie, you don't look well. What's wrong?"

"I've been sick."

"It's the drugs. You have to get off the drugs."

"It's too late. You don't understand. It's not that." She looked him directly in the eye, waiting for him to guess the truth.

"What is it?" .

"I'm going to have a baby." She trembled and began to cry. She then took a deep breath and whispered, "I cannot get an abortion. I cannot kill my baby." Marie came from a very religious family in Bordeaux and found abortion unacceptable. Rouan didn't want to ask if he was the father (after all, he was in jail and she sold herself daily for drugs; the father could have been any one of her customers). He didn't want to know who the father was. It really didn't matter. It would be their baby, he thought to himself. He just wanted help her.

"Don't worry Marie. I think I know how I can get out of here and we can be together."

"How?" There was a look of desperation in Marie's eyes.

"The prosecutor needs my help with Hassan."

"I don't understand."

"They need some information."

They want you to say something bad about Hassan. Robert, Hassan is our friend."

"I will make something up. I will tell them what they want to hear. It is not my fault that Hassan was drug dealer. They've obviously had their eye on him for some time." Rouan had begun to rationalize.

It was odd as Marie sat before him, an image of the two of them racing down the Champs Elysee on his fire engine red Ducati motorcycle flashed before him. It was spring and all of Paris was in bloom. Outfitted in black helmets and visors, leather jackets and pants, and boots, the two of them must have looked like a couple of Martians or characters straight out of Cocteau's *Orphée*.

"It is all my fault you should have gone home to the United States when your mother sent you the ticket." Marie began to cry.

Right before Rouan's arrest, Marie had discovered the airline ticket in the pocket of his leather jacket. She had begun to cry. Normally the effect of the heroin would have made sex impossible but somehow her whimpering triggered something in him and as consoled her, he stiffened and they made love. Later, he got some drugs out of the night stand. He cooked up a shot of dope. "Come over here, I have something for you." Marie sat up and passively gave me her arm so that Rouan could give her a shot of dope. Her world went blank. Her anger had dissipated. Rouan promised Marie he would cash in the ticket and stay in Paris. And that sealed his fate. Soon after that decision, their lives took a terrible turn, culminating in the death of Abbas Kali in the north of Paris.

Rouan realized from the beginning that the circumstances surrounding the death of Abbas Kali could be interpreted both legally and ethically in shades of gray. But for the prosecutor, Bertrand Perrout, a balding man in his fifties trying to rejuvenate his flagging career, it had been all too simple. If Rouan cooperated, it would all be seen as an unfortunate accident, manslaughter at worst. If he did not cooperate, then it would be seen as murder. Perrout had very little interest in his case; ironically he had no idea that Rouan's own connections went far beyond Hassan's. Still, Hassan had local connections

in the drug trade (Hassan had been Rouan's personal dealer) and Perrout wanted to put a case together that would shake up all of Paris. Rouan could give the whole set up to Perrout. And this would make Perrout a star. Perrout was elated but not Rouan. He could not shake the guilt he felt about Hassan. The price of his freedom would be high. Hassan had been a good friend to Marie and Rouan. Rouan could see his face before him, open, loving. If only they had argued and had a falling out, then his betrayal of him would have been so much easier. But all of this would lead to one thing, Hassan would be killed. Rouan had taken the deal, just the same.

Rouan tried to think of ways he might protect Hassan. But the truth was he knew too much. He knew, among other things, where Hassan picked up the drugs. Rouan had once followed him when he was desperate for a fix. Rouan even knew the names of the group who supplied the drugs to Hassan. (He knew more than even Perrout could imagine.) He knew the group in Marseilles where the drugs had been shipped. He even knew the Syrians who arranged for the drug to be brought to Marseilles. He had dealt with the same Syrians years before. But Perrout just wanted Hassan's contacts. Perrout was only interested in a criminal case in Paris. Information on a wider scale would just be turned over to someone qualified to handle it. It was abundantly clear that Perrout had no clue as to Rouan's background. Perrout was blissfully unaware of all of this. He just wanted to tie up the loose ends in a Paris drug case. That would be enough for him. Rouan was convinced that Perrout had no idea of Rouan's true background within the drug trade. Perrout just thought Rouan was another junkie to be flipped.

Rouan never carried or transported drugs across international borders himself. But he did arrange for the shipment. Sometimes Rouan was responsible for recruiting human smugglers. He would befriend someone in need of money and have him in turn recruit the poor: young women and men who would serve as mules to transport the drugs from North Africa to New York. This kept a firewall between him and the drugs. Sometimes he would put together a team in Morocco. Working with mules was Rouan's least favorite thing. But ironically it was what he did best. He felt guilty about this especially when one of his recruits was arrested. This is why he preferred to recruit one man who in turn would recruit from the pool of his own friends and associates. But this

sometime meant that the operation would not go as smoothly and the courier would disappear only to be located later and killed. Rouan felt guilty about this.

Shortly after he arrived in Paris, he was asked to make contact with some of his old associates in North Africa. His old contacts welcomed him back on the scene in North Africa and Marseilles. They knew Rouan had an uncanny ability to find recruits who were not only able to pass undetected on international flights (which after 9/11 was more important than ever) but were loyal and always showed up at the prearranged hotel where the drugs would be picked up. Being a native Arabic speaker came in handy working with mules. Once the drugs had safely found their way to their destination, Rouan would receive payment for the job. He was paid on a job to job basis. An account had been set up for him in Geneva and an ATM card was given to him so that he could access the funds (nothing was in his name). But since he never transported drugs himself, once he was back in France he was on his own. Through contacts he was given the name of someone in the pipeline, a low level dealer, who could get whatever he needed. This is how he met Hassan Mustafa. Hassan was an associate of an associate and knew little of Rouan's business.

Since Hassan had dropped out of the drug trade, he would be the first one his associates would suspect as an informant once a criminal process was begun. Hassan did not have a record which would make him a good witness, more or less. But all of this would lead to one thing: Hassan's death. Rouan would be purchasing his own freedom with Hassan's blood. Could he show just enough to Perrout without jeopardizing Hassan? Was that even possible? Rouan didn't see how. The prosecutor had already zeroed in on Hassan and Hassan would be made to flip with Rouan's help (just the threat of having someone that close to Hassan willing to speak against him was in itself all the pressure that Perrout need to break Hassan and force him to betray his contacts). Ironically, neither Hassan nor his wife, Fatima, used drugs themselves. They were just a poor family trying to make ends meet.

Hassan and his wife had three children. They were hard working Moroccans. But saddled with three preschoolers Fatima had to stay home with the children. It was

difficult making ends meet. Rouan knew Hassan was involved in the drug trade with some Arab groups in the area. But he never spoke about it. It was obvious that he did it for the money. He was resistant to the radical politics of jihad. He had no interest in that. He knew that Rouan had lived many years in the United States but that his mother and father were originally from Algiers. But he had no idea who Rouan was working for when they met. It was clear at the time that if he could find a way out financially, he would put an end to his work in the drug trade.

After Rouan gained Hassan's confidence, he asked Hassan if he could help him score. Hassan explained, "I don't sell to just anyone. I sell to a certain few, most of which I have known my whole life. Other Moroccans, Algerians, Pakistanis. They in turn, sell on the street. But maybe I can help you. We're friends, right?"

"Certainly," Rouan replied.

Hassan handed Rouan a packet of heroin. "I'm planning on quitting soon. I can't sell drugs anymore. I don't want to be a part of this dirty business anymore. I'm sorry Robert, just this one time. I can't sell you any more drugs. My brother says I can work for him in his Bazaar selling knickknacks. He doesn't want me selling drugs any more, either."

But it wasn't the last time Hassan sold Rouan drugs. It took almost a year for Hassan to free himself from the drug trade. And it appeared, he hadn't gotten free after all. Rouan thought it was both strange and unfair how things worked out.

* * *

Hospitalized and weaned off the drugs, Marie looked wonderful. She found a doctor that was sympathetic to her situation. It took a great deal of courage for her to admit that she was both pregnant and strung out. Arrangements were made for Marie to be hospitalized and treated for her addiction. She visited Rouan only once after that. She was visibly pregnant and looked completely different: her eyes were clear and her skin had regained its youthful appearance. Rouan was so happy to see her recovery, to her back looking like her old self. She spoke about how she had fixed up their apartment. He proposed and she accepted. They would be married. He could not wait to get out of jail

and begin their new life. He was filled with hope.

But a few weeks later his hopes evaporated. After several weeks with no contact, he had a bad feeling. Making phone calls was difficult and expensive. The phone number he had for Marie was no longer working (this in itself did not disturb him, since disposable phones were readily available in Paris and Marie would often lose her phone and would have to purchase another). Rouan told himself with the baby coming so soon visiting the prison was just too difficult for her (but deep down he didn't believe it). He began to imagine the worst. Finally he persuaded Frenot to try to find her and if necessary hand deliver a note that he had prepared.

Rouan regretted that he ever got Marie involved with heroin. He blamed himself. The first time they did it together was on a trip to Amsterdam. After a nighttime walk along a glittering canal in the Red Light District, they returned to their hotel room. They had snorted a little coke and were already wired.

"Is it coke?" Marie had asked.

"En anglais, it's called chasing the dragon." Rouan said. He then lit a match and inhaled the smoke with a straw. Holding the smoke in, he handed the straw to Marie and she took a hit. He watched her as she took in the drug. She was transported to another world, another state of being. After that, they began using on a daily basis. Sometime they would take the train out beyond Vincennes to Val de Marne. In Paris there was always something them to see. One night a band of ragged musicians emerged from down a darkened street, they both thought it was so strange. The mystery and the magic of Paris was enhanced by the drugs they took. Sometimes they would walk along the Seine in a heroin induced trance. More times than not they would nod out at the Parc Monceau or would watch the toy sailboats in the Luxembourg Gardens. But then Rouan would become paranoid. Such heavily policed spots made him nervous. So they stayed home in their tiny, dilapidated studio apartment in the far north end of Paris. Rouan thought back to their first meeting and Marie's lost innocence. She was so pretty. She worked behind the checkout counter at the Monoprix where he shopped. He was old enough to be her father. Finally, he got up the nerve to ask her out. Just to a nearby

café. He was thrilled when she accepted. They went to a café. There was still a trace of snow out on the street. Since it was cold outside they huddled together in a booth inside. They ordered hot chocolate.

“Have you worked at Monoprix for a long time?” Rouan asked.

“For just six months. Before that I lived with my parents in Bordeaux. But it was very boring.”

“Did you grow up there?”

“Yes, but I prefer Paris.”

“I prefer Paris myself, so that makes two of us.”

The two of us, is there a two of us?” She asked with a hopeful smile.

“So here we are. It must be fate.”

“Fate, I like that. Oh I worked so hard today. My feet ache. I’m very tired.” She sighed.

“Long day?”

“Too long.”

“Poor baby,” Rouan leaned in and gave her a kiss on her forehead. She looked up at him and he kissed her on the lips.

He told her he was an American. The part about being involved in drug smuggling, he left out. She didn’t know where he got his money. She knew he would take trips but he explained very little about where he’d gone. No doubt she would have found it all very entertaining. Still, she amused herself with the details he did disclose. He found her very endearing.

“Oh it’s going to be hard letting you go.” He teased her one day.

“Letting me go? Oh no. You’re never leaving; you’re my man, now.” She teased him back. She was so happy.

“Be careful what you wish for,” Rouan laughed. “Oh, you’re positive. Is that it?”

“I’ve been wishing for a man like you for a long time.”

“Okay, you’ve been warned.” Rouan smiled again, he was flattered. He could not believe his good luck.

“Robert speak Texan with me.”

“Howdy, Ma’am, call me Billy Bob.”

“Do you have a chapeau?” She giggled.

“I have a cowboy hat, boots and a big Texas belt buckle.”

She lit up the joint and took a few hits. “Want some?” she asked.

Rouan was woozy from drinking wine.

“No go ahead.” He eyed the joint. “Okay, let me have a little.”

Marie placed the lit end of the joint in her mouth and blew the smoke into Rouan's nose and mouth; he inhaled deeply and took in the smoke. They began to kiss one another; at first very softly after each hit from the joint but after some time they forgot about the joint and began kissing each other more and more passionately. He took off her bra and blouse and began to kiss her breasts. She responded. He puts his hand between her thighs. She moaned softly.

In the beginning it was all one big fairy tale where Rouan reigned king and Marie was his queen. But in the end their fairy kingdom went up in smoke while they nodded out, laying unconscious at the feet of a deceitful and all consuming god. Rouan thought back to the last time they shot dope together. It was in a dilapidated squat. (In Paris one can claim to be an artist and take over an abandoned building and squat. But there was no hope of art being done, just drugs and lots of them.) There was no electricity in the building but here and there light came in from the street. There were rats. Rouan imagined bats swooping down on them. He saw monsters in every corner, toxic smoke rising up all around them. But no knights in shining armor would come to their rescue. They needed more dope to make the monsters go away.

In the shadows, Rouan knelt and prepared for another fix. Marie held her lighter over

his track marks (the skin was bruised from puncture marks and the vein was inflamed). He was an old veteran. Next was Marie's turn. In the half-light she prepared a shot of dope for herself. She was a veteran, too. They were like vampires, existing in an endless night as they consumed one fix after another. They were like the walking dead. Rouan did another shot of dope. He closed his eyes as the drug took effect. When he opened his eyes, he thought he saw a tall bird-like figure hovering in the shadows. Then he saw a flying dragon swoop down into the room, its giant wings eclipsing everything, burying everything beneath the circumference of its wings. As the heroin continued to pass into his bloodstream, he became very sleepy. He felt as if he was descending into a dark pool of water. He was blind and could not breathe. He felt as if he was being buried alive. He would have panicked, but he could not move, his pulse was non-existent. His face turned blue. He was dying. Everything went black. He awoke with Marie pounding on his chest. Marie brought him back from the edge, and saved his life.

A few hours later, Marie and Rouan found themselves out of drugs and out of cash. Initially, Rouan was warmed and comforted by the drug (like a kind of wet dream) but that feeling had faded and the old ghosts would return: sickness and withdrawal, an experience that was somewhere between divorce and amputation in its level of pain. It was intense. Rouan dreaded it. He thought it was the worst. It was like dying over and over again. Marie and Rouan quickly found Abbas Kali, a tall thin North African drug dealer, in his usual place: a narrow passageway that stunk of urine, partially illuminated by a lone lamp post enshrouded in fog.

"We need something" Rouan said, stating the obvious.

"Money, you owe me money," Kali replied.

"You'll get the money, just a little something for now. I'll be back. You know I'm good for it."

"No." Kali shook his head.

"Come on man. Two dime bags are all we need."

"Money, cash, baby, sorry."

“I’ll be right back with the money.” Rouan lied

“Put your girl to work. You’ll have the money in no time.”

Half out of his head to begin with, Kali’s remark pushed Rouan over the edge. He grabbed Kali by the collar. Kali pulled a knife. But Rouan didn’t see it, and certainly not before the blade tore through both Rouan’s shirt and jacket piercing the skin right above his hip. Rouan reacted fiercely and elbowed Kali in the jaw, knocking him to the ground. Stunned, Kali looked up as Rouan took hold of the knife and brought it down hard into his chest, leaving a small opening, a slit really, but an opening large enough just the same for Kali to slip from this world into the next.

Only after the act did Rouan come back to myself. It had been as if he had been watching it all in a darkened movie theater and now it was too late to undo what he had done. It had all happened so fast, so unexpectedly, that disoriented and in a fit of both panic and rage, he had mistakenly thought that by removing the knife from his side and sticking it into the heart of another, he could deflect the pain away from himself and find some relief. But the pain had only spread making him believe falsely that part of the knife had broken off (even though it had gone in and come out cleanly enough) and was now growing ever larger inside of him with each shallow and belabored breath. The world began to disappear. But that was good, he thought. He wanted to rid of his body and thereby be rid of the throbbing pain that radiated up and down his torso. He began to float up into the darkness and felt much better. His body was falling away and with it all the worries and weight of the world. Stretched out on the ground, he couldn’t focus on anything except for Marie’s radiant and tender face hovering just inches above his—her arms holding him close, her eyes filled with so much compassion and love. Rouan thought that if he was dying how lucky he would be to have such a guardian.

Sirens whined on and off in rapid succession from police cars as their blue lights flashed across the early morning fog rising from the Bassin de la Villette. Then the paramedics pushed Marie aside and attended to Rouan before putting him in the ambulance.

Once in the ambulance, Rouan drifted in and out of consciousness. But

overwhelmed with fear and adrenaline, his mind continued to race, flashing from the dire situation at hand to the whirlwind of events that gone down. He wanted the world to stop: for the ambulance to stop, for the images of the past to stop, for the accusations to stop, for the paramedic to stop working on him, for the harsh glare of the overhead light to be extinguished. He wanted it all to end; mostly he wanted the pain both physical and mental to stop, the shame, the guilt. But he had no power over any of it. He had held on so tight for so long that all he wanted to do was to let go and for it all to stop. But something prevented that. Was it the expression on Marie's face as he was loaded into the ambulance or something else? He had hoped to restore his reputation but he'd disgraced himself and only added to the infamy of his past. It had been like doing the high wire act in a circus. And he certainly had been flying high, too high. After that he came crashing down and hit the ground with a terrible thud.

The week that Pope John Paul II died, as the television flickered with images of the dead pontiff (TVs were made available to prisoners for a weekly fee). Rouan thought of all that had changed since Karol Wojtyla became pope. Even though Rouan was an agnostic he had a deep respect for John Paul II and all he accomplished. Rouan glanced over at Karim. It was obvious that things had changed between them. In the past, Rouan had been like a kind of older brother. Karim was always pestering Rouan with questions. Now Karim asked nothing of Rouan.

"Is Paris still out there?" Rouan joked as Karim stood looking out the window.

Karim did not reply.

"Karim, did you hear me? How is your case going?"

Karim turned and looked at Rouan, "Why do you care? You care only about yourself. Do not pretend that you care about me."

"Of course, I'm care about my case; first and foremost, as I'm sure you care about your own."

"My case, no one cares. My lawyer doesn't care. France doesn't care." Karim was

poisoned with bitterness, self-pity.

Rouan was unsure on how to reply. Finally he spoke, "we should talk more enough. I miss our talks Karim."

"We shall see."

Both Rouan and Karim knew that whatever bond they once shared was broken, that their former relationship would never be fully restored.

Each day Rouan grew more worried about Marie. Why hadn't he heard from her? Had she lost the baby and fallen in to a depression or worse than that was she back on drugs? Finally an answer came. Rouan was summoned to the attorney's room.

Frenot was pale, somber.

"What is it? What is the matter? What does Perrout want now? More blood?" Rouan asked. He was still bitter about the deal that he'd made.

"Robert, I have some very bad news."

Rouan was not ready for more bad news. He could tell from Frenot's expression that it was not something simply about his court case, that it was something of a personal nature, something that was troubling for Frenot to even speak about. Had Marie lost the baby? The thought raced through his head. Then he thought of his mother. But that would not have disturbed Frenot the way this news had. Rouan had to know just the same even if he wasn't ready. "Tell me; please don't let it be too bad."

"It is very bad. They found Marie. Marie is dead."

"I don't understand."

"She was found in an alley yesterday. I was told this morning. Actually, Perrout called me. He seemed genuinely sad. He offered his sympathies. Apparently at one time, he considered having her testify in your case. She was on some kind of list. It looks like an overdose."

"That's not possible. She was clean. It must be someone else that they found, someone who looked like Marie. Maybe someone stole her ID." Rouan was desperate,

angry, confused.

"I'm sure Robert. She was identified by her landlord. Her family has been notified. There is no question it was her."

Rouan did not want to accept what Frenot was telling him. But deep down it made sense. Marie had been off drugs and her tolerance would have been low and with no money, her fiancée locked up, she was vulnerable. She hadn't told her family the whole truth. They knew she was pregnant but she hadn't told them about her problem with drugs or the fact that the American she was engaged to was in jail. How could they offer her help, if she kept her problems from them? Rouan felt the sting of blame through and through. If he'd been free, if only he had been free.

Frenot looked down, trying to avert his eyes from the pain written on Rouan's face. Rouan was shaking. He could not look directly at Frenot. He wanted to crawl into the corner and disappear. If he could have taken a hot shot of dope at that moment and ended it all, he would have done it gladly. But the pain just kept on coming, wave after wave, pounding against every part of his psyche like a fist. When Rouan glanced in Frenot's direction, there was a look of sadness.

Finally he spoke, his voice coming from somewhere outside himself. "At least there's one thing. Now I have no reason to testify against Hassan."

"No reason?"

"I had all these dreams of being a spy, of being a great patriot, but if a man will betray a friend, how much easier to betray a country? It's time for the lies to end. And I'm not going to hang Hassan out to dry, liberty, but at what price, the betrayal of a friend? When Hassan agreed to supply me with drugs, it was done with a promise. He had been very careful up to that point. He had never sold drugs to an outsider. But with me, he took a chance. And I had made a promise to him. Would I break it? I would be free. But how would I feel when the news got to me that Hassan or one of his children had killed? After I testified against him, sure I could go and never look back. But I would always wonder. And even if I didn't have to face him court, that is if he even made it to court, I would be

haunted by what I had done.”

"Think of your family back in the United States. You have a young daughter."

"They don't need me. They certainly don't need the person I've become, the one who lets everyone down." Rouan was full of self-pity.

"Maybe I could arrange for a priest, a psychologist."

"Okay, how's this for a confession. I did kill Abbas Kali for the reasons that everyone believes."

"Robert, no."

"The biggest and most dangerous lie is the one we tell ourselves. I was trying to steal the drugs after he had refused to advance them to me. I killed a man over drugs. That's the truth, and Hassan Is not going to pay for that crime."

Frenot seemed impressed with Rouan's honesty at that moment. "Even at worst it was an accident; it was an act of self-defense. Are you sure you cannot testify against Hassan?"

"Yes."

"Bien. I'll tell the prosecutor. And we'll come up with something else. Something that is fair for all those involved." I sensed Frenot was relieved, that he found my ratting out of Hassan to be distasteful. Frenot was no ordinary jail house lawyer; he was bit of a philosopher, a deep thinker.

Shortly after, Perrout put Rouan into solitary confinement in retaliation for renegeing on their agreement. Rouan had nothing but a bed and a toilet. He drank the toilet water when he became parched. The air was stale and sickening (it was mid July). At night, he was given a blanket. His only human contact was the guard who brought him his meals. Even so they hardly ever spoke. The prison preferred it that way. They viewed isolation as a fitting punishment and prohibited the guards from engaging in long conversations with the inmates. This left Rouan alone with just his memories. He lived in his own head. He shared his dark, dingy cell with the ghosts of the past. Their voices accusing him of

terrible things, phantoms whispering in his ear; and not did he hear voices but he saw their faces; he conversed with his visitors, at first telling them to go away but after his loneliness was too much to bear he invited them in, welcomed them into his dark cell. He expected the guards to say something; he was so sure that their voices could be heard outside his own head. Most of what was said was about Marie and the baby. Worst of all, Rouan could even hear the baby crying late into the night. He kept expecting the guards to investigate. Finally he asked the guard about the wailing cries he'd heard. The guard shook his head in disgust and began calling Rouan "the crazy one".

Rouan had to unhook himself from the darkness in his own head. But wherever he turned in the chambers of his mind, he found more heartache. He could not find a way to escape from the pain. Rouan was glad that his father was no longer alive to see him locked up in a French jail. When his father was alive, Rouan had tried to cover up his drug use. But his father was always suspicious and was not easily fooled. His father was far too intelligent to be fooled by his lame excuses for his wasted appearance and erratic behavior. Rouan remembered the day the first man landed on the moon. He was so proud that his father had been a part of it, a part of history (he bragged to all of his classmates). The shadow of his father's accomplishment was something that hung over his entire life. What had he accomplished? Nothing. In the end he had brought only shame to himself and to his family because of his addiction, his mental illness. Rouan's mother tried to tell him that his bi-polar disorder was not his fault. His father agreed and stated that it was all a matter of brain chemistry. But secretly his parents suffered with guilt and shame over his condition.

Over and over again Rouan thought about Marie. She had trusted him and he had led her into the darkness; he had taken her by the hand as they descended into their own private hell. She was pure, innocent, in her own way, a purity that he helped to destroy. He could not forgive himself. He had given her that first shot of dope. He wondered how he could have ever rationalized such a thing. Even if he had gotten out, Marie might have overdosed. And how would he have felt about especially if he had been the one that had given her the hot shot? Would that even be possible? He hated to

admit it to himself but he knew that it was possible. He was the first one to ever shoot her up. She learned how to do it on her own from him. So in a way he had given her that hot shot of dope. It was too horrible. The world was flat after all, he thought, and he had fallen off its edge. So be it. He would have to make a home in the hole that he'd fallen into or go mad.

Rouan thought back to a few years before. It seemed he had begun to turn things around, that his days were becoming brighter. He had been in rehab the year before. He was clean and sober for the first time in a long time. But he was impatient and wanted the changes to come fast, too fast. He was haunted by his failures and by his many false starts. His psychological state was precarious, fragile. There were gaps, gaping holes even, in his psyche. He had been given more than his share of talents, opportunities, but in a way this made his guilt all the worse; he was plagued with a self-loathing buried so deep within himself that he assumed that this was how he would always feel. That it was normal to feel lousy about the way his life had turned out. He wrote all this down in his notebook. He scribbled away. He jotted down his shortcoming, his failings. His story was fraught with more than its share of rationalizations and missteps, ultimately culminating in a long fall into a dark abyss.

His mind flashed back to Houston. He thought back to the last job he had before coming to Paris. He remembered feeling like a clown sitting at his desk in his wrinkled blue suit and shiny red tie. He knew that he had to make a sale if he was going to get his financial house in order and win his ex-wife back. "Yes, I'll hold," Rouan said as he looked out across the brokerage floor. A kind of hum filled the room. And out beyond that, patches of blue sky and white clouds shoulder to shoulder with hi-rises in every direction—the manmade canyons of Houston, Texas. Skip Davis slammed down the phone and made a fist and pumped his arm up and down into the air indicating a big sale. He was the top producer in the office. Rouan consoled himself with the thought that his suit was even cheaper than his own and that Skip Davis was an idiot.

Finally, Doctor Johnson picked the phone up, "Robert, I got your messages. I just couldn't find the time to get back to you. I've only got a second now. I have a patient

waiting.”

“That’s all right. Listen, I need to put you down for something on this new IPO.”

“We’ll have to talk about this later.”

“It will be too late. You have to move on this today.” Rouan began to panic but tried to stay cool.

“I’m sorry but I don’t have the time right now.”

“Listen, I’ll put you down now for ten thousand shares and if you have any questions, we can talk about it when you have more time.”

“Ten thousand shares, what’s that at twenty dollars a share: two hundred thousand dollars?”

“Okay then, how many shares do you want me to put you down for?”

“Robert. Listen. I can’t talk now. I’ll have to call you back.”

“Okay, fine. I’ll just put you down for twenty five hundred shares. Okay?”

“No, no. Hold on, I’ve got to go back to my office. We can talk there.”

“All right.” Once again, Rouan scanned the office and waited for Doctor Johnson to get back on the line. He knew he had to make this sale. None of his other prospects were nearly as strong. It had all come down to this one call.

After a minute or two, Doctor Johnson picked the phone back up. “Okay Robert. Let’s get this out of the way.” Doctor Johnson paused for just a second and then let out a sigh and delivered the blow, “I won’t be picking up any shares today.”

“What? Why?” Rouan stammered.

“I saw this report on television, stock scams and such. Your firm was mentioned.”

“I know that show. A bunch of celebrity journalists gossiping rather than reporting on hard news. They play fast and loose with the facts. It’s all a big ratings game. Our firm is considering suing them.”

“Well, until the dust settles, I just don’t see how I can justify investing any more

money with your firm. As you know, I've already lost several thousand dollars with your firm. And I'm just not going to risk any more. Sorry."

The line went dead.

Stunned, Rouan hung up the phone. His sales manager, Buddy Wainwright, looked out over at him from his private office. He picked up his phone and called out over the squawk box: "Robert to my office.." He sounded like the head cashier at a grocery store. Everyone glanced over in Rouan's direction. He lifted up a finger, indicating that he was on my way. Buddy stared intently at him as Rouan walked over to his office. Several brokers snickered.

"Were you monitoring that last call?" Rouan asked.

"I caught some of it."

"That TV report is just killing our sales."

"Yeah well, what can I do? Sit down." While it was true that Buddy had a slight paunch, he was not a big man but somehow you got the feeling he thought he was. He waited for him to sit. "Robert, I've got some bad news. I've been going over your file. You've reached the limit on your advances."

"Listen, I'm close to a big sale. I've got a friend."

"I know. I know. God bless you, Billy Bob. I've heard it all before." He called Rouan Billy Bob when he wanted to soften him up.

"This guy knows some of the biggest players around. If I can just show him what I can do. If he's on board when this IPO takes off, referrals up the ass."

"Okay. Stay and close the deal. But no more draw. When you close a big deal we'll just take a quarter of it against your draw."

"But I need the draw this week. I've got child support to pay."

"Sorry, I can't help you." Buddy walked over and patted Rouan on the back and began to show him out the door. "Just get back on the phone and close something like your life depended on it, because it does." Buddy turned and walked back towards his

desk. "And leave the door open. That's the sound of money being made." He turned and picked up his phone and did a little shimmy as he barked out over the squawk box:

"Let's go boys. Momma needs a new dress."

Rouan carried a box of his belongings to his car—an old beat-up surf green Pontiac. He opened the car door (it was unlocked, who would want to steal it?) and put the box of his belongings in the passenger seat. He felt so bad, not so much because he had failed but because he had gotten involved in that kind of scam in the first place. He put the key in the ignition and tried to start his car. There was just a clicking sound; the car refused to fire, a dead battery. He sighed and tried again. Nothing. He looked back at himself in the rear-view mirror, he was out of answers.

After he got a jump start for his car, Rouan made it over to his ex-wife's place. Jennifer was a former debutante and a real beauty: tall, thin, and blonde. The car continued to idle as Rouan walked up to Jennifer's apartment. She saw him and came out. She was upset, "I called the bank after you said you were coming over and they told me that your check had bounced."

"Yeah well I wanted to talk to you about that, but later." He looked over at his eight year old daughter, Terry. He did not want to discuss his finances in front of her but he had no choice. "As far as the check goes, just tell them to put it through again."

"No, I'm not going to do that. I think you're going to have to start paying through the court with a money order. I'm sorry but you're way behind, Robert. And I'm sick of having to beg."

"Can we talk about this later?" Rouan pleaded. He caught Jennifer's eye and her sympathy.

"Daddy are you going to take me out for an ice cream?" Terry asked.

"Sure baby," Rouan said. But he knew he did not have the cash to pay for an ice cream. It was so humiliating.

"Why is your car still running?" Jennifer asked.

"I'm having some trouble with the battery."

“Are you going to leave it running while you go into the ice cream store?”

“No we’ll use the drive-through. Do you want to come?” Rouan asked Jennifer.

“No thanks. I think you better just go with Terry.”

“Terry go ahead and get in the car. I have to talk to Mommy for a minute.”

Terry got in the car.

“Listen, I’m sorry about the check. I was expecting an advance at work. But they cut me off, so I quit.”

“Oh Robert.”

From inside the car, Terry watched her parents.

“And I have another problem. I’m a little short on cash, if you could spare a ten just for the ice cream.” Rouan felt totally humiliated.

Jennifer weakened and checked her pockets. “I don’t even know if I have a ten on me.”

“Not in front of her.” Rouan glanced over at Terry.

“It’s a little too late for your pride now.” She handed him a twenty. “It’s all I got.”

Rouan pocketed the money.

The next day, Rouan saw the toppling of the twin towers replayed over and over again on TV (Manhattan blanketed in ashes and smoke). He watched the Pentagon burn. His mother telephoned, worried as to why he was no longer at the office (he hadn’t yet told her he had quit). He had been irritated by all her questions about my former place of employment.

“The stock exchange has been closed down. That office was in a bit of a panic.”

“I don’t think it will matter with the stocks their selling.” Rouan replied.

“I don’t understand.”

“They’re not big companies, if they even exist at all.”

"Why do you work at such a place?"

"Well, I don't work there anymore. Now do I?" Rouan said resentfully.

"Robert don't get angry. I just want the best for you. You know that. You are so talented." His mother replied in Arabic.

Without money or the prospect of it, Rouan was floating on air, but just barely. On his kitchen table sat an eviction notice. He hadn't paid his rent in two months. Credit card bills stacked up on the counter. Another black mark on his credit, what would it matter? What was he going to do? He had no idea. It all seemed so unfair. Hadn't he been doing all he could? He had been off drugs for nine months. Everything had been safe in rehab. Everyone seemed to care. Now, no one seemed to care. His ex-wife had encouraged him at first but now was indifferent to his feelings. He had secretly hoped that after rehab a reconciliation would be possible. But now it seemed unlikely. Deep down he knew his marriage was over. But he could not accept it, he could not just let it go.

Just as it seemed as if there was no hope, a phone call came from his old boss, Dick Allen. Dick was a Yale educated businessman with a long and unforgiving memory when it came to any kind of slight, real or imagined. He did not say too much on the phone but Rouan got the feeling that he was going to be given a second chance. They agreed to meet at the Marriott hotel. Dick said he would explain everything.

They met in Dick's suite at the hotel (where there would be some privacy). Dick, tan, dressed casually, sat on a sofa with a drink in one hand and a phone in the other. His lips were parted slightly and the set of his jaw was relaxed, as were all the muscles in his face. But behind this cool exterior, one sensed an intelligence and razor sharp focus and a will propelled by a massive ego.

"How have you been?" Dick asked with his best poker face (he knew well enough that Rouan had been divorced and fallen deep into drug addiction in the years since they parted company).

"Okay." Rouan rubbed his hands together and tried to smile. But he was nervous. "After we parted, I had some bad years. But I'm doing better now. I'm off drugs. I've

been clean for almost a year.”

“Good for you.” This did not seem to impress Dick. It was almost as if it irritated him a little. In the past, he had always been so self-righteous on the issue of his associates doing drugs even when working with drug smugglers. In the past, Rouan worked with Arab speaking traffickers in the south of France, Spain, Algiers and Morocco. Rouan rationalized that it was much safer to be labeled a junkie than to be marked as an American spy.

“I tried to call you, you were always out,” Rouan said resentfully.

“I'm sorry I did not get in touch with you sooner. To be frank, I had no interest in those stocks you were selling.” Dick brought the tips of his fingers together and let them rest under his nose, his thumbs resting against his chest.

“So what do you want with me?” Rouan was blunt. He was anxious and he knew he was doing a bad job at covering it up.

“How would you like to go to Paris?” Dick smiled slightly.

“I don't think anyone is going to invite me back.” Rouan looked away, avoiding Dick's glance.

“I'm inviting you back. No one is going to second guess me behind my back. No one is going to object. Why worry about it? And you were the best. We need you. Everyone is nervous especially our North African friends. That is where you come in. You can smooth things over. They'll listen to you. You speak their language. No one's better at gaining a confidence than you. You're a magician. And without those talents of persuasion you would be rotting in jail somewhere, maybe here or somewhere else. You still have some pretty important friends here and overseas.”

“Yeah,” Rouan laughed. “But they don't return my calls.”

““Robert, I've already told you that had no interest in those stocks you were peddling,” Dick said.

“I've felt so guilty about the way things went down.”

Dick was embarrassed by both Rouan's feelings of guilt and sense of self importance, his grandiosity, but he covered it up; he wanted Rouan to agree to the assignment he was proposing and was trying not to let his personal feelings about Rouan get in the way.

“As you know, we are running short of partners who speak Arabic.”

“Why you? A few days ago, you wouldn't even take my calls.” What had been a lighthearted comment a few moments before now was filled with bile. His old resentments about the past flared up and began to engulf him. He knew he had been used for years. That he would never be an insider. Rouan did not even know who those insiders were. He could only guess. Rouan was just another tool to be used by Dick (and those that Dick answered to, that Rouan would never be included in the secret meetings that Dick had with his associates). Rouan had held on to his resentments for so long, that seeing Dick in front of him (and all that he represented) enraged him.

“As far as the past is concerned Robert, you were an embarrassment to us all.”

Rouan was further hurt by Dick's remark and this touched off a firestorm of guilt and resentments. “Be honest, I'm disposable, right?”

Dick shrugged off such an obvious statement. “Right.”

Rouan became emotional, he wasn't ready for all of this and he didn't want Dick to see how vulnerable he really was, so he headed for the door. Dick was calm; he knew how desperate Rouan really was. “I'm leaving tonight. After today, there won't be any more offers of any kind.”

Rouan rode down in the elevator with two businessmen. He was bitter, angry, mixed up. He got off the elevator in the parking garage. He walked over to his car and got in. He put the key into the ignition and turned the car over but it did not start. He looked down at the dashboard. The gas gauge read empty. He angrily pulled the keys out of the ignition and got out and headed back to the hotel. He walked in and sat down at the bar. It was mid-afternoon, so all of the lunch patrons were gone and it was too early for dinner. There were a few customers at the bar. “Can you ring room 355 for me,” Rouan

asked the bartender.

"Sure." The Bartender picked up the house phone and dialed. "Okay." The bartender handed Rouan the phone.

"I'm sorry about what I said. I overreacted. Your offer brought up a lot of old feelings, old failures. I'm the one to blame and no one else, if the offer still stands."

"Sure Robert." Dick sounded distracted, not surprised, not angry, but indifferent.

Rouan was being called back to his old line of work for one reason only: he spoke Arabic with a native Algerian accent. It was a bittersweet moment for Rouan. Dick Allen, after all, had been the one that recruited Rouan in the beginning. Rouan had taken the summer off in Morocco after being accepted to graduate school at the University of Chicago. Up until then, he did not take hard drugs, he did smoke hashish in Morocco but that was all. But then something happened. Rouan tried heroin for the first time. Since he spoke Arabic like a native he fit right in to the scene. Many had no idea that he actually was an American. During this trip, someone associated with Dick's operation must have spotted him and when he returned to the United States he was approached by Dick Allen. Dick knew everything about him, about his father, his family and his trip to Morocco. Dick made an offer: forget about graduate school for the time being and make some money as a translator. Rouan's heart was not really set on going back to school, so he accepted Dick's offer. Rouan had begun wonder if there was a connection between the beginnings of his hard drug use and his work with Dick since they both happened at the same time. (Rouan was not told initially what his exact duties would be and by the time he fully realized that he was in over his head, it was too late to turn back or at least that is what Rouan told himself). Now once again Dick had an offer for him. But this time, Rouan had something to prove; the first he had taken the job on almost a whim but not this time. Rouan desperately wanted to repair the damage he had done to both his reputation and his psyche (even if he would be dealing with drug smugglers and two faced characters like Dick).

Jennifer warned Rouan about going overseas so soon after rehab. If she had taken him back into her bed, he would have stayed in Houston. But she'd have none of that.

So he took the job. The last night he was in Houston, he went over to her place to say goodbye to Terry and to give Jennifer a copy of a life insurance policy. Dick had agreed to fund an annuity with a large death benefit set up in one of Dick's dummy companies. Now if something happened to him, his family would be taken care of. Rouan had to explain the policy and its ramifications to Jennifer.

"Daddy, Daddy." Terry met Rouan at the door, her arms reaching out to save her father from some dark force that neither of them could define. Terry was as beautiful as her mother but in her own way. Her complexion was darker (from Rouan's side of the family). She looked at her father so tenderly, her eyes contained a wisdom beyond her years.

"How have you been sweetheart?" Rouan hugged her, knowing they would soon be parting.

"Okay, but I missed you." She answered.

At first, Jennifer backed away and stood in a neutral corner. But once Rouan explained that he would be going overseas and Rouan began showed her the insurance policy, she became angry.

"I know what's going on Robert," Jennifer flatly declared.

"Yeah, what?"

"You're back in the game."

"No, it's business. I won't lie; it's true that some of my old contacts got the job for me."

"At any other time, I might buy all of that but not now. Your old employer is in hot water and you know it and they've called you back. That life is no good for you, Robert. I lived with it for ten years. First, it was the nightmares, then the drugs. You know the rest. Hell on earth."

No one could argue that she still cared about him, Rouan realized. But her feelings for him were full of pain. Pain that he knew he had caused.

“Jennifer, stop. It’s not what you think.”

“Don’t lie.”

The look in her eye shot right into him.

“Even so, I can’t say anything. You know that much.” Rouan tried to deflect the daggers she was hurling at him both spoken and unspoken.

“That’s not going to change.”

“It’s not? What does your therapist say?”

“You know I can’t talk to her about this.”

“Exactly, you’re already keeping secrets. Nothing has changed.” Jennifer shook her head in frustration.

After treatment, Rouan had been given the name of a therapist, Jan Carlson. She was an addiction specialist. Rouan called her Doctor Jan. She was younger than him but wiser. She was cool. She did not judge him but at the same time she did not let him get away with too much.

“I’ve been so proud of you. Clean, off drugs for almost a year.”

She was killing him with kindness. She had, after all, visited him in treatment. It had been years since their divorce but her visit had given him hope. He still loved her. Her support had been invaluable to him. She had greeted him with a big smile and a hug. He was so happy to see her. She looked so beautiful. She did not bring Terry. She felt it would scare Terry seeing him in the hospital. Terry had visited Rouan's father in the hospital shortly before he died and she now associated hospitals with death.

“It’s the right thing for me to do.” Rouan said firmly to Jennifer after a long silence. “Maybe if I had been working at the one thing I’m good at, things would have turned out differently. It’s not what you think. The government needs me. I speak Arabic. I can’t give you the details.”

“The government needs you, right. Your associates are drug smugglers and con men. Don’t lie to me. Don’t play the guilt trip. You inflate your image and then when

something goes wrong, being at the center of the universe, it's all your fault.

He thought her statement about playing the guilt trip was obviously shaped by what she had learned in therapy. Secretly, but in a way that he found difficult even to admit to himself, he was happy that at least one of them had gotten their act together.

“Robert, you can't stay clean wrapped up in that dirty business. The dirt rubs off.”

“While I'm still breathing that's the chance I'll have to take.”

Jennifer rolled her eyes. “You are like someone who throws his gloves away and then complains about his cold hands.”

Jennifer was obviously angry, nothing new there. He knew that he had no one else to blame for the failure of their marriage but himself. Rouan knew that Jennifer was never really sure whether he was working for the government or drug smugglers since he told so many stories. He was never sure himself. Rouan didn't know if Dick Allen was CIA or merely a businessman who traded information with the government to help in his nefarious business activities. Rouan had never been formally affiliated with the CIA or any governmental agency (though he often dreamed of it). But he was in the dark. He knew that he was often asked to gather information that would seem irrelevant to a drug smuggler. But then intelligence had value. It was something that could be traded like any other commodity, licit or illicit. While Rouan accepted that at the very least Dick had close contacts with the CIA, he also knew that he would never be accepted by anyone in the government, that he worked too far in the shadows of the international drug trade, that his personality was too unpredictable, that he didn't fit the profile for incoming candidates in Langley, that he was just another asset to be run, to be handled and if necessary discarded (even if he was a very valuable asset). But Rouan knew that he would never be accepted by his handlers in the United States, and this was something that he deeply resented and contributed to his underlying feelings of inferiority.

Rouan thought back to when things first went bad between him and Jennifer. Jennifer was pregnant with Terry. She had brought a load of clean towels into the bathroom. Rouan had forgotten to lock the door. He was sitting on the toilet seat

preparing to shoot up. He looked up at Jennifer just as he was about to push the plunger down on the syringe. Jennifer was visibly shaken. She knew Rouan had used drugs in past (they even occasionally smoked pot together) but she had no idea he had gotten hooked on heroin overseas.

“Oh my God, what are you doing?” She didn't know what else to say.

“Oh man.”

For a moment, Jennifer was frozen in space. She then turned to leave.

“Wait.” Rouan called out to her.

Jennifer put the towels on the vanity and stormed out of the bathroom crying.

“When did all of this start?” She asked him. He had an answer but it was one he wasn't prepared to give to her. It had started when he rubbed shoulders in the drug infested underbelly in Morocco and Algiers that was crucial for his work (there was no other way to make the necessary contacts that were needed to help connect the dots and gain information to turned over to analysts back in the States). But that had been problematic, for Rouan. He had a weakness for the heroin that he helped smuggle. While it helped explain why a bright young man would be involved in the drug trade in the first place, it was a big problem when he came home to the United States with a craving for the drug, a craving that he just could not shake without feeding it more drugs even if in the end that meant losing his family.

“My life is fucked. I got hooked overseas,” Rouan desperately needed Jennifer to understand. But it was too much for her to process just then.

“You mean our life is fucked and now I know why you've been acting so strange: tired one moment, on edge the next.”

“The one thing I was good at has been taken away.”

“And why was that? Because you were fired, and why were you fired?”

“Because of this,.” Rouan held up the syringe.

Just thinking back on that terrible scene chilled Rouan. If only things had turned out

different. Why had he gotten involved in drugs in the first place? He asked himself this question over and over again. But he had no answer, nothing that could excuse him from his baffling behavior. He thought back on his stay in rehab. His treatment had been paid for by his mother. He went into treatment soon after his father passed away. His mother received a large sum from his life insurance and Rouan had been hitting her up for money. Jennifer finally told her why (she had no idea that Jennifer's divorce from Rouan was because of his drug use; she had been in the dark and had no idea that her son was an addict). Once Rouan's mother knew the truth she lowered the boom and told him that she would not help him financially any longer except to pay for his treatment.

Hobby International airport was a nightmare. Holiday travelers were returning home and the country was in the grip of a kind national paranoia that Rouan had never seen (as if the toppling of the twin towers were not enough, the fear of Anthrax and poison gas gripped the nation). He had heard stories and seen movies depicting this kind of paranoia during the Second World War. At every airport in the country, everyone was looking over their shoulders for terrorists.

At the Air France Gate, Rouan took a seat off by himself, looking out at the runway. A man in his early fifties with some gray stubble in his dishwater blonde beard, wearing jeans, boots and a big Stetson, approached and sat directly behind Rouan. The cowboy opened a copy of the Houston Chronicle and then lowered it. Rouan turned and in the corner of his eye recognized his old friend, Pat Adair.

Rouan laughed. "Pat, what the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm here to see a man about a horse."

"Sounds right, you look like a horse thief in that get up."

"I heard the whores in Houston like big hats."

"How did you know that I was here?"

"How can you ask me that?"

"I guess you heard about this from Dick Allen."

"Fuck Dick Allen. Let me ask you something, how long have you been clean?"

"Eight months."

"Are you going to meetings?"

"With NA, too many former dealers, and AA is not the right fit for me. I'm not a drunk."

"You're addict just like me. It's just my drug of choice was booze and yours was less politically correct."

"Maybe so."

"Who could I talk to in AA that could ever begin to understand my life?"

"Me."

"Yeah, you're right. You've been sober for a few years now."

"Over five years."

"So what are doing here Pat, other than the twelve step call?"

"Walk away," Pat whispered. "Don't go to Paris."

"Yeah what about you, would you walk away?"

"I did walk away for over two years after I quit drinking after my stay at Betty Ford."

"And they let you walk away?"

"As long as I was quiet about it."

"Well, I've always been a loud mouth." Rouan said.

"You speak the truth there."

"But on what condition did they let you walk away?"

"Ah, not to talk out of school, not to write a book, not rat anyone out. Keep things secret that should be kept secret. Not go on CNN."

Rouan was shocked. "I had no idea. Why did you come back?"

"It's what I know. I'm good at it. What else would I do? Someone has got to do it."

Why not me?"

"You know, they're finished with me. This is just a little side job."

"They're not through with you. They need you. You're good at smoothing things over with boys in North Africa. They like you, they trust you. Everyone is freaked out. They're not finished with you. Do you think if they spent much time with Dick Allen he could calm their fears? No way. They need you, buddy boy. And now, after two airplanes slammed into the World Trade Center and another crashed into the Pentagon and fucked all their well laid plans. No they need someone they can trust over there. Anyone who speaks Arabic and has a tan is scared to death of this country right now. You they trust."

"All the more reason I should go. I'm not needed here. But over there, I'm needed. I'm good for something. Here I can't even keep a job selling bogus stocks. I can't pay my child support. I'm worthless here."

"That is not a good reason to get back involved."

"Funny that's what my wife called it."

"She was right."

"Yeah well she was right my check bounced for my child support."

"Sounds like a personal problem."

"It is and it is one I'm going to fix by going to Paris."

"You'll fix one problem and create ten more. You don't need to be a part of it. They're using you. Don't get caught in the crossfire. You need to pull the plug on this one. Pull the pin and unhook yourself from this train."

"Where would that leave me?"

"Away from the big cluster fuck that's coming, you don't know how this has rocked everybody. You're not on the inside. The paranoia is palpable. They need you, but when their through with you and your usefulness, or if you cause them embarrassment, they'll cut your throat. They care only about their egos. I've been there. Don't get caught in the cross fire. That's the danger zone."

"Wasn't it always like that."

"Now the lid has been taken off the insanity. Everyone is taking cover. Dick is a political animal. He just plays the game. He stays in the shadows. He puts you out front. For him, it is an opportunity. Bring in an Arab speaking lackey, one that he personally recruited, and throw him in with the French and the North Africans. If you fuck up, no one knows you. He's nowhere to be seen. You're overseas and he's back at home playing golf. No one bats an eye. You're looking at a big fall here. You'll be working without a net. If you were clean for five years, I would still advise you against going. Robert don't go to Paris. Tell Dick you've changed your mind."

"My life's been one big fuck up. And yes they're using me; and no they don't want me back. I know that. I don't want to be a part of it. But I don't see what choice I have. I can't say no."

Pat pulled out a card from his pocket and handed it to Robert. "So you know where you can contact me when things get hot and I believe they will," Pat said confidently.

"What's this?"

"My card, you'll need it before it's all over."

"I'll keep in touch and try to stay out of trouble."

"Okay I had my say. I wanted to make sure you knew the score."

"I understand, thanks," Rouan looked down at the card and squinted. He then carefully put it in his front shirt pocket. And in that instant, Pat vanished.

Soon after, Rouan boarded his flight for Paris. He was assigned a window seat. He looked out at the sky and the setting sun. The jet began to taxi down the runway and then gathered momentum and lifted up. The engines roared as the jet climbed. The sky was in flames from the fading sun as darkness approached. Rouan paid no attention to the French couple sitting next to him. He thought about Pat the whole time on the flight over. He had known Pat ever since he got involved with Dick. Pat was respected for his work. There was no one better. Pat was respected by everyone and anyone that knew anything and like Dick there was a veil of secrecy about who he actually answered to.

Rouan often met with Dick and Pat but connections went no higher. Who it was exactly that they worked for was a mystery to Rouan. When he asked questions he would be rebuffed or with Pat a clever joke would be made. Politically Pat was very conservative, a rabid anticommunist. The fall of the Berlin Wall was one of the happiest days of his life. No one would have guessed the true nature of his work. But unlike Dick, it wasn't a respect won by playing politics and knowing the right people (though he was on a first name basis with several presidents from both parties, including W and his father; in his off time he was a political fund raiser for the Republican party going all the way back to the Reagan years). That he was involved with drug smugglers would have shocked his conservative friends. But they had no idea what Pat was up to. They just assumed he was a good businessman and had to travel overseas frequently. Pat brought out the best in others and could be counted on to make things right if things went bad. He knew everyone and their vulnerabilities. But he never threatened anyone. If he had to act, no one would see it coming. Rouan had known Pat to be a good friend whenever in need. Where respect was rare, Pat was respected by all. He had a special touch and left no fingerprints on his handy work; he was a magician in his own way.

Rouan wished his own beliefs were as simple as Pat's. But Rouan's situation was never clear. He work forced him to lie, to play a role, his identity was split. He never felt good about betraying the confidence of others. Rouan wished his fall from grace and recovery had been just as straight forward as Pat's.

After he checked into his hotel, Rouan took the funicular to the top of Montmartre. It was snowing. Below Paris was in a white haze as the snow fell. He stopped by the Basilique du Sacré-Cœur and while he didn't pray exactly, he sat silently in deep meditation. He wandered about the church. Above the altar was the depiction of Christ in a white robe and a gold heart and above his head was a white dove. The figure of Christ was surrounded by blue and gold paint. Some nuns came into the area wearing white habits. They sang beautifully.

It had been a long flight from Houston to Paris and looking back Rouan realized he did something that should have been a warning, a red flag: he had a few drinks on the

plane (Rouan thought it was ironic having just spoken with Pat about alcoholism). Rouan hadn't drunk alcohol since before his stay in rehab. While alcohol had never been his problem, his counselors in rehab discouraged its use. They said it would ultimately trigger his drug use, and in the end they were right. He had promised Terry that I'd send her a postcard of the Eiffel Tower. That he did do. But that is all he sent. Even though he had made some money with his work with Dick, he blew it all on drugs. He was subject to arrest in the United States for back child support.

* * * *

While in isolation the authorities found the notepad and the plans for the weapon. Perrout threatened Rouan with charges of terrorism. Rouan had never sent his notes off to Pat Adair. He did not want to cause one of his few remaining friends any embarrassment. Rouan had lost confidence in himself, in what he thought he had discovered. Had it all been nothing more than doggerel about a bridegroom and his beloved? Was it all a product of his own paranoia and desperate wish to be a hero? He told Frenot this and went on to explain that he had first studied physics under his father's tutelage at the age of seven and this was the real reason for the document's accuracy. The matter was dropped within days, if for no other reason than it had the potential of making a laughingstock out of Perrout. While the French authorities had dropped the matter, Rouan continued to be haunted by the plans he'd discovered.

After Rouan had been returned to the general population, he had been put back in his old cell. But Abdullah had replaced with two other inmates. They were wild, unpredictable; there was something frightening about them. Abdullah was either stoned or irritable. But Rouan's new cell mates were different. And Karim had changed. It was obvious that he was on drugs. His moods changed constantly. Every night the two newcomers and Karim would engage in a free for all of sex and drugs. They had a blanket covering two of the bunks. But sometimes they would not hide their activities. Other times they offered Rouan drugs. They were like devils. Rouan was sick of it. To top it all off, he suspected that Karim had ratted him out and told the authorities about the notepad and its contents.

"Karim, I'm going to ask to be moved." Rouan said calmly.

"But why, Robert?"

"You know why."

"What did you say to them?"

"To who?" There was anger and fear in his eyes; and something else, something more sinister: it chilled Rouan's heart.

"The brothers, you shouldn't spread lies about me. You know there are rumors about you, that you are a spy. You are an American working for the CIA."

"Don't be ridiculous. Karim you must be careful what you say about me. I know that it was you who told the authorities about the notebook. You're a rat."

Karim's eyes flashed with hatred. Rouan thought he was going to come at him and fight. But Karim stopped, knowing full well (with his slight build) that he was no match for Rouan. He took a moment and collected himself. "You must be careful too. Are you going to tell them why you want to move?"

"I have to tell them something."

"No you will say nothing or I will tell everyone that you are a spy. You've been warned." He looked Rouan directly in the eye (but without really seeing him). The old Karim was gone.

Only later did Rouan realize how serious Karim's threat was. He was meeting with Frenot. Frenot looked at Rouan and said, "I must tell you something. It is a story. But it is much more than a story. It is a warning. It well known that French Intelligence officers share cells with the inmates. Of course, an attorney could never reveal the name of a French Intelligence officer to an inmate. He could be brought up on charges. Do you understand what I am saying?"

Frenot could only mean Karim. It made sense to Rouan. It was as if Karim had been putting on an act all along; except now he was out of control, taking drugs, engaging in sex with the other inmates. Rouan knew what it was like to be undercover and go over

the edge. Karim knew, at the very least, that Rouan had contacts in the intelligence community. If word got out about Karim's activities, his career as an intelligence officer would be ruined (and he might even be brought up on charges). This made Karim very dangerous. Rouan realized then with certainty that it had been Karim who had brought his notebook to the attention of the authorities. It all made sense. Karim was either French intelligence or an informer. This put both Rouan and Karim in a various precarious position. If Karim was French intelligence and the authorities found out about his drug use, things could go very bad for Karim. If he was simply an informer, his life was in jeopardy. If the other prisoners found out, he would most likely be killed.

A few days later, Rouan had a visitor. He was told at the last minute but did not recognize the name: James Patrick. It certainly wasn't a French name. Frenot had mentioned to Rouan that someone had telephoned and inquired about Rouan's case. Frenot was reluctant to discuss the case with a stranger over the phone. Frenot claimed he had forgotten the name but said the visitor was genuinely concerned with Rouan's well being and that the visitor had an American accent. Frenot did not know when this mysterious visitor would appear but only said that it couldn't hurt to agree to a meeting at the jail. Rouan guessed it was someone either associated with the American Embassy or one of his former colleagues. Rouan thought there might be some concern over what Rouan might disclose, considering the desperate position he was in.

As soon as Rouan entered the visiting area, he recognized Pat Adair. Pat had grown a beard and put on weight but Rouan recognized him immediately. Pat was dressed not in trendy jeans but in baggy pants and a wrinkled shirt (the ultimate bohemian look). Rouan thought that he should have brought the notebook with the diagrams. Rouan smiled as he glanced at Pat. Pat for his part looked at Rouan stoically.

"You're the last person I expected to see," Rouan said as the smile vanished from his face. Pat's expression brought the gravity of his situation back into Rouan's mind.

"I should have been the first to come. For that, I apologize." Then Pat looked Rouan in the eye and said sternly, "I warned you, Robert. You weren't ready."

"So James Patrick, here you are. Two first names, really?" Rouan whispered and

laughed.

“They may figure it out, but later.”

“Better to be paranoid, I suppose.”

“I have to be careful about what I say.” Pat glanced up at the camera and Rouan nodded. “Many are on pins and needles about you. No one wants to get involved. On the one hand you know too much. No one wants their name to come up in an investigation. But on the other hand, if you give something or someone up, it will be a big mess. So, I need to talk to you about a few things.”

“No one believes a damn thing I've got to say.”

“Maybe so.”

“I did not think anyone would care or even notice that I was here.”

“Come on, if only that were true. The list is long. Many are worried about what you might say.”

“The ties have been severed. My mind is blank.”

“Maybe so, but still the information is back there somewhere. And you're pushed daily to give them something.”

“They wanted me to flip on a friend of mine. I refused. Well, at first I agreed. My girlfriend was going to have a baby. But after her death, there was no point. If they really knew anything about me, they would have asked bigger questions.”

Pat frowned and the tone in his voice mellowed. “I have some news, hopefully you'll be getting out soon. There's been a push by a few of us to get you out. It will take a little time. Some strings will have to be pulled. But many people are nervous about you staying here, many people that we both work with.”

“And I thought, you were out of the goodness of your heart.” Rouan cracked a smile.

“I am.”

“Sorry about that. I know there was no reason for you to come.”

“No one wants you here. You could become a big embarrassment. Publicly the French and the American government are at odds. But privately, it's a different story. There is only a paper thin wall between our people and them. But it is a delicate matter. Discretion is needed. An all-out breach would cause a scandal. And then there would be no telling where it would end.”

“But Pat, you have to understand. No believes a thing I have to say. They consider me to be crazy. And they're right. Frenot mentioned I would have a visitor. I need to tell you about something. If I knew you were coming, I would have brought my notes. I discovered something. I discovered some plans. I need you to look into it Pat. No one would listen to me. I dropped the notebook. What I showed them at the Embassy made no sense. I should have waited until I could have reconstructed it correctly. You need to see the notes I made.”

“I know what you're talking about Robert. Everyone knows about your claims about the professor and the imam in the fifteenth. Robert, it's not real. Not any of it.”

“How do you know what I saw?”

“Robert, Doctor Azur is a professor not a terrorist. After your claims were made, he was checked out. There's nothing there. As for imam that he stayed with, while it is true that he objected to American foreign policy and protested against the bombing of innocents, the collateral damage in Iraq and Afghanistan, he was no jihadist. Many in France feel the same way. It's a bloody mess, rendition, torture. As far as the your professor goes, after all the surveillance, he became paranoid and left the country. You have to trust me Robert, there is nothing there. Even back in Egypt he was watched. Nothing. Robert you were high as a kite when you made those claims. You've been making a lot of people nervous even before your arrest. And that was the last thing anyone wanted. No one wants you here. And I'm sure you agree with them. I can't say too much more than that. I just wanted to let know that you have not been forgotten. And I will see to it that we get you out. So chin up.” Pat said gently.

“I had no idea that anyone except my family had given my situation a second thought,” Rouan said.

“You've been a worry to so many. Not because they care about you. They care about the damage that can be done to their careers.”

“How? That I know drug smugglers? Who would be surprised by that.”

“Come on, don't be naive. You know exactly who you have been working for all these years.”

“Who? Dick?”

“There's a firewall between you and the others, and the reason there is a firewall is for situations like this. But right now it all one big cluster fuck. I'll get word to your family that things are looking better for you and that you will be out soon.”

“Thanks so much, Pat.”

“One more thing, you're real lucky to have the lawyer that you. Frenot is a good man,”

“You've spoken to Frenot?”

“Yes.”

“What did he say?”

“I told him, I was an old friend of yours. An old friend of the family, I made it clear that I did not speak for the American government or the Embassy. He's sharp. He didn't pry too much into my background. But he understood. He likes you, Robert. As do I. If only you weren't such a fuck up. Hang tight.”

Rouan was stunned by what Pat said about the professor and the imam. He realized what Pat was saying was true. The thought had been building in his mind for a long time, maybe even from the very beginning. If he had somehow held on to the notebook, he would have realized there was nothing in it to incriminate anyone. He would have had time to analyze its contents and concluded that there was nothing there. But he had dropped it and his imagination took over. If he had the notebook the facts would have stood out before him. That would have been the end of it. He knew better than anyone that he was subject to the most grandiose fantasies. His mother would sometimes call

him affectionately her Don Quixote (in addition to Arabic, she spoke Spanish and read the stories of Cervantes in the original). She was the first to recognize her son's grandiosity. Now he could let go of his obsession with Doctor Azur. Now he had hope that he would soon be released. He had been without hope for so long that he had forgotten what it felt like. As Rouan thought back he realized he had only glanced at the pictures that he found in the notebook and then had done a massive shot of dope. How could he have been so naive? He had concocted it all in his own mind and now a man's life had been upended because of his claims and that man had been forced to flee France. And what of the imam? He certainly would be under the watchful eye of French Intelligence the rest of his life. French law allowed for someone to be held indefinitely for the smallest of suspicions. The Anti-terrorism laws in France gave the authorities unlimited power.

Day after day, Rouan watched the reports on TV as the sons of poor immigrants set cars ablaze in the suburbs of Paris. A month earlier, he watched as Hurricane Katrina struck in the United States, leaving bodies floating in the streets of New Orleans, Homeland security, FEMA, what a joke, Rouan thought. Then came news of the London subway bombings. The war continued in Iraq with more kidnappings, beheadings and terror, children maimed, orphaned and killed while the remains of U.S. soldiers were flown home in body bags. The scandal of Abu Ghraib and the controversy of detaining combatants in Guantanamo Bay was debated incessantly (Rouan thought about them often as he sat in his own cell). Why couldn't Bush and Company realize that for every human rights violation, misguided missile and collateral damage, the killing of innocent civilians, terrorism was fomented rather than stopped? America wasn't safer because of these actions but endangered by them. Rouan watched it all on the TV in his cell.

When did the world go so gray? Rouan would ask himself. When did it all go so bad? Was it after the war began in Iraq? But which one? The one that ended with half naked Iraqis waving dirty, white flags in the desert, or the one that would not end even after the death of Saddam Hussein? Or maybe it all began to go bad (for the United States at least) with the war in Vietnam—whole villages consumed by fire, the jungle itself decimated by napalm and Agent Orange? Or was that the fault of television seeing all

that death sandwiched between commercials for Mister Clean, Ultrabrite toothpaste and Wonder Bread on the evening news? He was high on his soap box now (even if no one was listening except for the phantoms in his own mind). And what about him? He, too, had fabricated a hoax. The CIA had misled Colin Powell about Iran's weapons of mass destruction and he had tried to do the same with plans he'd claimed to have found in Doctor Azur's apartment. Was he any different than the CIA when they led America into war based on a lie? No, he thought, he was no different. He had put his own ego and wishful thinking ahead of the truth just as his country had used the specter of weapons of mass destruction to invade Iraq. Rouan had not forgotten about the plans he had fabricated.

But his former obsession had now been replaced with a new obsession: a recurring dream that he could not forget. Images he could not help but recall. In the dream he saw flashes of a future catastrophe. This dream became increasingly more vivid and real as the days passed. The voices, the faces, the figures, loomed like giants in his mind. His imagination once again took over. In the dream it all started with just a sound, a sound that seemed to surface out of nowhere with a kind of warbling in his head. The warbling was joined by human voices. And then the voices took shape. He saw men dressed in Air Force uniforms descending into a capsule, a kind of control room that they entered after opening a Boeing blast door (Rouan had once seen pictures of one in a book). After this, there was a countdown, and then the flash of missiles as they emerged out of the earth. After he awoke from the dream, he could not let go of what it was that he saw.

Rouan decided he would begin attending NA meetings once he was released. Frenot was now optimistic that he could get him out on reduced charges. It seemed that Pat's promise of securing his release was bearing fruit, though Rouan could never be sure of what was going on behind the scenes. He only knew what Frenot told him. Perrout had softened. He'd reluctantly accepted that Rouan would not change his mind and testify against Hassan. He must also have become aware that Hassan was no longer peddling drugs. That Hassan was no longer a player in the drug trade.

Still, Rouan kept his expectations low. High expectations and big promises no longer

fit into my new outlook on things. In the past, he made promises and then let everyone down (including himself). The future, he'd given up on predicting its outcome. If everything was all mapped out, if everything was certain, what of free will? He was not a puppet walking in step to some kind of predictable destiny. No, life was not about mapped out plans, the products of wishful thinking, he thought. Sometimes we stumble, sometimes we fall, he said to himself, the best of plans get scuttled and a new destiny, a new path emerges. He thought wishes were okay up to a point. But when they become a way of avoiding reality, then they became counterproductive. He would now have to unlearn what he had perfected in the way of rationalizations and lies; lies that he once wore like a tightly fitted mask.

Rouan began to meditate daily. He engaged in an informal study of the Quran with other inmates. He did, however, reject the theology of death, the radicalized version of Islam that was popular in the prison; he had developed his own views. He was becoming a bit of a mystic, reading Sufi poets when he could get a copy of their works from the prison library and when these texts weren't available he made due with Saint John of the Cross. He loved the poetry but was not quite ready to accept the notion of a transcendent and loving God. But he had gotten in touch with something, something that he could not yet define. At the very least he was getting to know himself for the first time in his life.

As Rouan prepared for his biweekly shower, Karim was nervous. This was odd, Rouan thought. But then again Karim had been acting strange for some time. Rouan's request to move to another cell had been denied by the authorities. Rouan knew that Karim had been spreading rumors about him (that he was an American spy) and in so doing had endangered his life. But at that moment nothing was bothering Rouan. He was feeling better than he had in a long time. The night before he had had a new and wonderful dream he could now focus on. In it, he was on his way back to Houston on a Air France jet. The clouds outside the window of the jet were white and beautiful (he thought he could make out the shape of a white horse). In the dream, the prosecutor had dropped all the charges. He was going home. He and Jennifer were getting back together. He would have his family and his freedom back once again. He interpreted the

dream to be a sign of good things to come.

Once Rouan made it downstairs to the showers, he stripped off his clothes. He walked over and turned on the shower. Two men, a Pakistani and a Moroccan, approached him. He thought it was odd that they both were fully dressed. There were no guards in sight. Puzzled, but not frightened, Rouan turned off the shower and began to walk out. Just as he passed the Pakistani, the Moroccan produced a lead pipe and struck him on the side of my head. He touched the wound with his hand. He glanced at his hand and saw that it was bloody. The Moroccan swung again at Rouan with the pipe. Rouan lifted up his right forearm in defense and it was shattered by the blow. Rouan tried to stand as he reached out toward his attacker. Rouan's bloody hands wrapped around the Moroccan's neck and he began choking him. Rouan's right arm was almost useless and the pain was unbearable. The Pakistani then jumped on Rouan and pulled him off the Moroccan. The Pakistani picked up the lead pipe and brought it down hard on Rouan's head. The Pakistani and the Moroccan picked up Rouan's body and tied his neck to a shower head with a piece of cloth. They then turned the shower on and washed away the blood.

Rouan was conscious but could not move. He was floating, hovering between worlds. He went back to the dream of the white horse. Marie appeared amidst a giant white cloud. She held her baby in her arms. She smiled so beautifully. She was so happy. The dream cheered Rouan up. Somehow, he believed, the future was out there waiting for him. The horse was so beautiful. When he petted its white mane and soft neck, the horse closed its eyes in response. He noticed that his own hair had turned white and that the horse and he were a part of each other. He did not know rationally how this could be. Then a young woman appeared above him dressed in a white wedding gown at the top of a long staircase in a grand castle. Her face radiated joy and light. It was his daughter, Terry. She threw a bouquet of flowers. Rouan reached out and caught the flowers. He was quite embarrassed since he was the father of the bride. It was a sign that he, too, would soon be married. Then Terry, Marie and the baby vanished and Rouan's mind went blank and he fell into a deep sleep.

* * * *

Rouan awoke in a hospital bed in a room he did not recognize, in a place he did not know. He had no idea where he was. He felt like he'd been crawling uphill out of the darkness for ages, digging himself from out of a dark cave far below the earth. He was exhausted from the climb. For some time (he did not know exactly for how long) he could make out the outline of a kind of reality (a dreamscape really) but no more. He could hear voices, sounds, and at times could understand what was being said. But he couldn't put it all together. It was all a blur, one endless night of shadows and sounds. It was as if he was buried under a great weight, and the way forward was blocked. His awakening was gradual. There were flashes of awareness. The outside world was in darkness. Even so, a nurse noticed a change in him. She brought in several other nurses and a doctor. A light flashed in his eye and after that flash everything changed, the world opened up. He reacted involuntarily. He tried to speak. The doctor was startled. He smiled. With great effort Rouan raised his arm slightly. His head would not move; it seemed to be anchored to his pillow. He looked round the room using just his eyes. Everyone was amazed. He'd come back from the dead. But for Rouan everything seemed unreal; he was unaccustomed to the world that he'd awakened to.

As the days passed, Rouan began communicating, speaking in short sentences, with the nurses in French. Rouan was told he had been in a coma. When he looked at his withered arms and legs, he thought he must have been in a terrible accident. He had little recall of the blow to his head. Finally, he was given a mirror. He could not believe what he saw. He was an old man, wrinkled and gray. It was a shock. He recognized his features, his eyes; the shape of his jaw but his skin seemed paler and had aged. As his strength increased, he was allowed to move about in a wheelchair. Finally it was disclosed to him that he had been in a coma for well over twenty years. He had so many questions. It was all so much like a dream. It was like waking up after a long sleep. But it was impossible to comprehend that years had gone by rather than hours. What about his family? What about his court case? Would he be returned to prison? No, he was told his case had been dismissed years before. In fact, one of the nurses told him that the hospital had gotten in touch with his former lawyer, Jean-Marc Frenot.

Frenot had aged but still was fit, agile (he was in his thirties when he first represented Rouan; he was now in his late fifties). His attitude toward Rouan had changed, the skepticism was gone. There was a look of compassion and respect when he gazed into Rouan's eyes.

Frenot shook his head and smiled, "How are you feeling Robert?" He never had used Rouan's first name before.

"I am very tired. I feel that I've been packed away in a attic gathering dust for ages."

"We have both gathered some dust." Frenot smiled. "You are lucky to be alive."

"It is so strange. It seems as if we were speaking just a few days ago. But I know that isn't true."

"No one expected that you would recover."

"Do you know anything about my family in the United States?" Rouan asked.

Frenot had expected this question but Rouan sensed it was difficult for him to answer and not necessarily because he did not have an answer but because there was something unpleasant that he wanted to keep from Rouan.

Frenot sighed: "I was in touch with both your ex-wife and mother."

"Have you heard from them recently?"

"No." Frenot looked away.

Rouan could see that Frenot was wounded by the question.

"There is something more. Tell me."

"Robert, no one believed you. We should have listened." As Frenot said this, a weight seemed to have lifted from his soul.

"What do you mean? What does this have to do with my family?" In the back of Rouan's mind, a horrible thought was taking shape, but he wasn't sure what it all meant. He was confused.

"The plans you discovered."

“What are you talking about, the plans?” Rouan was baffled.

“About the tactical nuclear weapon that you described,” Frenot answered,

“I made all of that up.”

“Made up or not, they were prophetic. Somehow the system broke down. The computers in the United States indicated an imminent attack. There is strong evidence that the initial attack on Washington DC was a tactical nuclear weapon and not a missile. When I first learned of that, I thought back to the weapon that you had described. I went back and reviewed your notes. I asked myself if there could have been some truth to what you described. Was it something more than a hallucination? I asked myself over and over again. I became convinced that the first explosion was a tactical nuclear weapon similar to the one you documented.”

“I don't understand what you are saying. Someone used tactical weapons.”

“Initially, the United States in its confusion, after Washington was hit, released several ICBMs. This brought on a counter attack from China. Over a dozen U.S. cities were struck before anyone realized it was all a horrible mistake.”

Rouan hesitated, afraid to ask the next question. He dreaded Frenot's response.

“What cities?”

“The worst of it,” Frenot paused, “Houston was hit.” Frenot shook his head. “Along with Houston, a dozen more cities were hit. Fortunately, the bombings stopped before the whole country, the whole world for that matter, was left in ruins. A moment of sanity, I suppose, if one can call it that.”

“What about my family?”

A look of sadness crossed Frenot's face. “I'm so sorry. After the bombing, I did not hear from anyone in your family.”

“But many people survived?”

“Yes, many people survived. Many cities remained intact. They weren't targeted by the bombs or rather the bombing stopped before they were hit. But the bombings were

just the beginning of the nightmare for America. For weeks, for months, even years, many more perished from radioactive sickness. What remained of the country, of the government was in shock, paralyzed. Washington DC was gone. There were wars of a kind between various factions, and then came well-armed battles for control by profiteers. Different parts of the country set up their own forms of government. But nobody was in control for long. That has changed in some parts of the country now. Armed militias, police, are paid for by the big companies. But there is no justice in the way they rule. There is order, but no justice.”

“How did this happen?”

“No one knows what exactly happened. Some say there was a computer malfunction. Several cities in both Russia and China were hit. Some have claimed that the Chinese had planted a computer virus in the Strategic American Command and this caused a malfunction and missiles were prematurely fired. But the damage in Russia and China was nothing compared to the United States. Actually, the United States sent out very few missiles. But retaliation came before anyone had a chance to catch their breath. Much of the old cold war mentality was still in place, the hair trigger effect. My God, the world still had its finger on the button.”

So it finally happened, Rouan thought, the thing that no one wanted to face. The monster, the Frankenstein of the nuclear age, had come down on the world and unleashed its wrath. Rouan had grown pale, his upper lip quivered with emotion.

“I believe, someone once affiliated with Al Qaeda initiated the first tactical attack. This is what made the plans you discovered so important. I have no definitive proof of this. I have your notebooks. They were given to me after you were attacked.”

“You kept my notebooks all this time? But why?”

“Remember you were in a coma. I was the attorney of record. Your personal belongings were my responsibility.”

“I understand. But what I wrote was a complete fabrication. There was no truth to it. Trust me, I believed I discovered something. My imagination took over. I wrote out what I

wanted to see. It was a terrible delusion. And now a part of it has somehow come to pass. Can that be? I cannot believe it. None of it was real. I was very sick. I lived in a fantasy world of drugs and delusions. I imagined I could save the world. Well, I didn't save anybody. By some twist of fate, I survived. Why? How? I don't know."

"Your fantasies were a foreshadowing of what was to come. I believe a tactical nuclear weapon instigated the whole thing. What you saw was all too real. Proof? An entire continent is in ruins. Your country is gone, or at least as far as you once knew it. Those that have survived live a miserable existence."

"Is it that bad?"

"Yes.

"But how?"

"My mind keeps going back to that initial explosion in Washington DC. It occurred a full fifteen minutes before the ICBMs were launched. No one knows the size exactly of the initial explosion, since Washington was hit a second time by a much larger warhead. That this could be random chance, an accident, is hard to imagine. Some say Iran was working with what was left of al Qaeda. No one knows for sure. Al Qaeda never re-established their sway in the Arab world after the death of bin Laden. Actually, Al Qaeda, as you remember it, had become obsolete, all the more reason for them to plan something big. But a number of terrorist groups took their place, funded by Iran and others. After the death of bin Laden and what was then called the Arab Spring, Al Qaeda was rudderless. The Arab world was looking for a new way: democracy, modernity. Al Qaeda lost all credibility even among its most ardent followers. The Muslim world turned against all forms of terrorism. But it was too late. The damage had been done. The financial markets worldwide ceased to function. The dollar became worthless overnight. The Euro became destabilized. There was no looking back, just more heartache, and not just in America but everywhere. There was a nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan. Wars broke out from one side of the world to the other. The whole world has been marked, turned upside down, wounded by this catastrophe, famine, bio- terrorism on an unimaginable scale." Frenot let out a breath. "We'll have time to talk about this

later.”

“My family, my country.” Rouan was horrified. It was more than he could bear. Frenot stayed with Rouan while he took in all of the news, sitting silently with him. Frenot even held Rouan's hand at one point.

Frenot made the case (using Rouan's old notepad as evidence) that Rouan was one of the first to warn the West of plans by terrorists to use nuclear weapons. He had written several articles in *Le Monde*. Many pointed out that tactical nuclear weapons weren't used but rather Inter Continental Ballistic Missiles. They went on to say that the tragedy was not caused by terrorists but by a system destined to end in catastrophe. Frenot replied to this in several more articles (stirring up quite a debate) that Rouan's hypothesis and notes only illuminated the dark path that the terrorists were on and went to point out the initial attack was a rogue tactical nuclear weapon.

All this speculation disturbed Rouan. Long ago he'd accepted responsibility for the the hoax he concocted. Rouan thought of the old adage in intelligence analysis: that there is some truth to be discovered even in a lie. Rouan was consoled with the realization that there a kind of inevitability to it all. If the weapons exist, someone would use them. Even if the plans had turned out to be real and he'd been believed, would that have changed anything? Rouan wasn't sure. Rouan sure about anything. He knew what he re-created was real (at least as a blueprint), but he was relatively certain that it was nothing more than that. But what if the plans were real and Al Qaeda had used them to set off the first explosion? Rouan asked himself. What if Al Qaeda gave up on the notion of using multiple weapons in favor of a much simpler plan, using the weapons already in place, using the U.S. arsenal and defense system against itself? What if Al Qaeda simply turned America's computerized system against itself? Was it possible? Hadn't Al Qaeda used Americans planes against New York and the Pentagon? Why not use America's military computers to incite a confrontation? Why not use the Strategic Air Command to bring on a retaliatory strike? What if Al Qaeda had never intended to use multiple tactical weapons but rather just one? One strategically placed in Washington DC? What actually happened that day in America might never be known, Rouan

realized, but deep down he knew the plans he diagrammed were nothing more than the delusions of a desperate drug addict and any similarity to the weapon initially detonated in Washington DC was a coincidence. Rouan then remembered something else. The dream he had shortly before being attacked in jail. He remembered every detail of the dream: the countdown, the Boeing blast door, and finally the firing of the missiles. Rouan was convinced that the dream was somehow prophetic. This was more than coincidence. He could come to no other conclusion. Why had he been handed this vision? He consoled with the thought that he wasn't the only one who foresaw this almost inevitable consequence of the U.S. nuclear arsenal and the arms race. A race that no one could win but everyone could lose. Many had warned about it over and over again from the very beginning. But no listened. Or if they listened, they took no action. The world had been in a state of denial and been awakened from its sleeping state (just as he had) by the sound of thunder in the skies. The shoe had dropped and now there was no going back. It is a wonder that the whole world hadn't been reduced to ashes and smoke.

In the following days, Frenot visited Rouan often. He gave him more details on what had gone on while he slept all those years. He gave him a kind of history lesson. He explained that electric power functioned sporadically in the United States in the years after the bombings (leaving pockets of the country without power). With a worthless dollar, commerce on a large scale became impossible. Biological weapons were released; no one had a reasonable explanation why. It was madness. There was civil unrest, massive starvation. What was once the United States was now under quarantine; in the beginning, martial law was declared and the remnants of the federal government existed but were powerless exercise any control, and with no federal banking system and an inability to collect taxes, became irrelevant and ultimately collapsed. The country had been broken up into territories, counties, city-states. The United Nations was now headquartered in Geneva. Rouan could not believe what he was told. He asked himself over and over again, how was it that he had survived but his country had not?

While in a vegetative state, Rouan had been housed just outside of Paris along the

Marne River in Champigny. Though he had been in the coma, the nurses had exercised his limbs so his muscles had not completely wasted away. Still his limbs were fragile, thin and weak. He was told he would never walk again; that his legs would never be strong enough again to carry the weight of his upper body. His heart had been weakened but his lungs were in good condition, normal for someone his age. They could have just left him to die. But Frenot and others saw to it that he had been properly looked after. Rouan was so grateful. He learned that while the blow to his head did cause unconsciousness, it did not cause the coma (or rather what was diagnosed after his awakening as a minimally conscious state). The coma was ultimately caused by an infection in his brain from his intravenous drug use. The infection eventually cleared up and after a change of medication, he awoke. It would have been relatively easy with the right medication to bring him out of his sleeping state (once the infection in his brain cleared up) but everyone assumed that his condition was hopeless; that his condition was irreversible. Who would have guessed that his grave condition could have changed so miraculously? Brain scans were done in the beginning, but bleeding from the blow to his head hid the underlying infection from those radioactive eyes. The good news, of course, was that he survived at all. The doctors told him there was no sign of brain damage.

Some days Rouan would fall into a deep depression that he could not climb out of (no matter how hard he tried). A dark cloud covered his world, time stopped and once again he was back in the Santé behind its bleak, gray walls, and once again its ghosts came back to haunt him. The United States had been taken to its knees—and so had he. But when we thought of his own descent into the depths, he would begin to recall the day of his rebirth, of his resurrection, and he found some consolation there, some hope, and gradually he would come out of his funk. There must be some reason for his survival. Other times, he'd find himself sitting beside by the Marne River looking out at that green water and he'd think about the life that it held; the fish, the plants, the turtles. Then he'd think about the future. And that gave him hope. Hope for a new world, a world without sickness, addiction, wars and bombs. He hoped for that better world. He prayed that he could be a part of it. He felt a responsibility. He wanted to make up for all the

mistakes he'd made. He wanted to make amends to one and all.

While Rouan had been physically debilitated and disabled by his long sleep, his ability to communicate had not been diminished. He had begun writing in his journal in long hand. It was good therapy. But he tired easily (even after such a long sleep) and found it necessary to dictate his notes, his thoughts, to a nurse. She dutifully took down done all that he said (even at times laboriously transcribing his handwritten notes). Her name was Camille Demoulin. She had been a nurse for over twenty years. She was in her mid-forties. She had auburn hair and an alabaster complexion. She was a great beauty but without pretense or affectation. She carried out her duties with grace and humility. She looked after Rouan's every need (as she has been assigned exclusively to him since his awakening).

Things began to bloom in Champigny. Rouan spent as much to time as possible outdoors on the grounds of the center usually accompanied by Camille. The air was cool and fresh and the world was turning green once more. The blossoms hung from the bushes and were heavenly both to smell and to look at. On those days in particular Rouan would wonder again and again if any of what drifted before his eyes was real. How had all of this come to pass? Rouan had a hard time putting his mind around it all.

One day Rouan asked Camille how long she had worked at the home. She looked him square in the eyes and smiled: "I've been here eighteen months and I've known about you just as long. You know, you are kind of a legend in Paris and elsewhere. There have been several newspaper articles written about you and Monsieur Frenot."

"Oh Frenot was mentioned." Rouan laughed.

"You don't know, do you?" She looked at him oddly.

"Know what?" Rouan asked.

"About Monsieur Frenot, he is a very important person in the government."

"Important in the government, how so?"

"He was the top assistant to the former president. They say Monsieur Frenot might one day be the president of France."

"If I could vote, I would vote for him." Rouan stated.

"Monsieur Frenot did not tell you?"

"Another surprise, I suppose."

"You are a citizen of France. In order for your care to continue, French citizenship was necessary. Monsieur Frenot took care of it long ago."

"Oh my father would be proud, his son a French citizen. I must thank Jean-Marc." Rouan had begun calling Frenot by his first name. After all, they had known each other for such a long time and had been through so much.

"Jean-Marc Frenot, your good friend the next president of France," Camille laughed. "You will invite me to the inaugural ball." She winked.

"Whatever you want Camille. Just don't ask me to dance."

"I don't know Robert; you are getting stronger every day. We might have to include dance lessons in your rehabilitation." She put her hand on Rouan's shoulder and smiled so tenderly. That touch brought the world and all its joys back to him. After so much evil, so much loss of life, human tenderness had survived.

Rouan had known Frenot as the young lawyer who had taken up his case. Taken up the case of a seemingly delusional madman, murderer even, and in the end showed such affection and concern for him. It was not hard to comprehend that Frenot had made such a success of himself, Rouan thought. He was always bright, capable and seemed to know how to broker a deal and make peace even with fools (Rouan included himself as one of those fools that Frenot had dealt with. Rouan realized he had not been an easy client.).

Rouan teased Frenot when they met next: "They tell me that you are to be the next president of France."

"The rumors are greatly exaggerated. I suppose it was that pretty nurse of yours who put those ideas in your head."

"I suppose so. Or did she say you were holding out to be crowned king. There hasn't

been a king in France for several centuries. Maybe it's time." Rouan laughed.

"It is good to hear you laugh, Robert." Frenot smiled. "I see you too still think big. But seriously, I have no interest in being out front in politics. I prefer to stay behind the scenes. Which brings me to another point, if you think you're up to it, how would you like to visit the United Nations in Geneva? I have someone I would like for you to meet."

"I would love to go to Geneva. Who is it that you would like me to meet?"

"Assistant Secretary General Christophe Tousant. He is a friend of mine, an amazing man."

* * * *

Frenot arrived with his wife, Nathalie, at the convalescent home in a white Mercedes Benz van for the trip to Geneva. It had a wheelchair lift and an engine powered by a revolutionary fuel cell. Rouan had never met Nathalie Frenot. She was a lovely, articulate woman (a redhead, he would never have guessed). She was slightly taller than her husband and seemed to love him very much. Camille came along to look after Rouan's needs. It was a lovely drive. They discussed much. Madame Frenot mentioned the poverty and hardship for those living in the Q.

"The Q, what is the Q?" Rouan asked.

A look of pain flashed across Camille's face.

"Jean-Marc has not explained?" Madame Frenot seemed puzzled, surprised, that Rouan had not been filled in by Frenot on this highly controversial political issue.

"Robert, the Q is short for the quarantined area. It is an area that covers all of North America; it stretches from the Mexican territory to Canada. Since the Canadian government still exists, the Canadian dollar is the currency of choice except in in the Mexican territories where the Mexican peso is used. There have been a number of viruses, some airborne in the past that spread in Asia, and Europe and millions died. Every human being residing in North America was contaminated, a significant portion of the population perished. Even plant life, beef, poultry carried lethal viruses . After that, all agricultural goods were banned. Strict restrictions on travel were imposed. Anyone

traveling into the Q cannot return to France or anywhere in the EU without a wait of six months in a neutral area where doctors monitor and examine the traveler for any sign of contagion.”

“I understand now. Yes, Jean-Marc explained some of this to me. However, the abbreviation Q for the quarantined area is new to me. What about those born and living in the Q? What restrictions do they have regarding travel?” Rouan asked.

“It is not permitted. This is one of the issues that we will discuss with Assistant Secretary Tousant.” Frenot explained.

When they arrived in Geneva, Rouan was astonished. The city was so beautiful, so vibrant. The fountain at the mouth of Lake Geneva still sprayed hundreds of gallons of water high into the air just as he remembered it. Everyone looked prosperous, happy, content. Brightly colored streetcars and automobiles lined the roads. Geneva seemed to be the ideal city, a dream city, lodged in the center of a kind of Utopia. Everywhere people bustled about often carrying shopping carts loaded with goods. Rouan found the city cosmopolitan and culturally diverse (the United Nations served as the headquarters of a kind of world government; so it wasn't surprising to see so many races and nationalities among the populace). Orthodox Jews shared the same shops with Syrians, Iraqis and Iranians. The style of dress varied: some wore Indians saris while others were adorned in traditional African and Arab garments.

It was hard to believe that the horrors Rouan had heard about had happened at all. It was like a horror story he had read a long ago but couldn't quite recall. Or a nightmare that he had woken from and was relieved that it wasn't real. But Rouan knew that the horrors of the past were true, that there were cities in America where the wounds were still fresh and the nightmare was all too real.

Rouan thought their hotel was fabulous. It had a marvelous view of the lake and the surrounding city. Rouan shared adjoining rooms with Camille. This was necessary since he could not yet get from his bed to his wheelchair on his own. Shortly after arriving, Rouan and Camille took in the view together. “It is so lovely,” Camille said as she looked out the lake.

“Yes, one of the great cities of the world I think.” A note of sorrow could just be detected in Rouan's voice. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he mourned for the cities in America that were now gone (or radically changed). Camille sensed this note of sorrow and grasped his hand. She said nothing. She didn't have to.

Assistant Secretary Tousant knew of Rouan's physical limitations, so it was arranged that they would meet with him in a private suite at the hotel. When Tousant entered the room to greet them, Rouan was taken aback by his appearance. Tousant was in his eighties, he suffered from a congenital hunchback that had worsened with age. He wore a long, white Indian garment of some sort, a kind of sari, and sandals. He had long gray hair and a beard. He radiated with a kind of glow, a kind of aura. He smiled and greeted Frenot first with a warm handshake. He then kissed Madame Frenot in the French manner.

He looked at Rouan with a smile: “So here we have the awakened sleeper. I have heard much about you from my friend Monsieur Frenot.”

Rouan looked up at this dear old man and grasped his hand. When their eyes met, a flash of electricity passed between them (Rouan found it hard to define, but it was of another world). Tousant then greeted Camille and kissed her on both cheeks. Rouan could see that she, too, was moved by this otherworldly old man. They all moved to a sitting area.

“On our ride here, I told Robert about the Q and some of the problems the people face there.”

“Yes, we have lived through tragic times. We have seen the worst of humanity. What the people live within the Q is not humane, is not right. It is a living hell.”

“But everything seems so perfect here. Why can't something be done?” Rouan asked.

“It is lovely here and this is why many want to protect our paradise here in Switzerland from the horrors found in the Q. In a word, people are afraid. They fear contamination and it is not a completely unfounded fear. The world has suffered through

many hard times while you have slept Monsieur Rouan.”

“Robert, Assistant Secretary General Tousant wants to open travel and trade between the Q and the rest of the world.” Frenot interjected. “Goods are prohibited from the entering the euro zone. Many fear biological and radioactive contamination. Many believe that the survivors in the Q have developed immunity to the many viruses that have been unleashed in years past. But tests have been done and there is no evidence of this. In addition, much of the food grown in the Q has been tested and proven safe. There is just terrible prejudice. Even Secretary General Devereux opposes lifting the embargo and he is supported by both Russia and China on the Security Council. They have veto power.”

“And who replaced the United States on the Security Council?” Rouan asked.

“India,” Frenot replied. “And India is for lifting the embargo as is Great Britain and France, the remaining permanent members of the Security Council. But there are powerful factions amongst the other United Nation members who vehemently oppose it. Some of it is out of fear and some are swayed by the large corporations who control the Q.”

“It would seem the United Nations has lost its way. Its mandate is to help those in need, in poverty; it does not exist to just protect wealthy countries or wealthy corporations,” Tousant stated simply.

“That is true.” Frenot affirmed.

“I understand you lost your family in America. My family also was lost. I had a wife and two grown children in New York City in the first bombing. I was away. Actually I was here in Geneva when I heard the horrible news.” A look of deep sorrow passed across Tousant's face.

“I am so sorry to hear that,” Rouan said.

“I want to thank you Monsieur Rouan personally for all you did in trying to stop those attacks in your own way. Monsieur Frenot has written and told me personally about what you discovered and how hard you tried to warn others.” Tousant said with such deep

sincerity that Rouan was overwhelmed.

"It was a hoax that I dreamed up to make myself a hero and to secure my release from prison," Rouan confessed.

"The plans could have been taken up by another group, the idea could have been taken up by Iran or North Korea. That Al Qaeda was seeking tactical nuclear weapons was known to all. I'm sure there were many plans, diagrams drawn up, before the actual execution. What you saw was much more than a delusion; it was a vision, a premonition, even if it was only an act of the imagination it was an accurate warning. But as I say, it is hard to pinpoint who was involved," Tousant declared.

"At that time everything I believed was a lie. I lied to others and especially to myself. Even if I had actually discovered something, no one would believe anything I said. But then again, inquiries were made. Nothing was found to indicate I had actually discovered anything," Rouan said.

"You suffered from a debilitating condition; drug addiction is a terrible malady Monsieur Rouan. You did what you could. You tried to warn everyone even if what you saw was no more than a vision. There is no need to blame you for anything," Tousant said softly.

At that moment, Rouan saw a tear well up in Camille's eye. She tried to hide it and then wipe it away. But he saw it. She looked down at him and then squeezed his hand and gave him a tender look. Tousant also saw the tear and looked at both Rouan and Camille tenderly.

"I still believe what Robert saw was real. No one doubted Robert more than me back in those days. What Robert saw may have only been the crude beginnings of a plan but no one can doubt that the detonation of that tactical weapon in Washington DC was the fuse that set the whole world on fire," Frenot said adamantly.

"There was no way to know for sure what it was you saw. No way to run down every lead. How does one unring a bell once it has sounded? We could not put the genie of the nuclear age back in its bottle. There are new regulations in place (even if these

regulations are not always followed), hopefully the world has learned something from this tragedy," Tousant declared.

"Without the first detonation in Washington DC, the others would not have followed, I wished I had done more to tell other about what you had discovered," Frenot said again.

"What could you have done? I brought the information to the American Embassy and they saw it for what it was: a hoax, the product of a deranged mind. My government had abandoned me. As you remember, the prosecutor accused me of being a terrorist after discovering my notes. The only conclusion you could have made was that the plans were a fabrication, another made-up story of a junkie looking to get free of jail. And you would have been right. You are to blame for nothing. It wasn't as if I had discovered a cache of nuclear warheads. I'd made diagrams of imaginary plans. Nothing more. Just because you know a gun is loaded does not mean you can keep a madman from firing it," Rouan's voice broke with emotion.

"Your story is well known, thanks to Monsieur Frenot. He has done several interviews on television and in the papers describing how you brought the plans to the attention of your government. At the very least your notes were a warning. And I do agree with Monsieur Frenot that a small weapon most likely triggered the chain of events that led to this disaster that we are all still recovering from."

"Even if the plans I saw were real, there was no precise date when the attack would take place, no shipping containers to inspect. I tell myself these things because the weight of this horror haunts me. But we will never know exactly what happened."

"The truth may someday be revealed. One thing is certain you did all you could Robert," Frenot said as he put his hand on Rouan's shoulder.

Rouan looked up at Frenot. "Thank you, my dear friend."

"Ultimately, that those monstrous weapons had been stockpiled in such quantities is the real reason for the tragedy. I am afraid the blame can be placed nowhere else," Tousant said.

"I agree." Rouan replied.

"Now that you have made such a miraculous recovery you are becoming even better known. I have read many of the articles by Monsieur Frenot. If they help the world see the dangers of nuclear weapons in the hands of not only terrorists but anyone, any government, then they will have served a good purpose. And the added dimension of your story, of your struggle, Monsieur Rouan, is an inspiration to us all. Monsieur Frenot has turned you into a popular figure. All of Geneva, it seems, has heard about your visit. This town is buzzing with chatter. Everyone wants to catch a glimpse of the onetime spy and now awakened prophet. The man who slept while the world nearly destroyed itself. I won't call you a celebrity since you are much more than that. Your story is much more important than the latest love affair of a matinee idol," Tousant said

"I hadn't realized that my recovery was known to so many people. You are very kind. And very kind of you to invite us all here to your wonderful country, but to be honest, I perpetrated a hoax. I accused a retired professor of coming up with a plan to use tactical nuclear weapons. I fabricated evidence, diagrams. I'm afraid Monsieur Frenot has fallen for my old delusions. One thing is for certain nuclear weapons were not invented in a Paris apartment or in my own mind. The whole world knew of the danger and no one did anything to stop it," Rouan declared.

Frenot shrugged and looked to the ground.

"Monsieur Rouan. We are old horses now and we must work together" Tousant said with a gleam in his eye. He had something in mind when he said this, but what it was Rouan could not guess.

Everything in Rouan's life had this mysterious quality. This new world was filled with more questions than answers. Later after they returned to their rooms for some rest, Rouan asked Camille why she was so moved by Tousant's remarks regarding addiction.

"I worked in a treatment center," she replied. Then her expression grew grave. "There is something that I want to tell you. It has been on my mind for some time." Camille looked unsure of herself.

"What is it? You can tell me."

“I was assigned to you after your awakening to keep an eye on you. I hate secrets. I'm no spy. But because of your history the doctors thought it was for the best.”

“It is only reasonable to keep tabs on me with my background. Right now I have no desire to use drugs; I have already missed out on too much of life. I have slept too long. But the desire could return. So I am grateful, I have you to turn to. There is one thing, something that has been on my mind.

“Yes. Tell me.”

“I have been keeping this to myself. But I have to tell someone. I sometimes wonder if any of this is real. It all seems like a dream.”

“What do you mean?” Camille asked.

“I awoke in a completely different world. Everything had changed. But what is so strange is this new world seems to be an extension of my own mind. I once believed there would be bombings in the United States. In fact, I was obsessed with it to the point of fabricating the plans for it myself. And it came to pass. I wanted to free of prison and that came to pass. I wanted to find love,” with this statement Rouan's voice trailed off momentarily.

“Go on,” Camille grasped Rouan's hand and gazed intently at him.

“So it makes me wonder about the reality of it all. Is it all some kind of fiction my mind has invented. But it is more real than just a dream. In a sense, I did die. No one would question that. But I wonder about this place, this time that I've been brought back to. Sometimes I wonder if it is a fabrication, a fantasy. I've always had trouble recognizing what was true from what was false. I've always had a rich imagination. In fact, you know my medical record. That I have a history, that I was diagnosed with a bi-polar disorder. That I am prone to fits of grandiosity. So I have doubts about everything. And if all of this is true, why do I question its validity? Has there been some damage done to my brain? Is my present reality a delusion of some kind?”

“Robert to wake up after so many years would be a shock to anyone. It would normal to question things, to question what is real.”

Rouan sighed, "Yes you are right. It has been bothering me. I'm glad I could share it with you." Rouan took Camille's hand and held it tenderly.

"You can share everything with me, Robert. Never doubt that." The look in Camille's eyes gave Rouan confidence not only in her but in himself; that no matter what happened, everything would work out, that he could face the truth and accept it, whatever the truth turned out to be. Rouan felt better after making this admission to Camille. She had a point, he thought. After such a long period of unconsciousness one's sense of reality would be radically changed. It was funny, he thought, he could not remember any dreams while he was asleep all those years. There were flashes of something, but he could not say what it was. Maybe some sound, a voice, an image, penetrated deep into his brain and remained unprocessed. Rouan was sure of one thing this new world that he had entered into was fascinating, so full of strange and at times terrible events. Rouan could not shake off all that he learned about Christophe Tousant (the most amazing man he had ever met, before or after his deep sleep; he thought of Tousant as a kind of philosopher king). But Rouan's impression of him didn't end with their meeting at the hotel. At the last minute, they were invited to a speech Tousant was to make to members of the Security Council. It was there that Rouan learned how strong the opposition was to both Tousant and the people that made up the Q. And it was there that the most momentous turn of events took place.

Camille and Rouan arrived in the conference hall. Tousant walked up to the podium and began his remarks. He looked out at the crowd and smiled, his gentle eyes scanning the room. "Today we face many difficult issues. But none is greater than the problems facing those who live in the Q. We close our eyes and hearts to those who suffer from poverty, the whims of corporate profiteers, warlords, drug lords and human traffickers. Contraband goods produced in the Q do find their way into the euro zone and we use those goods, the fruits of nothing less than slave labor. Let us not deceive ourselves, the restrictions we have in place protect no one but criminals and thugs. As we once again find ourselves living in prosperity, we must not forget those who still suffer. After this unprecedented history of war and bio terror, we must tend to the wounded, the disenfranchised. There is no chance for the colonies in the quarantined

area to become legitimized, to become members of this body, without our support. If the colonies in the Q do not get the support they deserve, they will be crushed by greedy men who treat human life cheaply, a commodity to be bought and sold. The hopes of the people living in the Q will be tossed aside, their aspirations forgotten. France, supported the original colonies in the old world and we must support these new colonies in the new world. With the support of the Secretary General and this body, we can assure the Colonies legitimacy. It is for this kind of thing that this body was created.”

At this point, rumblings could be heard throughout the hall. Those surrounding Secretary General Devereux began whispering in his ear. The entourage that surrounded Devereux were obviously not happy with what Tousant was proposing. Secretary General Devereux did not look well. And not just because he opposed Tousant (and all he said), there was something else amiss. He looked pale and seemed to be trembling and became short of breath. He then collapsed, his head falling back in his chair. The meeting was hastily adjourned and Secretary General Devereux was placed on a gurney and transported by ambulance to a hospital a few minutes away. He was pronounced dead on arrival. This made Christophe Tousant the leading candidate for secretary general of the United Nations. Because of Tousant's age, if Tousant was appointed secretary general it would be only for the remaining eighteen months of Devereux's five year term. But with fierce opposition, Tousant's appointment even for just eighteen months was by no means a certainty. In less than a month, there would be a vote.

On the ride back to Paris from Geneva, Rouan had many questions for Frenot. He wanted to learn more about Christophe Tousant. Frenot said that Tousant had brokered the deal that led to the establishment of the Palestinian state. Israel had made concessions that a few decades before would have been unthinkable. But the Middle East had tired of war and wanted to see an end to it. Frenot went on to explain that Tousant was about to retire from the Security Council because of his advanced age (but had postponed his retirement in an effort to persuade the Security Council to open up trade and travel in the Q). Frenot went on to explain that Tousant was a Zen Buddhist having spent several years in a Zen monastery in Japan. He met his wife, Kyoko, there.

They had two children and as Tousant himself told him were killed when two bombs were detonated over New York City. All in all, over a dozen warheads were triggered within minutes of each other in Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston, Kansas City, Washington DC, Philadelphia, Atlanta, San Francisco and of course Houston. Tousant knew exactly where his family was at the time of their deaths but Rouan did not. It made him wonder. In the chaos, could they be part of the disenfranchised millions (refugees in their own land) who remained in what was once the United States?

“Could my mother, wife and daughter have survived?” Rouan asked Frenot.

Frenot thought for a minute and then replied: “In the weeks after the bombings, contact with the outside world was sporadic. Computer servers crashed. There were massive power outages from one end of the country to the other. But in the years since the catastrophe your wife and mother would have been able to get a message to me. Considering your mother's age, I would say she did not survive. Your ex-wife, too, was very keen on checking up on you. When it was decided that you would be removed from life support, your mother, your ex-wife and daughter came to France to pay their last respects. It was decided that it would be too traumatic for your daughter to be in the room when your life support was removed. So only your mother was in the room. The doctors, the nurses, were all shocked that you continued to thrive. Your mother, ex-wife and daughter, were very happy (they stayed for several more weeks, visiting you every day). After that, your ex-wife and mother stayed in contact with me, hoping for another miracle. This is why I feel they did not survive. It is possible but not likely that your daughter may have survived. But of course, she was living in Houston at the time of the attack.” Frenot let out a sigh.

Rouan took in what Frenot had told him. He was astonished. His family had come to France to say goodbye. He was pretty sure that was their last goodbye. But he held on to the thought, a dim and secret hope that his daughter Terry might somehow have survived. He did not know why he clung to this hope. But it seemed to him more than just a hope. He sensed something. He sensed her presence, and not in some other world. She was not looking out at him from some other life, some other dimension; he

sensed that they still shared the same planet. His sense of reality had always been tenuous at best but on this score he felt a growing certainty. It was the one thing that he held on to even as the rest of his beliefs had completely fallen away.

After his awakening, Rouan was moved from where he had been housed with several other comatose patients. He was placed in a private room at the convalescent home. He had his own bathroom (wheelchair accessible), TV and a lovely view of the Marne river. He could write using a dinner tray in bed or at a small built in desk. He still needed help getting in and out of bed but his upper body strength was improving. He was making progress with his rehabilitation (fortunately his limitations were physical rather than mental; his memory and language skills functioned well). There was an exercise room with a full time staff.

Frenot visited once or twice a week and filled Rouan on the latest news out of Geneva. Tousant had really stirred things up. He presented several studies that agriculture products produced in many parts of the Q have no radioactive or biological contamination. Secondly he showed that the active virus that caused the death of millions in the Q was dormant. With proper testing of food products, the embargo could end. Restrictions on travel for those living in the Q could also be loosened. Tousant had secured the full support from the socialist party in France (led by Frenot who was one of its most important members). Great Britain voiced opposition. Germany sat on the fence. Italy and the Roman Catholic Church (with the pope's blessing) were firmly behind these changes. The Church had long been an advocate for the poor and the disenfranchised in the Q. Still within the United Nations Security Council there was a faction that bitterly opposed Tousant and all his propositions. Next to these contentious issues, the controversial subject was the establishment or reestablishment of federal rule in the Q. Namely the group in the Q who called themselves the Colonists; a group of city states that worked together for the benefit of all; their leaders wanted to re-establish the constitution and federal control of a portion of what once was called United States but there was strong opposition from the corporations that controlled the Q.

One day, after a visit by Frenot, Rouan asked Camille what she thought about Tousant and changes that he proposed. She did not reply immediately, she looked to the ground and then looked up: "You must understand first why some oppose Tousant. In the last two decades we have endured many hardships, many horrors. The people in the Q, are not the only ones who have suffered. We have all suffered. There have been terrible wars in the Middle East, in Africa and China. There has been viruses of all kinds (some brought in from the Q) that have led to plagues even here in France and the euro zone. We have suffered from famine, the collapse of the banking system, and bio-terror. Now things are finally getting back on track for millions of people. But we are walking on egg shells. The average person in the euro zone feels they deserve some peace after so many year of tumult and war. This catastrophe this fell upon the world. Plagues, famine and not just in the Q. Starvation right here in France with all its rich, fertile soil, uncontaminated thus far by radiological disasters. Why should we risk another outbreak of plague, of war? Why anger the corporate warlords in the Q? They've controlled the Q with their weapons of war for so long. If the embargo is lifted, if their wealth and power is threatened, they will strike back. So it is not as simple as it seems."

"I hadn't considered retaliation by those controlling life in the Q. But what you say makes sense. So you do not agree with Tousant?"

"A minute ago, I was only asking questions that everyone asks and expressing the fears everyone feels.. But here is my answer. I agree with Tousant and what he proposes. I agree with the Holy Father. I am catholic and the church agrees with Tousant. As a Christian, I've been taught to help those in need. The modern day lepers in the Q are in need of healing and each one of us must do our part to help the less fortunate."

"Yes, of course, you are a good catholic. I should have known by the cross around your neck. My wife Jennifer and my daughter were Catholics."

Camille was startled. "Your wife and daughter were catholic, really? The Church keeps a database of all Catholics in the Q. In some sectors of the Q, there has been much persecution of Catholics. Those who control the Q, fear the Church. If your wife

and daughter somehow survived, there may be a record of them.”

“How can I access these records?”

“We will need Monsieur Frenot's help with this.”

Rouan contacted Frenot by phone. “Is it true there is a database of Catholics living in the Q?”

“Yes, that is true.” Frenot replied.

“My daughter and Jennifer were Catholics. If one or both survived, there may be a record.”

“What is your daughter's full name again?”

“Teresa Rouan.”

“I will get right on it and have someone check for you. But Robert don't get your hopes up too high.”

For the next few days, Rouan heard nothing. Then Frenot paid him an unexpected visit. He was smiling. He had good news. “Robert,” he shouted, “your daughter is alive.”

Rouan could not believe his ears. “Where, how?” he asked.

“Your daughter, Teresa, is a nun living in a convent outside of Santa Fe.”

Rouan was so happy to hear that his daughter was alive. He asked Frenot if she knew about him and his recovery. Frenot said messages had been sent to the archbishop in New Mexico. He said that she'd probably been told by now. Would contact be possible? Rouan asked. Frenot explained that many churches and religious orders in the Q had satellite hook ups. But some did not. So they would have to wait and see.

Word did in fact reach Rouan's daughter, Terry, regarding the miracle of her father's recovery. While there was no Internet service at her convent, there was at a church some twenty miles away that had a satellite hook up. Once his daughter was provided contact information, she called him via Skype video phone at the convalescent home. One of the nurses rushed to Rouan's room, “Monsieur Rouan you have a call. A lady.

She says she is your daughter.”

Rouan was overwhelmed. He headed over to the video phone. As he approached the phone, he could see the adult face of his daughter looking out from the screen. Rouan spotted on look of anticipation on her face as she awaited her first glimpse of her father after such a long time. She was dressed in the traditional habit of a Franciscan nun. Her face was dark, tan (she obviously spent time outdoors). She was beautiful. The most beautiful thing Rouan had ever seen in all his life. He recognized the child he had once known by the shape of her brow, her forehead, nose and lips.

As he approached the camera, she caught a glimpse of him. The most tender look of love crossed her face. “Daddy, is that you?” she asked.

“It is me, honey. What is left of your father.” Rouan didn't know why those particular words came out his mouth. They just did. Their eyes met and they both were silent for a time. Finally he asked, “Do you know what happened to your mother and grandmother?”

The light in her eyes vanished and she replied, “Daddy, they were in Houston. They were killed in the bombing.”

“How were you spared?”

“I was away at school in Dallas. Dallas was not hit by the bombs.”

“What happened after the bombings?”

“Total panic, confusion, the whole nation was in shock. The electricity was still on. The TV, at least some stations broadcast. But total chaos, everyone was traumatized. No one knew who to turn to. The country had lost its center, seemingly its soul. Washington DC was gone, the president, the vice president, all gone. The Governor of Texas called on the National Guard. But no one was really in charge. I knew when I heard Houston was hit, that mom and grandma were gone. It was so terrible. It was so sad. I was so scared.” She began to weep.

Rouan began to weep. Finally he spoke, “it is a miracle that you survived.”

“Daddy, I've prayed for you every day. I've missed you so much.”

Rouan couldn't help but feel that his own miraculous recovery was an answer to those prayers. He was so grateful to have such a daughter. "So you've become a nun, I see."

"Yes, I am quite happy at the convent with my sisters. We farm, we pray and we've made a life for ourselves with meaning and dignity."

"I'm so proud of you. You've become such a wonderful woman. I've heard how hard life is in the Q. It must be difficult."

"We have endured much. The horrors in the past and the present are unending."

"I've met Christophe Tousant in Geneva. He advocates major new changes, a lifting of the embargo, an end to our isolation, our quarantine, an end to the Q."

"People here love him. He is our chief advocate and a friend of the Holy Father."

"He has many enemies in the general assembly. Many people in Geneva and all over the euro zone fear opening the door to the Q and all its suffering."

"The Q has been controlled with guns and biological terror. In the south, drug lords control the Mexican territories. Many suffer from addiction in the Q. Children are sold for prostitution and child labor. The list is endless."

"I can't imagine what life has been like for you all these years."

"I've been lucky. The Church in one form or another has been supported me since. I thank God for all his graces. I am healthy. How is your health Daddy?"

"My legs are weak but I feel well. My thinking is clear. I, too, have much to be grateful for. I only wish I could give you a hug."

Terry put her hand up to the screen and Rouan did the same. They spoke for more than two hours and agreed to speak again soon. Camille caught the tail end of their conversation. Rouan introduced them to each other. Camille called Terry, Sister Teresa. It sounded strange but was correct. After the conversation, he was wound up, wired, filled with adrenaline but soon crashed. Camille took him to his room and helped him into his bed. She kissed him tenderly on the forehead and said goodnight. He had been

blessed with two wonderful women in his life. He had the friendship of Frenot. What more can a man ask for?

Tousant sent his congratulations. Along with that, he had a request. He wanted Rouan to address the United Nations General Assembly. He asked that Rouan discuss the problems facing those living in the Q. He hinted that Rouan might talk about what was once the American government (and its possible restoration in the Q). Rouan was flattered by this request and agreed to speak. (Rouan's talk would be the day before the crucial vote on who would be the next secretary general.) Both Camille and Frenot were quite excited by the idea of Rouan speaking to the assembly. Rouan later even told Terry about this. She asked that he mention the religious persecution faced by many in the Q. Rouan asked her to forward some personal stories so that he could include them in his talk.

Rouan began outlining his talking points and soon had a rough draft ready. He had several weeks to prepare and come up with a final draft for his talk in Geneva. He was honored that Tousant had given him this opportunity. He talked with Terry, Camille and Jean-Marc about what he should cover. He thought both an appeal to the head and heart would be in order. A simple appeal to the heart would not be enough (nor would an appeal just to the head be sufficient). The heart tells us that we are called to help those in need, he said to himself. The head tells us we might perish ourselves if he try to save those drowning in the Q. But here we must think ahead and see that by helping those in the Q be rid of despots we our ultimately making the world a safer place. So, he thought, the appeal to the United Nations must be one of both head and heart.

He grew tired of thinking of all this. He had been running on a mix of adrenaline and excitement but he needed time to reflect and rest. He would pick up his journal again after some much needed rest. The world would continue to turn, the sun would continue to rise in the morning and once again shine on all who bathed in its radiance, he thought. He did forget to say a prayer for his newly found daughter. Even though he did not believe in God, he had begun to pray (partially to honor his daughter and the vocation she had chosen and partially because it gave him a sense of serenity and

peace). Nor did he forget to pray for Camille, for Frenot and for the leaders in the United Nations who have such a grave responsibility, he whispered to himself. He prayed for the poor souls in the Q (particularly the children) who suffered from enslavement and unimaginable poverty and every kind of indignity. Somewhere in the universe, he thought, his prayers were being heard.

The arrangements were made for the return trip to Geneva. Once again, Rouan would be accompanied by Camille and the Frenots. They could have taken a plane or high speed train but they thought it best to take the white Mercedes Benz van.

Camille was becoming lovelier and more precious to Rouan each day. Their relationship had begun as a professional one: one of patient and nurse. But it had evolved. Rouan realized there was a difference of age between them, more than twenty years. But because he had slept during those years, psychologically he felt as he were still in his forties rather than his seventies. And his feelings for Camille were not one sided. There was a growing tenderness, fondness and even love on Camille's side as well. This was confirmed by Camille, after he told her how he felt.

She did not hesitate with her reply: "Robert I am so happy to hear you say that. I've been wanting to confess something to you." She stopped. She looked frightened which in turn frightened Rouan. What she said next was a total surprise: "I've fallen in love you. I'm sure this admission of mine is a breach of professional conduct. But our circumstances are unique. Thanks to you, and Monsieur Frenot, I've been brought into the center of an important moment in history. I'm so grateful that I've been given me a chance to be a part of your life. I've never known a man as tender, intelligent and compassionate as you. So I'm not ashamed to tell you, I love you."

Rouan was moved by her words. He did not expect them. He didn't quite know what he expected but it was all more than he could have imagined or hoped for. For his part, he had only wanted her to know how he felt (and that would have been enough, he would have been willing to leave it at that). He was so taken aback by Camille's words that he wasn't sure what to say. Finally he said, "I'm so lucky. It seems while the world's luck has changed for the worse, mine has gotten better. How is it that I've gone from

being a disgraced junkie, a man with blood on his hands, to someone so loved? It seems I must somehow pay back my good fortune to others who have suffered so much. I must dedicate this second chance I've been given to help those in need. And for you Camille, my affection and love is boundless, unconditional. Our relationship is so precious and so unexpected, such a lovely surprise.”

“It is a surprise to me, also. When I would pass by your room while you slept in the first months that I worked here, I could have never have predicted any of this. But then again we live an age where nothing is certain, it so good to know that not all unexpected events are for the worse. Let us hope that you're awakening is a sign for good things to come especially for those living in the Q.”

“Yes. Tousant had a look in his eye when we met. He saw something. I don't know what exactly. But something. I'm sure of it.”

“He is such a wonderful man. It is so strange how things have turned out.”

Rouan, Camille and the Frenots had a pleasant drive to Geneva. Frenot and his wife, Catherine, were curious about Rouan's speech. Camille, on the other hand, knew it by heart. She had heard it many times. He had read several drafts of it to her. Secondly, while he wrote in longhand whenever possible, Camille continued to act as his secretary by typing up all that he wrote and enter it into a computer; additionally Rouan's hand often grew tired or cramped, and it was necessary to dictate his notes to her.

Throughout the trip, the Frenots asked about the speech. Finally Rouan turned the tables on them and asked them what they would say. Catherine spoke first: “I would point out that it is not only the most humane thing to do. But it is so important for us in the euro zone. It was not that long ago that Hitler was allowed to build up his war machine while the rest of Europe slept. A similar situation can occur as the corporate profiteers band together and come up with a plan that will line their pockets and bring misery to the rest of the world. Folks in the Q are poor; the greedy men of the Q will want to expand their markets to wealthier countries outside the Q. Their products will not be safe, they will not undergo rigorous testing. That would cut into their profits. Who knows how much in untested goods from the Q, and it factory farms, already line the

shelves of the euro zone?"

"You must be psychic." Camille declared. "Robert has written something almost identical to what you have said."

They all laughed.

"What do you say, Jean-Marc?" Rouan asked.

"As a lawyer, I would say tribunals should be set up and international trials should take place, something akin to the Nuremberg trials after the second world war."

"Camille did you send a copy of my speech to them?" Rouan joked. "Of course, the problems in the Q are not a secret. Capitalism and all its greed is alive and well in the Q, but sadly the rule of law and democracy is not. And the underlying problem for the Security Council and all its members, it seems to me, is one of fear and prejudice, a fear not just of physical contamination but a psychological one."

"An excellent point Robert, let us hope you can help Tousant in his fight to open up the Q," Frenot said.

"What have you heard?" Rouan asked.

"There are some who want to appoint Zachariah Kimba from the Democratic Republic of the Congo as permanent secretary general for a five year term. Of course, his views are far more conservative than Tousant's regarding the Q. The irony, of course, is that Kimba was the protégé of Tousant for many years. Now he is turning his back on his old teacher when such a great position of power is dangled in front of him. I spoke to Tousant recently and though he tried to hide his feelings, he is very hurt. Of course, the argument of members in the Security Council who support Kimba is that Tousant should step aside because he is too old. This is why Tousant's supporters only ask that he be appointed for the remainder of Devereux's term. It does appear that Tousant is running neck in neck with Kimba. So your upcoming talk is very important. "

Tousant and Zachariah Kimba were the closest of friends until they competed against each other for the position of security general. Rouan was told that after the death of Devereux, Kimba came to Tousant and asked not only for Tousant's support but asked

Tousant to nominate him for secretary general at the next meeting of the Security Council. Tousant refused his old friend and protégé. This refusal caused a rift, a chasm, between the two.

Frenot's words weighed heavily on Rouan. He knew the importance of convincing the Security Council to act on behalf of the Q. Every day meant death and a thousand indignities for those living under the thumb of the corporate monarchs. Even if the Security Council acted immediately, it would take years, decades even, of planning, of re-building, of action. But the situation was far from hopeless. With the technology available, with physical and human resources available, the Q could be transformed. Democracy could be restored (possibly even the American constitution, the Bill of Rights). The dream of a federal state overseeing those without a voice, who were now without representation, could become a reality in what was once the United States. That he could be a part of helping that dream become a reality, of helping that dream come to fruition, amazed and excited him.

After arriving in Geneva, Camille and Rouan checked into the same hotel as before and requested the same rooms with the lovely view of the lake and the city. Geneva glittered before them, a brilliant gem, a star shining brightly for all to see; its glacial waters clean and pure. It wasn't hard to imagine why those who bathed in the radiance of such a luminous and enchanting city wouldn't want its luster tarnished by those suffering in the Q, wouldn't want the purity of their city contaminated. Why take a chance of bringing poisoned fruit into this Garden of Eden? It was the question more than any other that Rouan felt he had to answer.

Since it would be several days before he was to address the General Assembly, Rouan thought it would be best to meet with Tousant and discuss a few things that were on his mind. Tousant readily agreed to meet Rouan and invited both he and Camille for brunch at his villa.

Camille and Rouan were taken by taxi to the address given to them (about a fifteen minute drive from their hotel). They met Tousant in his garden in the back of the villa. He was pruning the leaves around a cluster of white orchids, his stooped figure engrossed

in the task before him.

“You are just in time.” Tousant handed an orchid to Camille.

Camille thanked him. Tousant then clipped off another orchid and handed it to Rouan.

“Thank you,” Rouan said looking into Tousant's pale blue eyes. Rouan it was like looking into the eyes of a wise and ancient child.

“You are most welcome,” Tousant replied. “A gift from an old man, some think I am too old. It's just an excuse by those who oppose me. But they are wrong, Because of my advanced age a temporary appointment of eighteen months would be appropriate. I think eighteen months is reasonable. I will be acting secretary for the remaining eighteen months of Devereux's term. That is all. If Security Council votes for Kimba, his appointment will be for five years. Any changes in the Q will be stalled. I'm afraid they've seen through me. They know I want to use the time to push through a measure to recognize the Colonies in the Q. It is a simple enough measure but it is a necessary aid, a stepping stone, in bringing some semblance of governance to those pushed around by corporate bullies. While there is a strong faction who supports me, there is an equally strong faction against me. But I will never be too old to stand on the side of justice. Justice is one of the eternal verities, eternal truths and much older than me. Do you know Plato, Monsieur Rouan?”

“Some. Even though my father was a scientist he enjoyed reading Plato and told me stories about Socrates when I was just a boy. ”

“As you know, Monsieur Rouan, I am a Buddhist and we believe in the Tao, the way. Ultimately it is simple to follow the true path by following no path. One must close one's eyes to see. We recognize the divine in all things. All life is sacred. Did your father tell you about Plato's allegory of the cave, Monsieur Rouan?”

“Yes, the gist of it being we see only the shape and shadows of things, of a greater reality.” Rouan answered.

“Yes, we live and breathe amongst shadows, the shadows of a greater reality. But

they are only shadows. We must walk out into the sunlight of the spirit, the sunlight of truth and love. So this old man is not too old for the eternal light of justice and love.”

“All three great monotheistic faiths, believe in one God. Of course you as a Buddhist don't identify, don't call that spirit God but rather simply embrace it rather than to try to limit or define it. My philosophy is much the same as yours. By whatever name one chooses to call that one transcendent spirit, that spirit is not divided. The division can only be found in the hearts of man, in bitterness and hatred. I've found forgiveness in my heart for whoever was responsible for the deaths of my ex-wife and mother. I suppose if I had seen the murder of my mother or Jennifer that would have been worse. But the killings of Jennifer and my mother was over in a flash while I slept. The death and overdose of my girlfriend in Paris sent me into the deepest depression of my life. I had Jean-Marc to help get me through that. He continues to help me today. I am so grateful to have such a wonderful friend. I choose not to focus on what I've lost but what I have. I've been given a second chance. Those living in the Q also deserve a second chance.”

“Bitterness, hatred and resentment poisons, toxic to the soul. I am so happy to see that those demons have been exorcised from your heart, Monsieur Rouan. I think you are ready, too, Monsieur Rouan to embrace justice for all those living in the Q.”

“Of course it is right to seek justice for those living in the Q. But why do the Canadian and Mexican governments have no voice in all this? Why have they said nothing?” Rouan asked.

“Mexico has been under Marshall Law for over a decade. The Canadian government is a skeleton of what it once was. Both governments are controlled by the monolithic corporations that own and run the factory farms, manufacturing, and housing. Graft, bribery is a way of life. Greedy corporations control the Q, not governments. The Colonists on the other hand believe in justice, in the dignity of the human person. Their purpose is not to line their own pockets but to give the people a voice, to bring back justice and fair play. Until the corporations are reined in by some governmental agency, goods cannot be safely exported from the Q into the rest of the world. The quarantine cannot be lifted until a central government that is not controlled by the corporations

regulates the market place. Right now the corporations serve as the only form of centralized government. And don't be mistaken. their tentacles run deep into the so called free world: in Asia, South America, Africa and the euro zone.”

“So you will not propose a lifting of the embargo on the Q right away?” Rouan asked.

“A gradual lifting of the embargo will be fine. But as the export of goods increase, it will be impractical for those outside the Q to test the food for safety. So I am proposing, lifting the embargo on the condition that the Colonies be legitimized, strengthened. The corporations that control the factory farms and manufacturing want the embargo lifted; they would love to freely sell their goods to the rest of the world. They just don't want to be under any kind of government oversight. Secondly, they don't want competition. A free government would end their strangle hold over those who live in the Q. In eighteen months much could be accomplished by a pro-active secretary general to aid those in the Q”

“Would you like to see a copy of the speech I've written?” Rouan asked, looking up from his wheelchair at Tousant. “Maybe you could make some suggestions, some changes.”

He leaned down and touched Rouan's hand. “I trust you will say what is needed to be said.”

“He has written a beautiful speech.” Camille said, smiling as she touched Rouan's other hand.

Rouan sat between these two gentle souls and all his fears about his speech vanished. He felt a deep sense of serenity and peace. He would say what had to be said to the Security Council and hope for a good outcome, hope that his voice would be heard. There was nothing more that he could do.

Back at the hotel, Camille and Rouan had a quiet dinner in Rouan's room. They had gone out earlier and had been caught in a rain shower. Camille's hair was still damp, her face glistened. Camille was a stunning beauty, a beauty that was natural and without pretense. They both ordered salmon, white rice and vegetables. Afterward they went out

on to the balcony and looked out into the night. Camille bent down and kissed Rouan on the cheek. "What was that for?" he asked.

"No reason, just an impulse." She ran her hand across his forehead and hair. "You're such a handsome man."

"You think so?"

"I do."

They embraced and kissed, her hands stroking him. He responded physically to her touch. Later that night when Camille helped Rouan into bed, after turning off the lights, she undressed and got into bed with him. The sheets were cool but her body was warm. Again they kissed and caressed one another. The balcony door had been left open and breeze blew in and seemed to lift them high above themselves as if they were sailing out into a realm they had never known before. Afterward, they feel asleep, satiated, their bodies bonded together, their spirits joined, their hearts at peace.

At breakfast Frenot had good news: Tousant had secured a majority of votes from the Security Council. China ultimately sided with Tousant and broke the deadlock. Kimba was out, Tousant was in. Tousant had always been a popular figure amongst so many on the Security Council. Only recently had some begun to question him, and only because of his views regarding the Q. Kimba on the other hand did not have Tousant's charisma or Tousant's following in both the Security Council and the General Assembly. Tousant was a beloved figure. So it seems Tousant would be elected secretary general. This was a great relief to Rouan. He would be able to make his speech without the added pressure of Tousant's election hanging in the balance. It seemed, to Rouan, to be a magical day. He looked out the lake glistening before him. Everything was working out. The lovemaking the night before left both Camille and Rouan glowing. The world itself seemed to radiate and glow. Rouan could not be happier.

With members of the General Assembly in attendance, with the Frenots smiling on, with Camille beaming with pride, Rouan was introduced by Tousant: "Here we have before us, an awakened sleeper. A man who more than just predicted but actually tried

to prevent the terrible bombings that set our world aflame, a prophet, a seer, a time traveler who has come back to us with a message of hope. For Robert Rouan it was only a few months ago that United States stood as the lone super power in the world. For us, it has been over a decade since its tragic fall. This is the first reason that I have asked Monsieur Rouan to speak to us. The second reason is that North Americans cannot speak to us. They are prohibited from traveling here, of speaking directly to this body. Monsieur Rouan slept in France while his countryman suffered nuclear attacks and the unleashing of lethal biological viruses, so fate has brought him here to give voice to those who have no voice, to speak for many that hadn't been born when he last saw his beloved country. And he does love his country, his countryman; he has a daughter living in the Q even now. I give you Monsieur Robert Rouan.”

There was applause throughout the hall. Tousant had touched the hearts of many.

Rouan wheeled up a ramp and took his place at the center of the stage. He looked out at his audience and began to speak: “Thank you for your warm welcome in this wonderful city. A city I have grown fond of, a city of great beauty and charm. But this city, this body is threatened by from abroad: from corporate monoliths who will not stop engorging themselves on human innocence and dignity at the borders of the North American continent. They will feed on fresh blood, on wealthier countries. They will export their misery beyond the shores of the Q, if we do not take action now. We do not need to do this by force but by persuasion, by allowing the highest voices of man to be heard. It seems in our current world we have grown numb, numbed by the countless tragedies that have befallen our world. When did this numbing of the soul begin, with the bomb, Hiroshima, Nagasaki? Truth, in what time zone, ours or the other guy's? Is fate nothing more than random chance made meaningful by rationalizations and fantasy where each of us put ourselves at the center of a poorly lit stage reenacting the past to fit our own story, our own egos? Well it's always easier to take stock of one's neighbor rather than one's self. But paranoia mixed and shaken up with rationalizations makes for a highly toxic cloud, and one that hovers above us all. So maybe we should play it straight for a while without the grease paint and the curved mirrors, the pointing fingers and the lies—whether those fingers point to the Q or at ourselves. We are one world.

We cannot divorce ourselves from this interconnectedness. Geographical distance is not enough. A problem faced in the Q is a problem for us all.

“I would like to include a couple of the stories from the Q that my daughter forwarded to me. There were so many that I will be able to only include these two today. It will be necessary to paraphrase much of what was communicated to me. I will try to capture the spirit of what was said since the stories were critical in the formation of my thinking regarding the Q. Many of the stories are heartbreaking. Some are inspirational in their own bittersweet way. The first story is about an orphanage located south of my daughter’s convent on the border of the Mexican territory. This orphanage housed over four hundred children of all ages. Some were abandoned by parents who had no way to feed and care for them. Some had lost their parents to drugs and disease. In some cases, mothers and fathers had gone north in search of work at corporate farms that often refused to house the children of their workers. For whatever reasons, a dozen nuns and one priest cared for these children. The orphanage was in a converted hotel with over one hundred rooms. There was a banquet room and kitchen where meals were prepared and served to the children. The nuns also taught the children. If the weather permitted classes were outdoors. The children were taught how to read and write, to add and subtract, to do long division and some of the advanced students were even taught Algebra and Calculus. There was a library that contained over ten thousand books on every subject. Crops were grown. Livestock, poultry and pigs were raised. Hunting of wild game--antelope, deer, pheasant and on occasion migratory geese--provided nourishment for all. Fish were plentiful in several nearby streams. All things considered, it was not a bad life for the nuns and the children.

“One day, some bandits from the Mexican territory arrived in a convoy of vans, jeeps and buses. Immediately they shot the priest in the head. They then began rounding up the children. One older nun, Sister Rita, tried to shield some of the children and fight off the bandits without a weapon of any kind. Her throat was cut. Several nuns (and even some of the older girls) were raped. Some were murdered in the process. Anyone who resisted was killed. The bandits then loaded up the buses with their human cargo and departed (none of the nuns were taken only the children). From there the bandits sold

the children to brokers who placed the children in factory farms or pimped out the prettier girls as prostitutes. There would be no retaliation toward these bandits since their criminal act was out outside the jurisdiction of the Mexican territory and there was no governmental agency to bring them to justice.

“The second story is about a Nebraska farm family, the Goddens. The Goddens had been farming for several generations. The family coming to Nebraska in the eighteen-nineties after emigrating from Germany. After the collapse of the United States, they continued to farm their land as best they could (they survived several waves of bio-terror unscathed; and the old county records verifying title to several thousand acres in their name had been honored). Often they were short of fuel and electricity. But with seven children, there was no shortage of hard workers. Eventually they had solar panels put on the roof of their farm house and barn. They bartered for fuel and farmed their land producing wheat and corn in abundance. Because the land was rich, corporate farms sprouted up all around them. Offers were made for the farm. But currency of any kind was a volatile commodity in the Q, and the banks were no better, often closing their doors on a whim, leaving their depositors penniless. No one could depend on them. Land that produced food was tangible, so the Goddens took no interest in the offers. Finally threats were made. Still the Goddens refused the offers. Then one night, the eight bedroom farmhouse burned down (with the Goddens, their seven grown children, two daughter-in-laws, and four grandchildren in it). No one survived. A corporation took over the farm. No one batted an eye. The only group strong enough to protest this injustice, to right this wrong, were the corporations that ran the factory farms in the area and it was in their best interest to remain silent and do nothing.

“The tyrants who rule from end of North America to the other ultimately jeopardized the security and well-being of all us with their illicit drugs, weapons of war (both biological and nuclear). We must act and help stomp out this poison before it wreaks havoc on the members of the United Nations gathered here which includes members from every corner of the globe. Thomas Jefferson said 'resistance to tyranny is obedience to God.' We must support those in the Q who resist tyranny and support self-government in the Q. By allowing money and ideas to flow into the Q, the Colonists can

break the hold of these corporate bullies who regulate the life in the Q but who themselves are not regulated. Regulations can be put in place to safeguard the goods coming out the Q. By giving representation in this body to those living in the Q, they will become bolder, gain confidence. Mega businesses will not operate shamefully, paying slave wages and working children long hours and paying them just enough to stave off starvation. Their practices will be brought out to the light of day; there will be transparency for all. Laws will be enacted and enforced for factory workers and factory farms.

In the past, in the United States, the strategic error was made to seek justice using weapons of war, to seek justice using force, to engage in military actions. This was madness. This is something we should shun. No we must seek justice by appealing to what is highest in man, his conscience, his heart, his mind. Capitalism reigns in the Q. But democracy does not. By establishing a body in the Q, by legitimatizing the Colonies, the people will rise up, and in an act of will and intellect, will establish regulations and a fair wage for those who work and live in Q. We need fear not biological and radioactive contamination (with proper testing), but what we must fear is the contamination of spirit that would poison our souls. A poisoned mind and soul is far more dangerous. It was this kind of poisoning of the soul that led to so many acts of terrorism that have changed our world. So let us not be poisoned in our souls but be renewed, and look to our better selves, and seek out fairness and justice for all. Let us do away with what we call the Q and once again look to America for nourishment for the world's body and once again inspiration for our souls from the land that invented jazz, Rock n' Roll and the cinema.“

Somewhere during his speech, a silence fell over the hall. There were no rumblings. It was as if Rouan was delivering a prayer. And he was.

* * * *

After the triumph of his speech, Rouan, the Frenots, Camille and Tousant took an evening cruise on Lake Geneva to celebrate his speech and Tousant's upcoming election as secretary general. Many members of the General Assembly (along with their spouses, staffs and friends) joined in the celebration. It was a lovely night. The lake was

beautiful under a full moon, the water was tranquil and serene. The mountains stood like gentle giants in the distance on the other side of the shore. But this picturesque scene was interrupted by a flash from the muzzle of a revolver, a small caliber handgun. The bullet struck Tousant in the head. A grimace crossed Tousant's face as he fell to the ground. Frenot went to the aid of his old friend, who lay on the deck of the boat dying (a bullet lodged in his brain). Catherine Frenot looked on in horror. Camille grasped Rouan's hand. They approached the scene but their view was soon blocked by the crowd that surrounded Tousant.

After the shooting, the gunman dropped the revolver and began mumbling to himself. This pale, thin man, a boy really, seemed to be out of touch with what was going on around him. He was quickly taken into custody by members of the crew. He passed by Rouan and Camille and as he was being taken away looked directly at Rouan and said, "I have saved many lives today. I could not permit us to be poisoned. You must understand." As he said this, Rouan thought, it seemed to be more of a question than a statement.

"What does he mean, Robert? Why?" Camille asked.

"Fear Camille, he is afraid. He doesn't know what he has done. He is very ill." Rouan shook his head and tried to catch a glimpse of Tousant, hoping that somehow Tousant would survive. But soon it became apparent that this gentle man, this man of peace and compassion, had passed from this earth.

"Why don't they turn the boat around and get some help?" Camille asked.

Just then a stretcher appeared and Tousant was placed on it. The wound to Tousant's head was clearly visible. There was no sign of life, his eyes were closed. A single bullet took his life. A sheet was placed over the body. The body was then taken into the galley, the onlookers were pushed aside by members of the crew. Shortly thereafter the Zen practice of wetting the lips of the deceased was performed by an assistant of Tousant's.

Catherine Frenot came toward Rouan and Camille. Camille reached out and

embraced her. Rouan reached up and took her hand. Frenot saw them and held up his hand acknowledging them; it was red with the blood of Tousant. Frenot was in shock, his face was without expression, blank, his eyes were filled with pain and sadness.

“Catherine,” Rouan said, “Go to Jean-Marc.”

Catherine Frenot looked over at her husband; she reeled back in horror at his disposition. “Jean-Marc,” she called to him. Frenot turned toward her like a lost child and then embraced her; he held on to her and would not let go.

Rouan learned that the shooter, Harry Osborne, was British and had suffered from schizophrenia all his adult life. Tousant and others in the community compassionately took Osborne under their wing and allowed him to part of their lives. They helped him find housing and secured employment for him. Osborne had been close to both Tousant and the Kimbas.

“How could this have happened?” Camille asked Rouan.

“I don't know.” Rouan replied.

Rouan and Camille approached the Frenots.

“Jean Marc, is this the act of a madman or something else?” Rouan asked.

“Harry Osborne was close to Tousant. He's suffered with mental illness. I just don't understand. Tousant had always been so kind to him.”

“I saw him staring at Madame Kimba earlier. He seemed quite agitated.” Rouan said. He thought it was odd that the gunman seemed so familiar with everyone on board. Earlier in the evening, Rouan had seen him looking intently at the wife of Zachariah Kimba. But she ignored him.

“Madame Kimba? He was close with the Kimbas too.” Frenot's voice trailed off, a thought was surfacing. “Madame Kimba is very ambitious. But I don't know.”

“Know what?” Rouan asked.

“She has been telling everyone in Geneva that if Tousant became secretary general, his policies would cause another plague in free world. Thousands of people from the Q

would spread plague in every country, in every corner of the free world. She was unrelenting. She would say anything to see her husband became secretary general. If she influenced Osborne in some way, and if she did, it's diabolical. I should say nothing. I don't want to falsely accuse anyone." Frenot stated.

"He's unbalanced, ill. Surely it's the act of a madman" Camille interjected.

"My husband has a point. I know Madame Kimba. Beneath her cool exterior, she is ruthless." Catherine Frenot said as she looked over at the Kimbas on the other side of the boat.

"Let's be calm and not rush to any judgment. It is too soon to speculate." Frenot said as he held up his hands, holding his palms upwards as if directing everyone to stop what they were saying and to not jump to any conclusions.

Madame Kimba was a tall, regal, Scandinavian beauty (some were even heard to call her a trophy wife; she was at least thirty years younger than Zachariah Kimba). But others said that she was much more than that; that she was very ambitious and had worked hard to secure the position of security general for her husband. Rouan recalled seeing her right before his speech; she seemed distracted. It was as if she were waiting for something to happen.

The boat by then had turned around and made its way back to the dock in Geneva. Rouan looked across to the other side of the water back towards where they had come from; a deep wave of sadness gripped his heart; he felt as if he had left something back across the water, back before the killing of his friend, Christophe Tousant. Camille looked over at Rouan and grasped his hand and kissed him tenderly on the cheek, trying to offer him some consolation in his moment of sorrow.

"You're so good to me." Rouan said looking up to Camille.

"I love you very much Robert." Camille declared.

"You are so dear. Thank you for making this awful moment a little more bearable." Rouan then kissed her on the hand and held it there to his lips and kissed it a second time.

It seemed all of Geneva and a majority of the world's leaders turned out for the memorial service at the United Nations for Christophe Tousant (though no one from the Q was in attendance since they were prohibited from travel into the euro zone). There was a private funeral ceremony at a Zen monastery that Tousant attended. Rouan, Camille and the Frenots stayed in Geneva so that they might attend. After the ceremony, the body of Tousant was cremated and the ashes were scattered over Lake Geneva.

Why had Tousant been assassinated? Rouan asked himself. There was no question that it was the act of an imbalanced mind. But was there something more behind it, a conspiracy? Rouan was not the only one that had witnessed Osborne gazing at Madame Kimba shortly before he pulled the trigger that ended Tousant's life. Several members of the Security Council reported receiving calls from Zachariah Kimba. While he expressed his horror at the killing of Tousant, his old friend, he pushed for his election as secretary general. Many members of the Security Council considered his calls in bad taste. Whatever support Kimba once had evaporated. Kimba's support was based solely on his opposition to Tousant and his proposals regarding the Q. On his own merits, no one considered Kimba to be a viable candidate. And there certainly would be no hurry to elect a new secretary general. With the death of Tousant, Kimba was out of the running.

Rouan thought it strange that the Kimbas did not attend the funeral ceremony at the monastery. They were present at the memorial service and Rouan noticed that not a word passed between them. Zachariah Kimba seemed distracted, depressed, inconsolable. Rouan wasn't sure if this was because he would not be the next secretary general or if he was mourning the death of his friend. An answer to this mystery came as Rouan and Camille were preparing to check out of their hotel and head back to Paris. Frenot knocked on the door of Rouan's room. Camille went to the door.

"Who is it?" Camille asked.

"It's Jean-Marc."

Camille opened the door.

"Is Robert here? I have some terrible news." Frenot stated.

“Jean-Marc, what is it?” Rouan asked as he came around the corner and wheeled toward the door.

“The Kimbas were found dead at their apartment this morning by a housekeeper. I've just heard the news.” Frenot explained.

“Dead, how?” Rouan asked.

“They're not sure exactly. But it appears to be a murder-suicide. It looks as if Madame Kimba was smothered by Zachariah and then he took an overdose of pills. He left a note. In it he said he could not forgive himself for allowing his wife to poison Osborn's mind against Tousant. She baited Osborne, telling him that if Tousant was elected secretary general and the Q the restrictions governing the Q were lifted, a plague would occur across the euro zone and rest of the world. Apparently, she had a lover. She confessed as much to her husband (when it became clear that he would not be elected secretary general even after Tousant's death). This sent Kimba off the edge. It was all in the note.”

“I knew something was wrong when I saw Madame Kimba speaking with Harry Osborne. It seems once again my instincts were right. Yet there was nothing I could do to stop another act of madness,” Rouan said.

“None of us could have predicted this. We all knew how ambitious Madame Kimba was but we had no idea how evil she really was,” Frenot said stoically.

“When will the world wake from all the madness? Must we accept it?” Camille asked.

“We must do our part. We must do what we can, and humbly accept that the world does not revolve around our good intentions and that even the best we have to offer can be erased in an instant by an act of madness. We don't make the rules. Change must come from within each of us. We must carry Tousant's work forward as best we can,” Rouan said.

“Yes we must,” Frenot said in agreement.

During the ride back to Paris, Rouan, Camille and the Frenots often sat silently each pondering the recent tragic turn of events. Other times, a thought or a question would

surface and everyone would join in the discussion. Rouan asked one such question, a question that was on everyone's mind: "What will happen now?"

"There will be an election for secretary general; of course he or she will be a compromised candidate. This will be followed by months, possibly even years of debate. In the meantime, the people in the Q will remain trapped, isolated," Frenot replied.

"Have you spoken to any members of the Security Council?" Rouan asked.

"Yes, everyone is in shock. The consensus now is no new changes. But there is an open mindedness about how to proceed in the future. Tousant's vision of freedom for the Q will come to pass. But now it will take much longer for those changes to take place. You must understand that many remember the plagues of the past: Great Britain, Hong Kong, even as far away as the Southern Hemisphere in Australia, all viruses that began in North America. A decade ago, the quarantine made sense. But now the fear is irrational. But many do not want to take the chance." Frenot sighed and shook his head.

"I've been thinking about something. Even Camille does not know," Rouan said.

"What is it, Robert?" Camille asked.

"I'm thinking of going to see my daughter in New Mexico."

At first, Camille was shocked. Then the realization hit her: that what Rouan proposed was inevitable; once he had discovered that his daughter was alive, and that it was impossible for her to travel and visit him, that he would have to visit her.

"How long have you been thinking about this?" Camille asked.

"Since I first discovered that Terry was alive," Rouan answered. "Furthermore, if an old crippled man can survive a visit to the Q, the publicity would help ease fears of those living in the euro zone, in the free world."

"As your friend, I fear for your safety. But as a father, I understand," Frenot said.

"You're not going without me," Camille stated firmly.

"Camille, it is something I must do. I could not ask you to expose yourself to the dangers."

“Expose myself. Robert you are in a wheelchair. You cannot get out of bed on your own. No, if do go, and that is if, I am going with you,” Camille was becoming agitated.

“Jean-Marc, how difficult would it be?” Rouan asked.

“Well as you know Robert it is impossible to get out of the Q. But it is possible to go in. Of course, to return to France after a visit into the Q is very arduous. A six month wait in Miami is necessary. And it is always possible, that you might not be cleared to enter France, or to leave the Q if anything suspicious is found in the blood test. For any reason, that they see fit, you can be refused entry back into the free world. You could become exiled permanently as could Camille and I'm afraid if you do travel, you will need her assistance. The paranoia is so high regarding those who enter the Q. It is a big risk, a risk that you both must think on long and hard.”

“Exiled, I'm an American. I've been in exile for decades,” Rouan said.

“You are a French citizen and the United States no longer exists,” Frenot replied. “If your daughter wasn't there, I would try to prevent you from going. But it is a miracle that both you and your daughter survived, so I won't stand in your way. I will warn you of the dangers. But I will not stand in your way. I will offer whatever assistance I can once you are sure that you must go. But as you know, the Q is a very dangerous place. And I'm sure you will be viewed as a threat to those who hold power. The speech you gave was followed by many, especially by those who hold power in the Q.”

“I could try to keep as low a profile as possible. And actually, I'm sure those in power in the Q would love to be able to sell their products in the free world. I don't think it would be in their best interests to harm me. After all, I have pushed for opening up trade with the Q. If the big corporations could sell their goods in the free world, it would make them billions.”

“But you are also on the side of the Colonists, and the Colonists wish to ultimately break up the handful of companies that control the Q.”

“I'm an old man, what threat could I be?”

“I see your mind is made up, Robert. And what about you, Camille?” Frenot asked.

“If Robert is going, I am going.” Camille answered.

While Rouan would never have asked Camille to join him on such a dangerous journey, he was happy she agreed to go. Since their relationship had changed to one of lovers, Rouan knew that it would not be possible for him to stay at the convalescent care home (they were, after all, no longer just nurse and patient). Of course, he and Camille could get an apartment in Paris or even Geneva (and maybe they would, but later, after they returned from the Q). Then and there, Rouan realized that they would go, that it was something that had to be done. He had been given a chance to see his country and his daughter once again and he would take it.

For several weeks Camille and Rouan made preparations for their trip to the Q. A trip that they both understood and accepted would be for several years at a minimum. Money was not a problem. Rouan had been receiving disability checks from the government of France (arranged by Frenot), those checks having been put in an account on his behalf. Camille had qualified for a pension after all her years of service as a nurse. Euro dollars were at a premium in the Q and Frenot would see to it that funds would be sent to Camille and Rouan whenever needed. The permits were issued and the ticket for their flight was purchased. They would be flying from Paris to Havana Cuba (there were no flights in and out of the Q). Once in Havana, they would take a boat into the Port of Miami. From there, they would fly from Miami to DFW airport in Dallas. For security reasons they would take a flight under assumed names to Albuquerque (fake identity cards were plentiful in the Q). Folks from the free world were a rarity in the Q and Rouan would be considered a valuable target for kidnappers with his close relations with such high profile figures from the free world and their ready access to its funds from the euro zone. Rouan's daughter arranged for transportation from Albuquerque to her convent outside of Santa Fe. When Rouan first brought up traveling to the Q with Terry, she had reservations (she feared for his safety). Once it became clear that Rouan would not change his mind, she confessed her happiness of seeing her father after so many years. Rouan too anticipated their reunion with great joy.

Once again the white Mercedes van was put into service and transported Rouan and Camille (along with the Frenots, who wanted to give Rouan and Camille a proper send off). There wasn't a lot of talk on the ride to the airport. All were anxious. Catherine was particularly nervous and she admitted so much. "But after all you have through, why travel to that lawless land?" she asked.

"It is the land of my birth and it is a necessary pilgrimage. I must pay my respects to my fallen countryman," Rouan stated.

"I know for the sake of you daughter, you must go. I understand that. But the restrictions won't last forever. Certainly she can come and visit you here."

"Before the death of Tousant, we could have expected changes to come sooner rather than later. But after his death, who knows when the ban on travel will be lifted. How much longer can I wait? I am no longer a young man." Rouan replied.

"But the danger to both you and Camille, I am so worried," Catherine Frenot said. "But I accept that it must be done. It is all very heroic on your part."

"Camille is very brave. She insisted on going and to be frank, it would be nearly impossible without her. I need her. She is the hero in all of this. My return to America is long overdue." Rouan no longer used the phrase the Q.

"I think it will be a lesson to the free world, that if Robert can safely travel there, in his condition, without fear of contagion, he will set a wonderful example. The world must wake up and see that the restrictions placed on those living there are ill advised," Camille said emphatically.

CDG airport bustled with activity both inside the Terminals and outside on the runways. The Frenots waved one last goodbye as Rouan and Camille made their way to their gate. It was clear to Rouan that they both were very concerned.

Once they boarded their flight, Rouan asked Camille: "How do you feel?"

"I'm tired. I didn't sleep very well."

"Maybe you can nap on the flight over." Rouan suggested.

The seats in business class were quite roomy and because of Rouan's condition they shared three seats in all. The seats were a plush pale blue and quite comfortable. They flew to Havana in a state of the art Air France jet. The engines after takeoff were almost silent. Rouan found it unnerving at first but once he realized they weren't going to fall from the skies, he began to enjoy it. Now and again, they encountered some turbulence but nothing extraordinary. After a six hour flight, they landed in Cuba. Havana was both old and new. There were towering hi-rises mixed with old world architecture. The roads were congested with shiny new vehicles of all kinds. Rouan and Camille would be spending a few days in a hotel and would then be ferried by boat to the Port of Miami.

Rouan was amazed at the changes in Havana, it was truly a city transformed. Rouan had visited it many times in the past, posing as a wealthy Algerian on holiday while working with Dick Allen. Rouan remembered that it always had been a beautiful city but now it actually glowed. The people were friendly and happy. The poverty was gone (as was Castro). Politically the country operated under a socialist form of democracy.

There first night in Havana, Camille and Rouan went out to dinner at a traditional Cuban Bistro and enjoyed a meal of shredded flank steak in tomato sauce, black beans, yellow rice, plantains and fried yucca. That night they made love.

The ferry ride from Havana to Miami was not crowded with people. Very few people had an interest in entering the Q. Rouan and Camille's passports were stamped (anyone who had this stamp on their passport was subject to testing, at any time, once back in the free world). On arriving in the port of Miami there were many loaded cargo ships. This was the primary port where contraband goods were smuggled out of the Q and into Cuba (from there they could be taken to South America, Europe, Africa or Asia). Except for Haiti, Cuba was the nearest point of departure for the free world. After that, Panama was the closest port for shipping goods to the free world. Panama served a geographic dividing line between the Q and the free world.

Rouan was shocked when they arrived in Miami. The cars were old, the poor lined the streets, the Q was truly was a third world country. To see a once great American city in such a state broke Rouan's heart. He had prepared himself for the worst, and

believed what he had been told, but he hadn't seen it with his eyes until now. It left him terribly sad.

Rouan had been told that it would be safest to go from the port of Miami directly to the airport. Rouan and Camille took a taxi (a beat up old yellow cab with faded lettering and a talkative driver). "I see that you are coming from the ferry from the free world," he said.

"I guess it is obvious," Rouan said.

"Well it is my regular route from the ferry to the airport. It one of the rare places where people come from the free world. I always ask why? But hear an American accent. But your friend is French."

"Yes she is French. I was born here. I've been away for a very long time."

"You got out before the quarantine?" The driver asked.

"Before the bombing," Rouan replied.

"Before the bombing, oh my God, I was just a boy. But I remember what it was like. You'll find much has changed. But why return?"

Rouan did not want to reveal too much to their driver. He did not want anyone to know their destination. "I had to see my country before I die."

"I wish you both luck. I hope one day they open things up for us."

"I do too." Rouan said. Camille stroked Rouan's hand and smiled.

Rouan's and Camille's flight from Miami to Dallas was completely different than one from Paris to Havana. The plane was an old 747, similar to the ones Rouan had flown in the past. It was noisy and cramped, the seats were worn and stained in places. The price, however, was right. Rouan was amazed at what the Euro purchased. A single Euro was worth over twenty four Canadian dollars. Rouan regretted that he hadn't seen much of Miami or the country that he left behind all those years ago. What he had seen in Miami broke his heart, the poverty was everywhere. Miami had been such a vibrant, wonderful city. Now the luster had faded, the cars were old, the streets were in need of

repair and the people looked defeated, lost. Maybe it for the best, Rouan thought, that he did not see everything at once, that he took it in gradually.

Several times during their flight, there was turbulence and Camille would grasp Rouan's hand. When things would level out and plane took a smoother course, they both were relieved. Still, Camille held on to Rouan's hand even after the turbulence subsided.. They had a an uneventful landing at DFW airport. Rouan caught his first glimpse of Texas (after so many years) as they descended. The city glittered below. Dallas was still there. It gave him hope.

Rouan and Camille spent the night in a hotel near DFW airport. The next morning they took a taxi to Love Field. There had been little new construction in decades. Rouan saw blocks and blocks of dilapidated apartments, strip malls and weathered office buildings. Love Field was bustling with activity. Southwest Airlines had survived but the planes were old. There was little security at the airport and no one seemed to pay attention to the old gentlemen (Rouan) in the wheelchair and his French companion.

After a short flight, Rouan and Camille landed in Santa Fe. When they disembarked from the plane they were greeted by Terry, in her traditional Franciscan habit. She immediately recognized her father and ran toward him: "Daddy," she cried out to him.

Rouan looked up in shock. The air was taken out of him. "Oh Terry," he kissed her, the tears running down their faces. "I thought we would meet at the convent. Transportation was arranged."

"We're the transportation that was arranged. I wanted to surprise you." Terry smiled.

Camille embraced Terry.

A priest from the convent came forward, "I'm Father Louie, how do you do?" He shook hands with Rouan and greeted Camille in the French manner; lips pursed kissing the air on the both sides of her cheeks.

Father Louie drove the van. It was twilight when they passed through the city of Albuquerque. The streets were spooky. Trash was everywhere. Hookers, addicts, the homeless, clustered together. Rouan thought it was like looking out at the walking dead,

their faces were blank, without hope: Rouan didn't see a single smile amongst them. Rouan was astonished that he hadn't seen any panhandlers until he realized that everyone was poor, that there was no one who had anything to spare. Albuquerque like many cities in the Q did have a police force. But the police were used only for the most major of offenses, petty crimes like burglary, assault, and even robbery went unpunished. Few cities had laws governing prostitution and those that did only enforced them when it suited them. There were virtually no laws governing drugs (the FDA no longer existed, the difference between licit and illicit drugs was negligible). Only the corporate city states had strong law enforcement and Albuquerque was not one of the them.

There wasn't a lot to see once they got out of town, an occasional tattered and illuminated billboard, but for most part darkness and an unseen desert, a wasteland. There were hitchhikers, even families with their thumbs out looking for a ride to who knows where. Rouan wanted to stop and pick at least some of them up (or at least offer them some water) but Rouan realized that soon there would no room or water left. But when Rouan spotted an older woman that looked so weather beaten and defeated that she about to vanish from the planet if someone didn't help, he spoke up: "Let's stop and help that poor women out."

"You don't understand. They have nothing. They're desperate. If we stop they may try to take our vehicle. It is a common practice to hitchhike and then rob the good Samaritan who offers his hospitality and a ride. It has taken a long time for the reunion with your daughter, we cannot take the chance and spoil your reunion." Father Louie explained.

"He's right Robert," Camille said.

"Yes," Rouan sighed. He put his arm around Terry. She smiled and put her head on his shoulder.

"I love you Daddy. You've never heard the story about the evacuation of Houston after Hurricane Katrina?"

"No evacuation of Houston, I don't understand?"

“It was at the time that you were beaten in prison. After Katrina, they predicted a Hurricane in Galveston. Everyone panicked and headed for the interstate. Mother and I were trapped in traffic for hours. Then the phone call came. You had been beaten and weren't expected to live. Mother didn't want to tell me. But she started to cry. I didn't know why. I thought it was because of the traffic jam. Finally she said that you had been hurt in Paris and were in the hospital. She hadn't told me you were in jail. Later after we visited you and they said that you weren't expected to live she told me you had worked for the CIA and some bad men had hurt you. I thought, my father, James Bond, so romantic. It was sad when you were in the rest home and we came to visit. She wanted to cheer me up and say something good about you and make me proud of you. That is why I told my friend in Dallas that you knew who killed Kennedy. I told her you were in a coma in Paris after a mission with the CIA.”

“Terry, I must be honest, I was in jail because of drugs. I'm no hero. I fancied myself a spy. But I disgraced myself. Who really knows about the people I worked with? One day they were drug smugglers, the next CIA. Spooks, drug smugglers, con men. What's the difference? So many masks, so many lies and I played with them all. One thing is certain, the shadow of the cold war descended and left this country in darkness and I shamed myself and shamed my family,” Rouan said sadly.

“You were very sick Daddy. I've prayed for you day and night. And the Lord heard my prayers. I am so grateful to have such a good God. I am so grateful to call you my father.” Terry said tenderly, it was clear that she had accepted the reality of her father's past long ago.

“Do you know Sister Teresa that your father was one of the first to warn others of the danger of tactical nuclear weapons and their possible use as weapons of terror? Your dad is a hero. He is a great patriot.” Camille spoke passionately on Rouan's behalf.

“You're sweet Camille. But I fabricated evidence to help secure my release from prison. And before that, after my disgrace, my fall back into addiction, I tried to impress my American colleagues at the embassy with the same story. That my fabrications turned out to be prophetic was just random chance. Contrary to what our friend

Monsieur Frenot says there is no evidence that I discovered anything. Something went wrong and bombs were released. Something the whole world knew could eventually happen and did nothing about it. It could have been much worse.”

“I was so proud of you when I read about your speech at the United Nations. I'm so lucky to have such an important man for a father.”

“More than anything after all the horrors, to find you alive and doing well means everything to me. And yes I do wish the bombing that killed your mother and grandmother could have been stopped. Everyone knew of the threat. Atomic weapons have threatened mankind since the day they were invented just a few miles from here.”

As they drove on through the darkness, Rouan thought about the confession he had made to his daughter. Rouan thought about his former associates Dick Allen and Pat Adair. In the spy game everyone knew everyone, but really knew no one. The CIA spooks knew the drug kingpins, the informants knew the mules that were transporting the drugs (sometimes they were one and the same; often after they were apprehended they were sent back to work off their sentences, to pay their debt for their crime, back in their native countries on the street where they could bring valuable information to the CIA). Money, names of contacts, was exchanged freely between those in the drug trade and those working in intelligence. But no one talked openly about these relationships. If a smuggler knew of a terrorist cell and the CIA knew of a pending investigation, information was exchanged. Everyone wore a mask. No one was exactly who they seemed. But there was a price for everything. The transaction once made was never disclosed and was seemingly forgotten. But not really, information could always be sold again, or stowed away, to the highest bidder. A code was followed. Agree to a price, pay up, and then move on. There was no difference between the smugglers and those in the drug trade and the agents involved in the spy game. They were all players on the field, ready to exchange information for the right price.

Rouan looked into his reflection in the darkened glass of the van, and saw the lines of age on his face, and realized Dick and Pat were part of the past, ghosts from another life, shadows from an existence long gone.

Rouan and Camille settled in to their rooms at the convent. Each room had a twin bed, a small writing desk and chair, and a window looking out at the desert and mountains. Camille attended Mass with the nuns daily and received communion. Sometimes Rouan would attend but did not receive the Eucharist (he was not catholic, after all). Rouan did however take part in the prayers and spent long periods of meditation in the chapel. Because their situation was unique, Rouan and Camille had their meals with the nuns and became a part of daily life of the convent. Out of respect for the rules of the convent, Rouan did not spend any time alone with Camille in either his room or hers. Rouan did not want to cause a scandal for his daughter or Camille. He came up with a solution for this problem but it took several days to bring it up with Camille. "I've been thinking about something. I wanted to see what you thought," Rouan said to Camille as they sat on the veranda one evening.

"Yes what is it Robert?" Camille asked tenderly. She could tell by Rouan's expression that it was something serious.

"As you know some time ago our relationship progressed beyond just friendship."

"Yes, I love you Robert."

"I love you too. But here we cannot act as lovers for obvious reasons. Or rather we cannot sleep together."

"I am happy with the way things are, Robert."

"Yes. But we may go too far and I fear cause a scandal. I do not want to hurt Terry. I love you very much Camille. I think we should be married," Rouan said quietly.

"Marry? Are you sure?" Camille asked.

"I'm sure. But what of you?"

Camille's head rocked back at the thought and then answered, "Yes, I'm sure. It is the right thing for us to marry."

Rouan grasped Camille's hand and smiled. "There's one more thing that I must do

before we marry.”

“What is that?”

“As you know my marriage to Terry's mother was destroyed by my addiction. I must make sure that I am spiritually ready for marriage. I promised myself when I was in the Santé that when I got out, I would take my recovery seriously and attend meetings with other addicts.”

“Yes, that is important. But how? Here in the Q?”

“From what I understand the Q is full of addicts in need of recovery. It shouldn't be hard to find a support group in Santa Fe. If I can't find one, I'll have to start one. Father Louie takes several trips a week to Santa Fe, I'll talk to him.”

“So when do you propose we marry?”

“Well, I'll have to talk to Father Louie about that. But first I must talk to Terry.”

“Yes, that is only right Robert. For myself, I could not be happier.” Camille kissed Rouan on the forehead.

Rouan made arrangements to go to Santa Fe with Father Louie. Rouan found that there were dozens of recovery groups with meeting throughout the day. He chose an NA meeting that met in the basement of a church that Father Louie knew well. Father Louie would run his errands and Rouan and go to the meeting and often would have to time for a coffee afterward. Rouan heard many horror stories of life and addiction in the Q. He befriended a man named Hank who, like him, was old and gray had been a heroin addict before the bombings. Hank had been clean for decades and helped many addicts as they struggled in their first days and weeks of recovery. Hank became Rouan's sponsor and encouraged Rouan to sponsor others. Rouan even begin bringing a Native American handyman, who had a horrible reputation as a drunkard amongst the nuns, to his meetings in the church basement (no one in Rouan's group cared what addiction one suffered from, be it alcohol, crack or heroin, all were welcome).

“We don't care about your past.” Hank declared.

“We've all been through so much.” Rouan added. “I think each one of us has to strive for peace within. Let us remember that all wars begin in the darkness of the human heart. All of us have to be exorcised from that darkness, to let it go, to be free of that burden. Hatred, retaliation, fear, paranoia, most of the reasons for war are absurd. We all have to grow up and let go of our petty differences. All of us here have witnessed so many hardships. We came close to seeing the end of the world. I saw the end of my world and awoke in a new world. A world almost destroyed by weapons of war, my country gone. But all of you were here. So you know better than I about the suffering here. I was lucky, I slept through it all.”

“Some of us were sleeping but we woke up,” someone shouted from the back of the room.

Some in the group smiled. Everyone knew his story. That he had been in a coma in France and had only recently returned to America.

“We're glad you're here,” Hank said.

“It's been a pleasure working with Robert,” Hank said. “Well I see it is time to close.” With that, Hank and everyone stood and said the Serenity Prayer: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the thing I can and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Once Rouan felt secure in his recovery, he went to his daughter, Terry, and told her of his plans to marry Camille. Never had Rouan seen such a radiant look on Terry's face as she spoke, “Daddy that is what I've been praying for. I felt from the beginning the Lord brought Camille to you. She loves you so much. Have you talked to Father Louie?”

“Not yet. I wanted to talk to you first.” Rouan replied.

“It will be a beautiful wedding. We must have it here in the chapel,” Terry said enthusiastically.

“So we will. I will talk to Father Louie and Camille and we will set a date.”

“There is something else I want to talk to you about Terry.” Rouan's face darkened the joy from a few moments before vanished. This frightened Terry.

“What is it?”

“Oh I did not mean to frighten you. I would never want to hurt you. But I have hurt you. Because of addiction, you did not have both parents. It was my fault that your mother and I divorced.”

Terry let out a sigh of relief when she realized why her father had grown so serious. “Daddy, you were sick. You could not help yourself. I prayed for you every day when I was girl. I became so good at it, that I became a nun,” she laughed.

Rouan realized at that moment, that his disease had taught his daughter something that he could never teach her: unconditional love. She prayed not for selfish wishes (as he had in his own way) but for someone else, someone she loved dearly.

“That is wonderful. But I'm not off the hook. Not only was I not there for you. I caused you to suffer so greatly. Monsieur Frenot told me that you and your mother came to visit me. I can't imagine how you must have felt when they told you that I was about to die,” Rouan said.

“There you see Daddy, You didn't die. I was praying again for you, for a miracle. I asked the Saints to intercede for you. I prayed that my Daddy would live, and here you are. Don't you see, if you had been back in Houston with mother, you would have been killed. Then I would have lost both my parents.”

“You make things so easy for me, honey. But I had to come back here to tell you these things. It will take the rest of my life to pay back what I took from you. I love you so much. I am so sorry. And I want to thank you for your prayers. For this miracle I've been given.” Both Rouan and Terry had tears in their eyes.

The date for Camille and Rouan's wedding was set for Pentecost. Terry helped Camille pick out a wedding gown. Camille looked radiant. Rouan wished he could stand and take his vows but his legs would not hold him, even so he felt as if he was floating on air.

When Camille threw the bouquet (which was caught by a young girl, a novice who had not yet taken her vows), Rouan vaguely remembered seeing a bridal bouquet

somewhere before but couldn't remember when. Later when he and Camille honeymooned in their new home (a gate house at a ranch a few miles from the convent), he went outside for some air. He wheeled down a wooden ramp (that had been put in place for him) and wheeled up a path to a barbed wire fence. Everything seemed unreal. The sky was blanketed with stars. Rouan contemplated the constellations, the Milky Way, the Big Dipper. And just as things couldn't have become stranger, out of the darkness, a white horse appeared like an apparition on the other side of the fence. The horse approached Rouan. It was then that he remembered where he had seen the tossing of a bridal bouquet. It was in the dream with the white horse. He remembered the bride had been Terry. He remembered his embarrassment when he caught the bridal bouquet. He remembered the promise that he too someday would be married; and now all of that had come to pass. Rouan reached out across the fence and the horse bowed its head low and Rouan was able to reach up and pet its soft white mane. The horse's eyes looked knowingly into Rouan's. Was all this real? Rouan wondered. It was like a fairy tale: the wedding, the bouquet, the white horse, the remembrance of the dream. After all the horrors that had befallen, after all of that: suddenly this apparition of a white horse before him. Illusion, reality, what did it all matter? Yes, he thought, he was blessed with new eyes. It was real enough for him. He had woken up from the nightmare of the past. Was it all a dream, his awakening? Rouan was certain of one thing. The past could not be changed but the future could. One could learn from the past. The past was a great teacher, if one were willing to listen to what it said. One could take the right path whenever one chose. Once a stone fell into a pool, it stayed on the bottom. But a human being unlike a stone could surface after such a fall. The past was gone, its effect could be felt, but the course of one's life could be changed. Rouan considered the existence of God. It seemed to him that God was both everywhere and nowhere. Rouan thought about what his father used to say about infinity and nothingness being two sides to the same coin. Just as that thought passed through his mind, a shooting star burst across the sky. Rouan was transported, elevated momentarily into that sky, into those heavens.

He then thought about the future. He saw his country restored, not as it was but in a

new way. Rouan wondered if his vision (of the restoration of the United States, of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, of its democratic freedoms) was a kind of prophecy, or just the product of wishful thinking. Was all that he had experienced since his awakening a fantasy, a manifestation of a sleeping brain, remnants of a former reality? Had he, in fact, died back in prison in Paris? Was this the afterlife? How was it that he come back justified in his paranoia, a man who had tried to foil a plot to destabilize and ultimately destroy the United States? A man who addressed the United Nations on the behalf of his fallen country? Was it all a product of his unconscious mind, a kind of wish fulfillment? Once again he faced the same question: what was real and what was imagined? No, it was much more than a dream (and since his awakening it was as if he existed in a kind of heightened reality). Not even he could come up with such a powerful dream. It was more than a hallucination, a fantasy. It was much more powerful. Some divine force was at work. Was this some form of Purgatory? he asked himself. Maybe he needed to work out the imperfections in his personality, the defects that held him back. Then, he thought, he could move on to a higher realm. But he didn't want a higher realm. This world was good enough for him. He was happy for the first time in his life.

Even the bi-polar condition that had marked his previous life was gone. Not vanished entirely but somehow transformed, leveled off; it became manageable without medication of any kind. Yes he was depressed at times. But who wouldn't be after discovering all the horrors that he had woken up to? And who wouldn't be after the high points of his new life? Now, it seemed to him, his joys and sorrows followed some kind of order, made sense, and were not simply by the product of some random mood beyond his control. Even if everything was an illusion, a product of his imagination (which he now doubted), he would act as if it was real, and do what he could to make his world, his reality, a better place. And he was not alone in all of this. He shared his world with others. And if it was a dream, it was a beautifully made one. He could feel it with all his senses; he could breathe in the fresh air. It was invigorating. No, he was not the dreamer. The world that surrounded him was not just one of shadows, full of missing parts, loose ends. That is what his dreams were like. That is what his nightmares were like. It seemed some transcendent being was the dreamer and this divine and all

powerful being forgot nothing down to the finest detail. Some power had guided him and blessed him and brought to this place, this moment. I will believe in it all, he declared to himself. Why not? In particular he believed in the prayers and love of his daughter, Terry; and in the love of his wife, Camille. Their love had somehow plucked him from his misery and had lifted him high above all his pain, lifted him out of his own private hell, and gave him eyes to see. He believed in love. He was so grateful. Rouan realized at that moment that he had been given the ultimate second chance, and what up till now had remained only a vague and unknown promise, like an unknown country, was now fulfilled in the strange and magical land that stretched out before him under a starry sky. He had all of eternity to take it in, to contemplate its wonders. Yes, it was all too real.

“Heaven is real,” he whispered to the horse that stood beside him as he stroked its white mane. “Heaven is real,” he said again. He would never have guessed that even in his wildest dreams. He had found Heaven in every moment of his existence. He was so grateful to the force that had guided him, that had offered him this gift of enlightenment. He had looked for answers all of his life and all along everything that he needed was so close that he could not see what hovered all around him. He was happy. He was content. He was ecstatic. But this time he was not flying on false wings. His wings were real and strong and flexible. He wasn't simply being carried away by a fleeting mood, a symptom of a mental disorder. His flight was the result of an inner transformation, his unfolding soul transfigured and guided by a divine light that lifted him beyond the stars, beyond the limitations of time and space. It was the fulfillment of a promise that he had only guessed at, but now fully knew and embraced.

Camille stood in the doorway and called out to him, “Robert, who are you talking to?”

“To the horse,” Rouan replied.

“What horse?”

The horse had spooked and had quietly merged back into the shadows.

“He's gone, dear.” Rouan looked up at Camille.

She seemed like an apparition standing in the doorway in her night gown, the kitchen

light catching the curves of her figure, the curves of her hips and breasts. She was smiling so peacefully. She was luminous, radiant, like a goddess or a Saint, but not one who occupied some distant cloud, she was near, he could reach out and touch her.

“Well come back inside and warm up our bed, it's cold out here. And it's cold in bed without you, my love.” she said

“I can do that,” Rouan replied. He wheeled up the ramp toward her. She opened her arms wide and embraced him so tenderly. He looked up into her eyes and thought he was back looking at the stars, the heavens. “Heaven is real” he repeated for a third time.

“Yes, Robert. Heaven is real.”

Rouan did see major changes in what was once called the Q as the years passed. He did see his vision of the future come to pass. Even in his nineties his heart grew more hopeful every day. He saw the changes for himself in Santa Fe. Hope sprang up from one end of the continent to the other, signs of prosperity cropped up everywhere. The United Nations accepted the Colonies as a sovereign state (and more importantly began accepting imports from the America, on the one condition that the goods were stamped as coming from the Colonies). Rouan had written endlessly on behalf of his countryman in America in journals on the internet read across the free world. He never spoke again at the United Nations. But his words and example were well known. If an old man, debilitated and frail, could survive living in the Q without contamination, then others in the free world need not fear any latent viruses from the people or the goods produced there. Jean-Marc Frenot actively advocated for the lifting of travel restrictions for all those who lived in North America. His voice was heard and he was present when the United Nations accepted the legitimacy of the Colonies. The Colonies were now members of the General Assembly. They did not have the power that the United States once had but they finally had a voice. They could make a case for free travel and the sale of goods worldwide without restrictions.

Rouan saw a massive migration to those parts of the country that were under the control of the Colonies. He saw an amended form of the United States Constitution put back in place. This made him so proud. He saw the Colonies setting a minimum wage

for all workers and setting price controls for rent and food. The large corporations were forced to do business under the federal jurisdiction of the Colonies if they wanted to sell their produce and goods worldwide. Factories were controlled by laws the Colonies put in place; the big corporations now had to answer to them. Small businesses flourished without fear of retribution. The threat of the Colonies removing their stamp of approval on goods produced by the big corporations was a strong incentive for them to tow the line. The world grew confident in the goods manufactured, produced and grown in North America once again (the Q was a thing of the past, that name had become obsolete). Funds flowed into the coffers of the new federal state on the goods exported; it allowed for many new programs to help the poor and disenfranchised, the elderly, starving children, the sick and destitute. Taxation on workers' wages was extremely low while the big corporations were required to fund retirement and health insurance benefits for all workers.

Rouan and Camille watched all of these changes together. When Santa Fe, and a large portion of New Mexico, officially joined the Colonies, Rouan and Camille petitioned for citizenship. Travel opened up. Even so Rouan and Camille made New Mexico their permanent home. Life at the convent flourished and Rouan and Camille spent as much time as possible there. Rouan started an NA group in one of the abandoned buildings at the convent; dozens of regular members attending there. Camille once again worked as a nurse and tended to the poor who need medical assistance.

One spring night as Camille and Rouan sat on the porch of their cottage, Rouan reflected on all the things that had come to pass: the restoration both within himself and his beloved country. He had found peace and so had his country, both had moved from darkness and despair into the light. The twilight sun's pink and red streaks had been replaced with a deep blue and a violet afterglow. Rouan glanced over at Camille and thought that she was more beautiful than ever. When out in the sun, working in the garden, walking around the ranch, or even running errands in town, she always wore a hat to shield her pale complexion from the sun. Her face seemed to him to be ageless. She was obviously older than when they first met but to Rouan she appeared to be like a ripened fruit that had matured perfectly and only now was ready to be picked. Camille's

brehtaking beauty hadn't diminished at all. To the contrary, her beauty had blossomed in the years he had known her. Her eyes were still a lovely green. When Rouan looked into them, they filled him with such hope. He could see the future when looking into them (even more so now that he had reached such an advanced age; he thought he could see into eternity looking into those eyes). She had the figure of a girl her in twenties; she practiced yoga and even convinced Rouan to try it. The breathing exercises and the stretching was an excellent tonic for someone in his condition and at his advanced age.

"What are you thinking about dear?" Camille asked.

"All the changes that we have seen and even after all these years, how beautiful you are. You are more beautiful today than the day I met you."

"You have kept me young. Our love has kept me young. When I look at you, I feel like a school girl with a crush."

"And I feel like a school boy that cannot believe his good fortune at capturing the heart of the prettiest girl in the class."

"Who could have predicted all this?"

"With all the horrors, life can be so beautiful. We are so lucky. That I've lasted this long is such a miracle. I am so blessed."

"We are both blessed. I am so blessed to have you in my life Robert."

"I don't know what I would have done without you."

"I think you would have done fine."

"I'm not sure of that at all. What is that you have in your hand?" Rouan asked after seeing Camille pick up a book on the table beside her.

"A novel I've been reading."

Rouan took a deep breath and then let it out. He had no need for fiction, none at all. Even after all its disappointments and horrors, madness and pain, this life was enough for him. He could imagine no other. He could imagine nothing better. The door of Heaven had opened and he'd crossed its threshold without the sound of trumpets,

fanfare or blowing horns of any kind; there was just the fragrance of something in the wind, something in the air, something in his soul.