

American Nobody

A work of Science Fiction by Christopher Gesualdi

As I gazed out the porthole window into the unbroken void of space, I felt suddenly this emptiness in my chest; one I had never felt before. I was now a distinguished officer of the Royal Star Corps, a decorated hero, all I had ever dreamed of. And yet, I was unsatisfied. I had spent my life looking for something tangible at the edge of this eternal frontier. But was this it? Was this the destiny I had been searching for?

Here, lost in the infinite darkness of the universe, I wasn't sure.

Chapter One

The Beginning of the End

There's a steady plume of thick smoke rising from over the dunes, one I watch with childlike curiosity, trying to forget that behind those sandy hills lie the remnants of my final battlefield. Despite my best efforts though, the horrors are too vivid to simply ignore. I see it now, the bloodied corpses of my former comrades strewn across the burning landscape like an oil painting of hell, a smoldering crater left to mark our exit from this world. And all I could do in the end was limp away like a coward. Overhead the sun approaches supernova, a crackling ball of energy and heat ready to collapse inward on itself and take the universe with it. Here I am. The sole witness to the end of the world, watching with a hole in my side and the doomsday button in my hand. And I can't even remember who I am anymore.

"Who do you want to be?"

There's that question again, waiting for me as I close my eyes. When I was younger I probably had an answer. Looking up at some authority figure with a cheeky missing-teeth little kid smile and declaring "astronaut" or "fireman" or something else within the same mindset of wanting to wear a cool uniform and ride around in a big shiny bastard of a vehicle for the rest of my life. In that alternate timeline I had grown up, eventually discovering my true calling in life. Something simple, a writer maybe, or an artist, or an OSHA-certified forklift operator, a lifetime spent stacking crates at a biscuit factory in lower Missouri. Back in the real world however, I was never

able to find the right answer. I could only shrug my shoulders, eventually offering a half-hearted “Astronaut?” and hoping people would leave it at that. And for awhile, they did. The world moves fast enough that people are willing to overlook the obvious inconsistencies, applying their own labels and brands to those undefined people around them. I had become saddled with a lot of these useless symbolic things lately, and I regarded each with reluctance, names like terrorist, revolutionary, fugitive, sometimes even hero. But none of them ever seemed to stick in my mind, no matter how often they were repeated by the high definition 1080p newsmen and the hopeless revelers who followed blindly in my clumsy footsteps.

I had always assumed I would come to an answer eventually. But now, I wasn't so sure. I had set off like a fool with the hopelessly juvenile intention of finding myself, only to "find myself" bleeding to death a million miles from home. Closing my eyes I search for a tangible memory, but I find none. There were no answers here. Just a handful of broken and blurry recollections, scattered images of light and color with no frame of reference to guide me.

Aware of my failure I finally open my eyes wide, gazing up at my burning god, waiting for the light to engulf me completely. But before I can lay my body down to rest, I'm blinded by a screaming moment of clarity. A sudden bolt of unbroken sunlight, one which pierces my optic nerve and shoots to the back of my brain, filling it with an exploding cacophony of light. And in that brief moment, it all comes rushing back. My life flashes before my eyes, the illuminated images flickering past with the hurried pace of a broken film projector. I see them then. The bronze god and the tired actor. The space pilots and the doppelganger armies. The smirking cowboy and the snarling black dog. And of course there was the girl. Standing there in that golden field, her body burning a silhouette against the sky as she turns to me with that smile of hers. The smile that made me wonder if maybe everything would work out in the end. I see it all so clearly, the shattered fragments coming together for a final reconciliation, the answer so apparent to me now. Everything in its place.

I remember.

And realizing the absurdity of it all, all I can do is I laugh.

*Act I:
Our Tired Adolescence*

I spent most of my time on-colony daydreaming, gazing up at the stars and wondering if somewhere out there my destiny was waiting. In those moments I would fancy myself as the rogue and dashing star of my own space drama. An ace pilot in the service of the empire, dedicated soldier and hero of the people. But there was always a moment of hesitation in these idle moments. I was no hero. I was simply an unpopular schoolboy with mildly competent grades and unrealistic goals; too much of a coward to ever actually commit to anything. I was as nameless as anyone you'd pass on the street. Nothing more than another anonymous stranger, living an unremarkable existence on some backwater colony in the middle of dead space.

Still. I kept on dreaming.

Chapter Two

The Inarticulate Conception

I've always had a bit of a memory problem, though to be honest it's not anything I've ever spent too much time lamenting. I figure there are enough kids dying of consumption in third world countries that forgetting what year it is now and again is a decent enough hand to have been dealt. It's a minor character flaw really, one I've managed to come to terms with. The various prescriptions I down with bravado at the start of each morning help of course, myself a proud card carrying member of generation RX. These days it was the kids who weren't on some sort of drug that were the freaks anyhow, we bright-eyed attention deficit psychotics having taken our place atop the pedestal of normality long ago. But despite the pills I was never truly cured. It seemed there were always those tiny bits and pieces that would slip away while I wasn't looking. The names that just wouldn't stick, the graded school papers I couldn't remember completing in the first place. Tiny things like that. I would forget if I had brushed my teeth, if I had eaten lunch. And at this very moment, staring deep into the supermarket's refrigerated abyss, I've forgotten if I'm supposed to be buying milk or not. I wish I had brought a list, though knowing me I probably wrote one out only to leave it sitting on the kitchen table. Thinking back I can vaguely remember eating some rather dry cereal, but for all I know that breakfast had occurred months ago, a phantom memory.

On the bus returning home I finally notice the words “No Milk” scrawled in my own hasty typefont across the back of my left hand, sighing as I pull the cord to signal my stop and gathering up my groceries. Glancing down, the freshly-purchased carton of milk peeks at me through the top of the plastic bag almost mockingly.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, a child dies from malaria every 30 seconds. 7,884,000 children a year.

All things considered, I was doing alright.

I arrive home without incident, clicking my walkman off as I prod the front door open with a foot. In the living room I find my uncle’s armchair notably empty, though the worn piece of furniture still bears a notable impression, the seat sagging from years of use. Leaving the grocery bags on the table in the adjoining kitchen, I return to helpfully gather the beer cans he’s left littered around the TV table, bending to snatch the few empties which have taken up residence in the thick shag forest beneath me and returning to toss them in the kitchen trash can. I’d wonder as to my uncle’s whereabouts, but seeing as his car is in the driveway I can only assume he’s in his workshop. I’d confirm his location, but I learned long ago that it’s usually a bad idea to venture into the workshop without good reason. At least not if you desired to return unscathed.

I frown for a moment when I open the fridge, placing the freshly bought carton of milk beside several of its unopened brothers. Rather than dwell on my failings, I instead reach for the single open container, a tired king behind his proud pawns. With the carton to my lips I move to retrieve a snack from the freshly bought box of toaster pastries in the bag beside me, though I’m instead greeted to the sound of biscuits wrapped in cheap foil clattering onto the tile floor as my unskilled fingers lose their grip. In the back of my mind I consider a society where such abstract sound is considered the pinnacle of art, and I in my clumsy lack of talent am their greatest maestro. I take my bow, grumbling as I bend over and scoop up the mess I’ve made before rising to return the snacks to their perch above the microwave, and it’s in that moment that the fallacy in my previous statement becomes clear. Namely, there is no microwave. There had been a

microwave, one which I'm rather sure that even despite my failing presence of mind was something I had used to nuke a breakfast burrito sometime recently. What remains now however is simply a rather convenient microwave-shaped space on the counter, handily outlined by a few miscellaneous boxes of cereal and a loaf of white bread which still bears an impression from where it had once been inconsiderately shoved against the side of the now absent appliance. Unsure how to come to terms with the situation, I absentmindedly tear the foil from a corner of my toaster pastry and take a bite.

It was an action that confirmed nothing, yet seemed altogether correct.

I find my uncle in the garage, the patches of human features vaguely identifiable; obscured as they are behind racks filled with half-useful technology. I'm surprised to find him actually working, the welder's mask over his face offset by his traditional unkempt fashion, a stained white T and worn pair of grey sweatpants. Too busy fiddling with some piece of machinery he doesn't notice my entrance, me taking slow sugary bites of cherry-flavored pastry while watching with casual interest. My stealthy entrance is soon betrayed however as I accidentally brush against some metal hosing, my legal guardian looking up from his work as the coiled tubes clank angrily against themselves.

"You're home!" He exclaims, raising his mask to reveal the excited smile framed by his scraggle of a beard. I'm unable to return the enthusiasm.

"The microwave is missing, I assume this is your doing."

"Microwave!" He laughs at the thought. I survey the scattered mass of wires and circuitry beside him and know that my beloved appliance is already dead.

Uncle David called himself an inventor, though his profession served largely as an excuse to get drunk before noon in the name of ingenuity. He was one of those brash artistic types, callous poets who regard their own works as gifts to creation. In truth he had only ever invented one actual marketable product, a highly effective and corrosive multi-purpose household cleaner called Miracle 9, the residual sales off which we lived. After one particularly heavy night of drinking, my uncle decided I was finally old enough to know the truth behind his great discovery. It turns out that following a rather messy divorce from his second wife, my uncle had apparently

attempted suicide by crude poisoning, mixing together a potpourri of whatever he could find around the house that seemed lethal. The list of ingredients could fill the first few pages of a trashy pocket novel, though the bulk of the concoction was made up of Bleach, Mr. Clean, some Alka-Seltzer tablets, paint thinner, and grape kool-aid (for taste). Almost immediately after ingesting the swill he began vomiting, accidentally kicking over the bucket containing the mixture as he stumbled towards the bathroom. When he finally returned he discovered that his vomit had been miraculously dissolved, along with a corner section of the carpet.

The bottle was covered in a multitude of sternly worded warning labels. The Dutch apparently bought it in droves, for reasons that were never quite explained to me.

My uncle considered this discover a miracle, hence the name. I myself always wondered what sort of Rube Goldberg type deity would have the mind to dissolve a man's wedding so that in his ensuing attempting suicide a new household cleansing product could be happened upon. The only miracle I could see was how he had managed to pour that swill down his throat and live to tell about it. I never voiced this opinion however, because for all my uncle's faults he was a better man than most. Maybe not the ideal father figure, but even still I respected him enough to allow him his delusions of grandeur. After all, he was the only family I had.

"Let me tell you something my boy..." he says with a snide smile. "We don't need a microwave anymore! In fact, America will never need a microwave again!" It's then that he stands, taking what appears to be a gun from his table and pointing it in my general direction.

"I don't want to know what that is just please stop aiming it at me please" I plead, taking desperate cover behind my own arms. He approaches as I cringe, getting within execution range before suddenly snatching the half-eaten pop-tart from my hand. "Hey!" I protest, watching helplessly as he casually tosses it onto his worktable.

"Time for a field test" he says, grabbing the lip of his welders mask. He looks at me briefly, furrowing his brow. "You might want to stay back... you know, just in case." I take the cue to hurriedly shield myself behind a piece of heavy sheet metal at the other end of the garage, peeking around a corner and waiting for the subsequent explosion. My uncle quickly lowers his mask into place, and before I can remember the words to the Lord's Prayer he's already begun.

The gun lights up as the internal motors presumably begin spinning, a fiendish orange glow that radiates through the vent holes he's punctured through the outside of what looks to be a toy ray gun. Likely some cheap piece of Chinese plastic originally designed to fire ping pong balls or some other form of harmless projectile. I can only wonder what fiendish modifications he's made. Yet despite the glowing and slight whirring noise coming from the toy, nothing really seems to be taking place. No lasers careening off the walls, no explosion, not even a puff of smoke. As my uncle sets the gun down I assume failure, but as he lifts the mask up there's a noticeable smile across his face, eyes wide with dumb excitement. "It works! Dear god Watson it works!" he exclaims, and intrigued, I quickly rejoin my Uncle by his worktable. At first I can find nothing of interest, though as I examine the pop tart further it becomes apparent that the thin layer of confetti speckled icing has noticeably lost rigidity, the formerly solid white mass now slick with evidence of its failing structural integrity. Meanwhile, a distinct strawberry ooze trickles from the wound I'd bit open earlier.

"What the hell have you done?" I ask, not wanting to know the answer.

"It's the Micro-Blast my boy!" He declares, spinning around in his work chair clutching the device in question. "All the convenience and efficiency of the modern microwave; now contained in the palm of your hand!" Before I can process what he's saying he's already plucked the errant pastry from where it sits and taken a bite. "Perfection!" He declares, offering it to me with an extended hand. I recoil in horror.

"You built a microwave gun."

"I... built... a microwave gun" he confirms slowly, the smug smile still plastered on his face. I breathe deep; shaking my head at the horror my uncle has wrought.

"This is unfathomably irresponsible...I mean there's no way this can be safe." He shrugs, taking another unadvised bite.

"What's the problem?"

"Didn't it occur to you that maybe microwaves are built a certain way for a reason?" I argue. "Like maybe they shield the rays behind a sturdy metal box for safety reasons, something like that?" He scrunches up his face in confusion.

“Hell, I don’t know about that sort of thing” he offers carelessly. “I’m sure it’s not that dangerous...” I shake my head.

“You’re saying you’re comfortable with giving people a gun that shoots microwaves? You really trust that middle America is smart enough to use this device for its intended purpose?”

“Well who’s going to be dumb enough to point this at somebody?” He jokes with a slight laugh. I look at him in disbelief, pointing towards the device in question.

“It’s shaped like a gun!” I decry. My uncle looks down at the object in his hands, the child’s plaything turned deadly weapon that he in his shortsightedness has created. There’s a brief pause, and I assume he’s come to his senses.

“Well... I mean this is just a prototype” he justifies. “I’m sure, they’ll put a disclaimer on the—” as I turn to leave he’s still explaining his position, something which very quickly turns into a half-serious rant about my inability to recognize genius and my lack of marketing savvy. But by the time he’s making his point I’m already out of earshot.

In the kitchen I listen as the Chinese man on the other end of the line confirms my order, absent-mindedly staring into a microwave shaped hole in the world and picturing a platoon of child soldiers crossing a hill with rainbow-colored microwave weaponry in hand, boiling the brains of their countrymen as they go. “I need to pay on a credit card.” I tell these irresponsible and unfortunate youth. “Extra duck sauce if possible.”

In the bathroom mirror that night I examine my face curiously, pawing at my reflection like a confused child. Downstairs my uncle is passed out in his chair, a container of micro-blasted Moo-Shu pork rotting away beside a phalanx of beer cans. I think of the partially digested sesame beef quietly gestating in my stomach, the waves of sloshing acids slowly dissolving the organic matter, breaking the bonded amino acids down into base proteins. And for some reason I am suddenly aware of every working of my own body. The expanse of my lungs, the slow steady beating of my heart, and the nervous crackling of electrical signals bouncing around the inside of

my skull. I long to be the hollow man, constructed of clear Lucite plastics, the wonders of my own body not hidden behind a flesh façade but instead exposed to the world. Paraded onto an ancient stage from behind red velvet curtains, the horror of our simple and meaningless existence exposed to a paying audience.

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Was that really me? The gaunt dull animal with the sideways frown and hollow eyes? Then again, how could a man ever paint an accurate portrait of himself? Maybe someday government scientists would invent the means for us to view the world in four-dimensions, to see the brilliant radio waves that radiated throughout the universe like a deep and endless ocean. But for now all I had was the few pitiful spectrums of light my eyes could process; the only inhabitants of this stale chromatic world being myself, my lonely ego, and the bottle of prescription medication in my right hand, blaring angry instructions at me in thick black type.

TAKE 3 TABLETS BY MOUTH EVERYDAY AT BEDTIME

This was my nightly ritual; to watch as the cascading waterfall of drug-induced normalcy slowly receded, revealing the jagged and uneven stone beneath. Normally I'd heed the demands of my orange idol, eventually ending my flirtation with insanity and devouring greedily of his innards. Tonight however, I'm content to ignore the decree, slowly slipping further into my hazy delirium, the world warping and blurring at the edges.

As I stumble into my bedroom the smiling couple eyes me suspiciously from their lacquer frame. They've got every right to be upset I suppose, seeing as how their only son has been replaced by this slow sad doppelganger. I try my best to ignore their stares, clicking off the lamp before stretching out on my bed. But for some reason I can't seem to shake the uncomfortable mood in the room, feeling almost guilty as I'm finally forced to turn the picture at my bedside face down, hiding from the judgment of ghosts.

I once stumbled across some Christian literature which argued that the existence of guilt was proof of a higher power; the idea that an organism could feel regret over their own actions showed that our thought patterns were beyond anything the universe could construct by happenstance. I always wondered if it was true. If the heavy feeling in my chest whenever I

looked at that smiling couple in the frame was not due to some psychological failing but the work of a higher power punishing me for my inability to change the past. It was a rather unfair sentence, but compared to most other biblical punishments it was relatively minor. You rarely hear of people turning into pillars of salt these days, maybe god had just gotten soft. But this was my curse. That despite all my broken mind I would never forget the horrible events of that day, a memory still as clear and vivid to me as if it had been long ago been recorded onto disposable media, with the tapedeck infinitely looping the footage through a direct feed to the back of my eyelids. And on nights like these, as the darkness surrounds me, the waking world slipping away, I find myself forced to revisit it. That horrible moment when I first entered the world. My genesis.

Ten years ago, a young boy and his parents died in a horrible car accident. It was an unfortunate and unavoidable accident, their smart Japanese compact car hitting a patch of black ice and flipping into a ditch off the interstate. The young boy of course was me, the previous incarnation at least. A presumably normal and well-adjusted child who was killed on impact, head slamming violently against the car's interior and knocked more than a few things loose. It was at that moment that I was born. Crawling from a womb of twisted metal and shattered glass out into the frozen air, gasping my first panicked breaths. A fully-formed child, the confused and shivering son of this blameless tragedy. And the last thing I remember is lying there, bloody and bruised as in the distance the sun broke through the ground. Myself in awe as the sky ignited with the most pure and beautiful spectrum of blue, watching as the world lit up for the first time in my life.

Several days later I awoke in a hospital, bathed in harsh florescent lighting and not knowing who I was. Various men entered and exited, asking questions from behind their clipboards and recording my scattered and failing recollection with precise strokes of ballpoint pens. One of them told me that everything would be alright.

I knew he was lying.

I was temporarily released so I could to attend the funeral of the two strangers who had once been my parents, my hospital gown traded for a stiff black suit one size too large. It was a cold autumn morning that the service was held, me watching stoically as a pair of mahogany boxes were slowly lowered into the ground. But though the priest spoke well of this young couple

snatched away in their prime, the mourners seemed more interested in their emotionless child. I'm not sure what I was expected to do, if it was to cry or to yell or to curse whatever higher power I assume I had once regarded. But I couldn't. The only memories I had of these people were unrecognizable blurs of color and emotion that I had no business trying to make sense of. The few tangible scraps of memories I had managed to collect were abstract at best. My mother holding my hand in a crowded department store, my father looking up from his lit cigarette and smiling warmly. Meaningless snapshots taken at random moments in time, photocopied enough times to render them largely unrecognizable. And for all I knew these errant memories may not have even been genuine. Dreams maybe, the work of my own imagination. Or worse yet I had simply recalled the moments of some popular television program and assumed them to be my own.

I was without any emotion that day, save for the first twinge of that irreconcilable guilt. Guilt that came from knowing I'd never be able to meet these fine decent people who had been responsible for my conception. Guilt from knowing that I was the only undeserving survivor of this tragedy, that only through their unknowing sacrifice had I entered this world.

After failing a mandatory mental health assessment and collecting my government sponsored medication, I was sent to live with my uncle in Massachusetts. That same year I would re-enter school as a rather reserved if not hopeful young student. I figured this was my chance to start anew, to forge through this tragedy of mine and return to the presumed normalcy I had likely once engaged in. Soon though, my optimism faded. I discovered quickly that I was quite unlike these peers of mine, who filled their time with idle pursuits; with hobbies and sports and talk of the grand futures lain out before them. They were to be doctors and firemen, ballerinas and professional baseball players. Not that it mattered that few; if any; of them would ever truly achieve their dreams. The point is that they had something they believed in, the starry-eyed idealism to drag them unscathed through adolescence. And as my peers ran headstrong down their own paths, I could only shuffle my feet at the starting line and act unawares that the race had even started. I had no ambitions, no desires, no goals. I was entirely lacking in that necessary youthful foolishness, the dumb unbridled optimism which the viewbox instills in our six

year olds; primary colored cartoon heroes telling them they can “do anything” if they want it hard enough. But what did I want? If I had known once, I knew no longer.

Not wanting to bother the world with my hesitation, I resolved to instead sink into peaceful obscurity. I became the quiet loner in the back of the classroom, the friendless nobody who is so invisible no one even thinks to pick on him. I was invisible and would remain as such well into my teenage years. I tried my best to feign contentment, knowing that any hint to the contrary might be enough of a case for them to send me back to the state psychologists. So I grit my teeth and smiled for the cameras, all the while watching as the world slowly left me behind.

And here I am now; still wondering what it is that would make me complete.

I’ve tried to figure it out of course, filling my bookshelf with heavy novels looking for a purpose to model my own after. I find myself secretly drawn to these long epics, tales regarding old men standing at the edge of rocky cliffs and proclaiming their defiance of fate. I long for their boldness. That resolve, that strength of character, the refusal to settle for what most men would consider fulfillment. To stand at the end of the world, to explode outward like a dying star in a final justification of one’s own existence, and only then to lay down to rest. I realize the fallacy in my desires of course. Besides the obvious fact that the time of the merchant ships is far past, I am someone barely courageous enough to try a new brand of soft drink, let alone consider venturing into the metaphorical belly of the beast with some manner of phallic Freudian weaponry held aloft in my hand. But though I try to disregard these fantasies as impossible, drowning them in the sweet candy pills and the smooth faceless complacency I feign in public— on nights like tonight; as the past returns to haunt and to taunt me; I still dream.

Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. A gun fires and the arm jerks in recoil. My uncle’s life is saved by his invention and somewhere in Deutschland a man is eternally drowning his sorrows in a bottle of Miracle 9. And here I am, alone and forgotten somewhere north of nowhere, watching the slow awkward shadows from the ceiling fan as they dance across my face. Recklessly hoping for something to arise out of the darkness and save me from my mediocrity.

I had hoped things would be better once I got into the corps, but I guess that was little more than wishful thinking. After my mediocre performance in the combat aptitude tests I was assigned to the repair division, essentially sentenced to two years as a lowly wrench monkey. I couldn't really complain of course. They sure as hell didn't need a snot-nosed kid who couldn't even keep the throttle steady up in the skies, and most pilots were recruited straight out of the combat academies than from the civ ranks anyhow. However, there was a lot of buzz running around regarding some hot-shot kid who had aced the combat apps, the first time a new recruit had scored full points in over a decade. Best of all he wasn't even one of those academy brats, just a regular civ like us. I was jealous sure. But I still wanted to meet him.

Chapter Three

Our Proud Bronze Gods

I once heard that there's a portion of the human brain whose only function is to avoid mammoth stampedes, long forgotten neural synapses that still fire at random intervals. It's supposedly the reason a busy room will suddenly go quiet, the most interesting conversation cut short by our subconscious desire to avoid tusk impalement. And now; as I stand on the street corner and fiddle with the walkman in my pocket; I feel that familiar twinge of adrenalin, instinctually glancing around in search of the impending stampede. It always takes me a good few seconds before I remember it isn't the ice age anymore. Several million years ago my heightened instincts could've saved caves full of my Cro-Magnon brothers from certain doom. Nowadays society just groaned at the sight of twitchy bastards like myself.

"Mammoth check" I whisper under my breath. My flat-browed ancestors nod their heads in stoic appreciation.

I sometimes wonder if there's a period in time where I'd fit in, where my modern flaws and inadequacies would be interpreted as the markings of a great hero. All I really know for sure is that the modern age left me behind a long time ago. For example, right now you can probably fit the sum works of every major artist in the history of music recording onto a computer chip the

size of an M&M. And yet here I am, fiddling with a busted tape-player, trying in vain to drown my morning boredom in the listless screams of dead rock and rollers. The tapes aren't easy to find, my music library limited to the handful of old punk recordings I've found in back-alley record stores and thrift shops, but it's more than enough for me. No programmable tracklists, no handy scroll wheel. Just a corroded length of magnetic tape guided by the series of half-working buttons running over the top of the device. **REW, STOP, FF, REC, OPEN.** These commands were the tiny bits of escapism that kept me sane, all that I needed in the world. After all, you give a man the freedom to listen to anything he wants and he'll end up in a padded room, frothing at the mouth as the collected works of Jan Hammer bounce off the walls. You give a man the freedom to do anything he wants and he'll eventually tire of banging super models and set the universe on fire. We're only human after all.

Standing at the edge of the street, my ears burning with the sweet sounds of long forgotten basement rock, those familiar primal instincts kick in once again. Looking up I can see it crossing the horizon line, a bead of sweat running down my neck as the great yellow beast barrels towards me. I look around for an escape, feeling the desperation growing by the second. But there's no way out. My only hope is for a rift in space-time to open, the crackling void sucking me inside and propelling me back to a time when the kids were alright. I close my eyes and I can hear them- calling for me from across the expanse, their voices filtered through the crackling hiss of half-functioning audio equipment and decades of tape decay. But too soon are their cries trampled underfoot by the screaming of the beast, like the horrid screeching of a thousand dying birds. My fight or flight instincts have beat each other into submission; burnt out synapses gone dark again as I open my eyes and find myself accepting my fate, refusing to fight against that which was inevitable. Watching with nameless horror as the beast opens its maw and welcomes me inside.

December 8th, 2054. Day 434 of my compulsory High School education.

It never got any easier.

The driver eyes me warily as I board, a gruff heavy-set woman whose own children were likely already grown up and dying in a gutter somewhere. I don't blame her for the apprehension,

assuming I'd be equally disagreeable if my chosen profession involved chauffeuring around unappreciative teenagers. As the mammoth lurches back to life I swing my bag into a seat, plopping down beside it as the current track begins to skip uselessly. The sudden absence of uniform motion seems too much for my half-century old technology to process, though under my scrutinizing gaze the inner mechanisms almost apologetically correct themselves, filling my existence once more with the comforting lull of half-toned electronic feedback. Letting my back sink into the stiff plastic seating, my eyes wander across the slick canvas banner across from me, one which runs the length of the bus's interior. "***Our Greatest Weapon Against Terrorism – You***" it proclaims in a heavy sans-serif font, the black words breaking across an otherwise empty white expanse. Looking down at my pathetic third-world build, I hoped they were talking to someone else.

It was all part of the government's latest propaganda nightmare, trying to instill blind fear-driven patriotism in an otherwise uncaring public. The school hallways were blanketed with posters bearing the same slogan, a silhouette of this mythical everyman American hero standing proudly American flag majestically unfurls behind him. For the most part it was the same sort of mantra that had been regurgitated almost verbatim over the past half a century – the enemy has silently infiltrated our ranks, and the best way to combat their mysterious agenda is to continue living in fear, turning in your neighbors for their imagined crimes against the state.

The real reason for this new push however was that the military's standards were finally low enough that any red-blooded American citizen who still had a working trigger finger was now considered more than qualified to hunt insurgents. Long ago the government had come to the simple realization that the more money they spent on the education budget, the lower the military enrollment rates became; these newly educated brats running off to their sissy college campuses. The simple solution of course was to let the two budgets overlap, fixing up the schools while quietly replacing the smiling sweater-vested guidance councilors with friendly muscle-bound veterans known as "career advisors." It was a devious practice, scouting the dullards and offering them what was pretty much a free ride through the rest of high school in return for their indentured servitude. Sometimes I'd see them, square-jawed kids with crew cuts running laps

around the school and handing in half-attempted English essays with smug grins. I understood the necessity of a working military as much as anybody; especially given today's geo-political wasteland; but it was still disconcerting to know that the unfortunate kids who weren't talented enough to get basketball scholarships somehow saw an exciting career in getting shot at as a viable alternative.

We should've been outraged, but the truth is that nobody really cared enough to say anything. These days it wasn't about how much you loved big brother, rather how much casual indifference you treated him with. In the corner of the bus a few of the boys are playing some handheld video game console in the seats towards the back; their glazed-over eyes gleefully looked onto tiny handheld devices as they wirelessly murder each other, while a group of the attractive girls sitting in the front pass an internet reader around, the LCD screen dimming as it finds itself unable to siphon enough battery power to display his radiant white smile of teen heartthrob Johnny Nebraska. One of the girls; a strawberry blonde; catches eyes with me and shoots a disdainful glare, something which causes me to quickly turn towards my adjoining window and feign nonchalance.

These were my peers, happily watching their vid-screens as a million miles away from here black tanks rolled through nameless cities, the leader of each major power waiting almost anxiously for the bright red phone beside their desk to ring. Yet to us the world outside is at peace, the cold New England wind whispering through the trees and scattering the leaves about listlessly. I briefly imagine the flash of a nuclear weapon peering from over the horizon, the intense flash of heat and energy engulfing and vaporizing the whole lot of us in an instant. The world covered in flame, everything we had ever loved gone in the blink of an eye. And as the track cuts out; the strumming of an ancient guitar replaced with the dead silence of the living world; I wonder if anyone would even notice.

I wearily rise to my feet, standing at attention as the bus comes to a stop and legions of similar purposed minds shuffle into the aisle. My unknown maestro is beginning another song,

screaming about how if we're all going to die we might as well go down with a loaded gun in one hand and a bottle of alcohol in the other. Though I appreciate the sentiment I regrettably remove my headphones – the desperate rock and roll fading out of earshot. What replaces it though is not the sounds of our regular funeral march, but instead the hurried murmurs of my pointing classmates, gesturing wildly towards some commotion outside. Concerned I crook my head, peering beyond the thick Plexiglas to see the crowd gathered around the school entrance. It takes me a second to assess the situation, but it isn't long before I find an unfamiliar smile crossing my face. My thoughts of the approaching Orwellian state dissipate as the procession begins moving forward, me eagerly anticipating the sight of the incorrigible Mr. McFinnegan and his yearly shenanigans. I hoped he wouldn't disappoint.

The ancient brick behemoth I and several generations of bored teenagers referred to fondly as “school” was quite an interesting landmark, not for any sort of eye-catching architectural design or famous alumni, but rather for the strange history of the building. It had been built around the time of the depression, the money for its foundations being graciously donated by a charitable benefactor named Dooley McFinnegan. A former bootlegger turned factory owner, Mr. McFinnegan figured the act of kindness might earn him at least a few points in the eyes of his vengeful Irish Catholic god, though the man's charity did not deter him from naming the school after himself. Nor did it stop him from commissioning a grand statue of his likeness to be cast in bronze, set at the foot of the steps of this new community installation. It was quite a magnificent work to be quite honest, this proud stout Irishman gazing wistfully upwards, extending his arm to the heavens as if reaching towards fate itself. That or perhaps there was a bottle of illicit liquor waiting on a high shelf, but no one really thought to ask before Mr. McFinnegan was tragically gunned down at the dedication ceremony. It was all quite a mess really, something about some unresolved mafia feud, bad blood and all that. There's still an impression near the statue's left shin, allegedly left by an errant bullet. The only remnant of the only remotely exciting event to grace the town in over a century.

Even now the kids affectionately referred to the place as Dead Mick High School. I wish we had enough money for a sports team; our mascot would've been fantastic.

Anyhow, it was sometime in the 60s that the first wave of counter-culture pranksters were set loose on the world, old McFinnegan's arm being hacked off at the shoulder in the dead of night. And it was this seemingly innocuous act that lay the grounds for what would soon become a yearly tradition. Unwilling to delve into the budget to replace the missing limb, the school instead commissioned the senior art class to craft a paper mache replica. The solution was crude but effective, the sturdy newsprint and paste design quite convincing from a distance, surprisingly able to sustain even the heavy New England rain and snow. What the school board failed to calculate however, was how well it would stand up to the bored and able young minds of our small community.

This is why I find our patina green idol enjoying a newfound popularity on this cold December morning, the anniversary of his death and the poor man's annual defacing. Mr. McFinnegan stands proudly, almost as if unaware of the black cowboy hat atop his head and the faded porno magazine held aloft in his right hand. In addition his limb has been ripped from the socket, replaced by a crude replica which grasps awkwardly at his new paper-mache dick. It's all quite a sight, however the true ingenuity here is the water hose strung through the back of his new appendage, the old Irish bastard could be seen spilling his seed carelessly all around the school entrance. And even I; the disaffected young malcontent; find myself wearing a dumb smile as I admire the handiwork.

"Pretty good huh?" I hear a voice remark from close behind me. I turn to catch sight of the voice's source, the dark-haired boy taking a long step from his vantage point atop a low stone embankment, unkempt hair falling over his eyes as jumps down beside me. He wears a brown bomber jacket over a black t-shirt; the front of which bears an illegibly faded band logo.

"Yeah, it's something alright" I agree, both of us mulling over the scene with a strange fascination. "You the one who did it?"

"No" he says with a sad shake of the head. "I never had much of a knack for modern art." We chuckle at this, the both of us surveying the chaos with quiet appreciation. Several hours of running water has left the school entranceway covered in a slick sheet of ice, and there seems to be a great divide between the eager young souls who happily slide their way towards the front

door, and the poor denizens who nervously trudge across; several losing their footing as they curse the cold embrace of the New England winter. “Still...” he begins. “I bet I could do better.” I scoff at the errant observation.

“Better than this?” He nods at my challenge. I try to catch sight of a smile at the edge of his lips, but he’s apparently serious. “C’mon...” I offer in disbelief. “You couldn’t top this.”

“Why not?”

“Really?” I ask with a teasing shake of my head, waiting for him to recognize his own misjudgment. “I mean, look at this. The penis and everything—” I gesture towards the grand spectacle before us, legions of cold schoolchildren slipping around the base of their perpetually ejaculating idol, the man’s stern bronze gaze locked on the sky as the wind ruffles the pages of his porno rag. The principal has apparently caught wind of the commotion and is now frantically gesturing for everyone to move inside, yelling angrily as he tries in vain to twist the frozen water spigot off. “I mean, this is art. This is the pinnacle of creation – chaos and disorder and all that. How the hell would you even begin to try and outdo this?” My new acquaintance mulls it over for a second, furrowing his brow as he examines the work in question.

“I don’t know—I mean you might be right” he admits with a shrug, and I feel for a second content that I’ve convinced him of his err in judgment. “Still...I can’t help but feel some sort of—I don’t know... intuition, a premonition or whatever you want to call it... hell, maybe it’s fate.” He thinks for a second, before laughing at this idea. “That’s it!” he declares as he whirls around from the statue to face me. “Fate. It’s my fate to do something rather spectacular to this statue. Something completely over-the-top, something so fucked up I can’t even begin to think of it right now.” He turns again towards the monument, gazing up at the thing with a hopeful smile before glancing back over his shoulder at me. “You believe me, right?”

I’m stunned for a second, trying to make sense of the declaration laid out before me. And when I realize how ridiculous it all sounds, I ruin the grandiose sentiment with an uncontrollable burst of laughter. He falters for a moment, before a chuckle spills out the side of his mouth. And soon we’re both laughing, fits of it coursing through us as the school bell rings and the remaining onlookers shuffle inside.

It's just the two of us now, watching as the steady stream of water spilling from Mr. Finnegan's erect member slows to a trickle; the old bastard still standing before us with that unrelenting Irish confidence, even despite his recent cuckolding. And without a word my errant companion strides confidently towards our proud bronze idol, reaching up and snatching the hat for himself before turning back to me with a cheeky grin.

This was the moment where fate finally caught up to me, wearing a cowboy hat and asking if I knew where the gym was. And in that moment I realized that; yeah; I believed him.

"It's so odd" Nero ponders. "When I was younger all I ever thought about was how I was going to be a pilot when I grew up. That I was going to be some hotshot fighter ace, gunning down the bad guys and saving the world. But there's no war anymore. Even if I get promoted through the ranks the most action I'll ever see is all useless stuff, running raids on helpless rebel outposts and the like."

"At least you're out there" I offer helpfully, pointing towards the port window. Yet Nero still seems unsatisfied.

"All I ever wanted was to be a pilot" he murmurs despairingly, turning to gaze longingly out at the infinite reaches of space. "But not like this."

Chapter Four

Almost Cowboys

Greg was new to our school, having transferred into the district a week earlier. He'd been moving around the country for the past decade or so, his aging bohemian parents searching for some strange semblance of contentment. With the money running out they had apparently settled for the mundane settings of Western Massachusetts. I somehow doubted it would sate them.

My new acquaintance shares his rather truncated life story with me in the gymnasium, in-between our half-hearted attempts at simple basketball maneuvers well beyond the innate abilities of our own racial heritage. Earlier; upon discovering we shared both a common P.E. and English period; he had confidently declared that the universe long ago set into motion the cosmic events that would result in our friendship, and that we would be a very ungrateful bunch of assholes to ignore billions of years of probability. I quickly agreed, nervously hoping he wouldn't discover the fact that he'd befriended the weird loner and trade me in for a hipper social group.

Thankfully, he never did.

It wasn't long before we were hanging out roughly every day, and despite my obvious lack of social grace the two of us hit it off surprisingly well, our opposite magnetic polarizations strangely drawn towards each other. Greg was a brash, outspoken firebrand, driven more by mischievous instinct than anything else. Where I was content to quietly fill in my assigned

worksheets without fuss, Greg had a knack for turning ordinary class discussions into epic screaming matches between previously neutral sides. Where I made an effort to avoid placing myself in harm's way, Greg spent weekends building improvised explosive devices, often dragging me out to the woods for grand firework demonstrations. Then again, we weren't entirely dissimilar. We listened to the same antiquated rock music, and both shared an equal disdain for the pulp media of our own doomed generation. And although he hated to admit it, Greg was as much a closet intellectual as I was, though whereas I read mostly tired old epics his bookshelf was filled largely with creased and stained volumes of illegal literature.

In our free time we did the sorts of things you'd expect any pair of bored and aimless teenagers to do. We turned the rock and roll up as high as it would go; driving around in Greg's old beat up car in search of trouble. We took pretentious photos of ourselves holding BB rifles and discussed the sexual acts we'd of liked to perform on the pretty girls who ignored us. And more often than not we'd use Greg's bootlegged military ID to purchase a case of beer, the two of us driving out to the middle of nowhere and getting piss drunk under the stars.

I won't deny I romanticized those moments of ours, reveling in the pointlessness of our teenage wasteland. Yet for some reason I would still find myself lying in bed each night, wondering when this life of mine was destined to kickstart and sputter off towards the horizon. Deep down I knew our rebellion was a façade, the result of misplaced hormones and stale adolescent nihilism. That someday we'd turn down the stereo, cut our hair, and get in line with the rest of the proles. But with no apparent solution to my weakness I simply pretended not to notice, nodding at Greg's half-baked philosophy about how to fix the world while swallowing pills by the handful. Watching with little remorse as the days blurred into each other, the once individual moments of sound and color forming a perfect humming singularity.

It's as I contemplate this rift in the universe that a year passes me by, myself too distracted to notice until it's too late. Disoriented, I take a quick look around to try and place where the time warp has left me. To my right Greg sucks down the remainder of a Marlboro, letting the smoke lazily drift from the corner of his mouth before snubbing out the butt on the car roof and tossing it uselessly into the surrounding brush. I take a lazy slurp from the half-empty

beer I'm holding, glancing up at the pale October moon and regarding it with a nod. I then realize that there's a party hat sitting on my head, and still confused I remove the colorful cone and look it over for clues. The flimsy cardboard accessory blares "Happy Birthday" at me in bright cartoon letters as the Tetris pieces dropping steadily towards my hippocampus begin to arrange themselves into a concise pattern, falling into neat little rows.

"Happy Birthday" I offer uselessly.

"Thanks" Greg replies without looking up from his freshly-opened beer. In tandem we each take a sip, me rubbing the frothy film from my lips as I let my now empty can roll off to the side. Greg reaches into the brown paper bag before us and tosses me another beer, one which I accept with gratitude. "Last one" he mentions.

"I'll try and make it count" I assure him. Despite my state of mild inebriation I somehow find the lucidity to recount the minor details in my head. Greg's just turned eighteen, the two of us celebrating the same way we celebrated everything; with a professional level of mild apathy. We're both growing up I guess, High School seniors steadily approaching our monumental transition into the supposed real world. It was an event I anticipated with surprising dedication. I was cautiously hopeful for the future, and surrounded as I was by half-attempted metaphors about the ends of long roads, I tried my best to remain optimistic. Soon I'd be off to college, well on my way to a four-year degree in my still un-chosen discipline and the brilliant opportunities of the American job market shortly after. Sure, I may have fucked up High School with grand execution, but now I was on the path to self-fulfillment, self-realization, and all of those other misaligned buzzwords which assuredly meant something important. Everything was going to be alright; at least that's what I kept telling myself, ignoring the truth with the vigorous teeth-grit smile of a corpse.

"You finish applying to Kentmore?" I ask, trying to drown my doubts in useless conversation.

"I haven't really gotten around to it" Greg admits.

"Isn't the deadline soon?"

“I dunno...” My strangely stoic companion lights up a fresh cigarette before continuing with a disdainful look on his face. “I don’t really want to talk about it.” As an uneasy silence sets in I hesitantly search for a conversation starter in my mind, something to break the obvious tension.

“You get any good birthday presents?” I ask with a forced smile. There’s a quick pause as Greg lights a fresh cigarette, exhaling with a slight chuckle.

“Money” he says, enamored at the thought.

“How much?” He laughs again.

“Too much—“ he starts, a statement I eye with interest. Yet he declines to elaborate, sighing as he stares vacantly off into the distance. There’s something on my Greg’s mind tonight and I’m not sure how to prod it out of him, nor if I should even try. All I can really hope for now is a distraction, something to rouse us from our tired adolescence. Something on a grand scale, a rogue meteor slamming into the earth or a legion of the undead suddenly bursting free from their graves. We’d long ago sketched out various contingency plans in the unlikely event of such an occasion, though before I can remember where we’ve hidden those particular field manuals Greg is talking again. “Hey, did you ever watch the Desperado Rangers as a kid?” he asks suddenly. I shrug at the seemingly errant question. “Right, of course you don’t ” he mutters, as if my ailment was something I had created solely to inconvenience him. You’d think a nostalgic and an amnesiac wouldn’t have anything to talk about, and you’d probably be right. Though this obvious flaw never seemed to stop Greg from reveling in his colorful past, and I always found myself compelled to play along.

“What is it? Some movie?”

“No, no” he replies with a shake of the head. “It was a cartoon. One of those imports from back before they ripped everything foreign off the airwaves.” Greg refers to the decade-old seclusion act; our country’s poorly thought out answer its current standing in the global marketplace. With the value of the American dollar at its lowest point in a century, the good old U.S.A. had cut off down on trade relations; imports severely restricted in an effort to force consumers to buy American. Of course, America was still forced to play nice with China and the few other countries that produced goods we couldn’t obtain domestically, but aside from this most

import goods were a severe luxury. This also meant there hadn't been good cartoons or video games in over ten years, something we often lamented with great despair. "I used up at the crack of dawn every morning with a soggy bowl of cereal waiting for that show to come on. It was all that real glorious old-school Japanese animation; spunky wide-eyed teenagers with day-glo hair and voices that don't match up to how their mouths are moving." I let out a laugh at this, Greg grinning at my reaction as he continues. "The best part though was that the whole show was this really weird Japanese take on cowboys and Indians, like a Japanese spaghetti western."

"A ramen western."

"Exactly" he remarks with a nod, enamored with the term. "Now, there were five Desperado Rangers." Greg holds out a hand, tapping each ranger off on a finger as he details their position on the team. "Desperado Red; he was the leader. Real quarterback type, the typical jock hero of the group. Blue was the powerhouse, big square-jawed tank of a guy, the bruiser. Green was the smart one, Yellow and Pink were both girls, mostly eye candy really. But then; and here's the cool part; Desperado Black—"

"I thought there were five."

"There were" he insists. "Or at least there were like five main guys. Black didn't really count, he wasn't part of the main team, more of a guest star almost..." Greg swirls his hand around in the air listlessly as he stumbles around an explanation. "Look, that's not important. What **is** important is that Desperado Black was a **complete badass**."

"That so?" I remark, but Greg is too busy talking to notice.

"See, once every couple of episodes the main cast would be getting their asses kicked, completely overwhelmed by the bad guys. No way out, just completely out of their league. And just when you thought it was time to cash in the chips, suddenly there would be this loud whistle." Greg pauses to breathe for a second, emphasizing the tense situation. "The action would complete freeze, everybody just silent as they all turned towards the horizon. And all you heard was this thunderous stampeding of hooves, getting louder and louder as it approached. And then suddenly—**BAM!**" Greg smacks his hands together in emphasis, smile wider than that of a child who's just been told the Disney corporation is replacing his school with a theme park. "All of a

sudden Desperado Black would come riding in on this big black motherfucker of a horse, just.... barreling over the hills. Completely decked out in black; black bandanna, black cowboy hat, handkerchief over his face, everything. And he'd point square at the bad guys, and then he'd say to them—" Greg mimics his gravel-voiced hero, a stern finger in my face as he makes his declaration heard.

"In the heat of the desert sun your reaper approaches,

cloaked in the black heart of this world.

Sinners and saints alike know this!

That those who would dare trample on the ideals of this world will know my name!

I am the cry of the vulture overhead,

the sharp eyes of the coyote at your heels.

I am Desperado Black!

And you will know justice."

There's a pause as Greg exhales, looking at me for an opinion as his declaration of justice lingers in the air. I'm at a loss for words, somehow struck by the childish sentiment of the moment, almost as caught up in the nostalgia as he is.

"That's...pretty intense for a kid's show" I remark finally. He grins at my bewilderment.

"Isn't it? Isn't that badass?"

"I mean yeah" I admit with a dumb smile. "That's pretty badass."

"Completely badass, insanely fucking badass" Greg agrees, the two of us laughing at the thought. Greg begins lighting up a cigarette as I consider the mantra of his childhood hero.

"What exactly brought this on anyway?" I ask. "I mean why the hell are you bringing this up now?"

Greg's face lights up again, like he's been waiting for me to ask.

"I found it." Greg says, eagerly pulling out his wallet.

"Found what?"

"Thought it was gone forever you know? But there it was. Bottom of some old storage box, can't believe it's still around but I found it." I look on in intrigue as he fishes up a tattered

piece of laminated plastic, handing it over proudly. I play my part, reading each capitalized word aloud to our studio audience.

“Official Desperado Rangers Fan Club Member... Gregory Schwartz.” I glance over at the still glowing Greg with mock disdain. “Seriously?”

“What? You wish you were cool enough to have one of these!” He protests, snatching it away from me. “You wouldn’t believe how many damn box tops I had to cut out to get this thing.” Greg rubs at the slick plastic surface with a thumb, looking the card over with a fond smile. “It’s weird you know...?” Greg muses, the bent cigarette in the corner of his mouth spilling crisp tobacco smoke into the air as he stares at his laminated past. “I used to be into all this cowboy shit and I just sort of forgot about until the other day. I was obsessed with this kind of stuff. Cowboys and Indians and all that nonsense. I remember-- my dad, had a whole box full of old VHS tapes, all these spaghetti westerns he’d studied back when he was a film student? And we’d always watch one every weekend, I always looked forward to that.” Greg takes a quick drag before continuing. “So my dad, he actually went out and bought me this awesome cowboy outfit. And it was perfect, he got everything right. Big ten-gallon hat, a sheriff’s badge, the little vest and spurs and everything. And best of all I had these two plastic silver six-shooters with holsters on either side. And I would just run around our yard like an idiot, pretending I was Clint Eastwood or whoever, fighting imaginary bandits all day long...” he turns to look at me with an earnest grin on his face, briefly lost in his childhood. “Fuck man, I think those were the happiest times of my life.”

“Yeah?” I ask with a mischievous smile. Greg frowns at this.

“Don’t look at me like that” he protests.

“No, I get it. You’ve got a thing for sweaty guys in chaps. It’s cute really.” Greg punches me hard in the arm, and I relent on my character attack.

“Fuck you man. That’s my childhood you’re picking apart you fucking Freudian hack.” I laugh. “Shit, I mean when I was a kid and people asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up—you know what I would say?”

“Cowboy?” I ask.

“Cowboy” he confirms with a nod, pointing an invisible revolver my way. Pulling his thumb down and firing off an imaginary round, mouthing a ‘bang.’

“You must’ve had quite the imagination.”

“Pretty righteous thing for an eight year old to declare if you ask me.”

“I guess so” I remark with a sarcastic bent. Greg takes offense to this.

“What do you expect?” He asks, throwing his hands up. “I’m the child of Saturday morning cartoons and sugary breakfast cereal, allow me my delusions. I mean isn’t that all they ever used to talk about on those shows anyhow, about how anybody could be anything they want and all that?” I nod. “Well—I wanted to be a fucking cowboy, that’s some real shit! And besides,” he counters. “You don’t even remember your childhood. I mean for all we know you were an even bigger nerd than I was.”

“There’s a chance” I admit with a shrug. In this brief pause I wonder if he’s right. I try to picture myself as a dumb rambunctious little kid, sitting in front of the television as my brain is filled with Saturday morning delusions of grandeur. Then again maybe my parents were prudes, maybe they didn’t let me watch television at all. I’m only vaguely aware of the empty feeling in my gut as I reminisce on the childhood I never had.

“It’s a real shame you know. They don’t even make shows like that anymore. I mean, I was practically weened on traditional four color comic book morals, cowboys and superheroes and all that. Real chauvinistic shit, killing bandits, slaying dragons--”

“Saving princesses” I interject.

“Right!” he says ecstatically. “There’s got to be a girl. Real knockout blonde with huge tits and everything.” We laugh at this for a second, though our laughter ringing strangely hollow. Greg coughs before picking up where he started. “But that’s the thing, that’s the real tragedy of our generation. We were raised believing all that stuff, that there was some eternal struggle between good and evil out there. I mean I grew up thinking that someday I was going to be a cowboy, that I was going to be some gunslinging wild west hero, simple as that. I grew up believing there was something out there worth fighting for. But these days, hell, I’m not so sure...”

“Things aren’t so bad...” I try to justify. Greg chuckles at my ignorance.

“Not so bad” he reiterates with a grimace. “Shit man, look at the world. Everything’s going to hell.” I look over to see Greg downing the remainder of his beer before hurling the empty can at a nearby gravestone, noticeably drunk on equal parts booze and rambling idealism. “What do we have to work towards? A college degree? A career? A family? I mean fuck, right now every developed nation on the earth has enough nuclear weapons stockpiled to blow up the world. How can anyone care about anything so trivial? And yet nobody cares enough to do something about it. Rather we’ve embrace the fragility of our lives as an excuse to appoint ignorance as the state religion. We convince ourselves that nothing’s changed. That as long as we maintain the status quo everything will work out in the end, same as it always has.” Greg takes the burnt-out cigarette from his mouth, looking it over with disinterest before tossing it listlessly into the frozen autumn air with an angry shake of his head. “Then again, who the hell am I to talk? I’m just as useless as anyone else.”

“Greg...”

“You know how stupid I feel lately?” Greg asks, with a crude broken smile across his face. He’s cracking up about this, something inside him aching to burst free as he continues his diatribe. “I’ve been a fool all these years, a stupid kid rebelling against nothing. All my talk about changing things, it was just talk really. Stupid afterthoughts, grand schemes I knew I would never follow through on. I mean sure, I wanted to change things. I just kept thinking I needed time to figure things out, get my life in order. That I’d finish high school, get into a respectable college, get a career, make some money and then! Then I could really focus on doing something with my life.” he thinks it over, laughing suddenly at his presumed foolishness before angrily rapping the car roof with a fist. “But the real truth is that I’m just too much of a coward to do anything with my life.”

“We’re still young Greg.”

“The young grow old and die, same as anybody else” Greg replies bitterly. “Right now there’s an infinite number of alternate universes where I’m already dead. Universes where somebody, the Russians or the Chinese or whoever went ahead and pushed the doomsday button and killed the whole lot of us a long time ago.” He looks around at the world for a moment, as if searching for something in that empty black night. Whatever he looks for, he doesn’t find it.

“It just isn’t fair. Things weren’t supposed to be this way...” There’s a brief pause then, but before I can offer any more half-hearted support Greg suddenly rises to his feet, gazing out at the endless rows of tired stone monuments and addressing them like a sad and tired phalanx of once proud soldiers. “We were supposed to be heroes!” he declares to our audience of ghosts. “We were going to be warriors! We were going to be space pilots and infantrymen! There was going to be great battles to fight, princesses to save! There was supposed to be something worth fighting for!” He’s choking back the emotion now, the fervor of his words catching up with him. “I was going to be somebody! I was supposed to be--”

He stops suddenly, voice cracking from the tirade as his words echo off into nothingness. I rise to my feet then, standing beside my only friend in the world. Both of us looking upwards towards that eternal canvas of light, our bodies bathed in the glow of long dead stars as we consider the fates of men. It’s in moments like these that I feel both completely insignificant and yet somehow almost content. I wonder if the rows of corpses lain out before us had once felt the same, looking up at the sky for no reason other than to count the time in-between moments. If they had gazed up at these same stars, sharing the names of the great spirits they represented knowing that for all the world’s mysteries, there was some strand of purpose uniting it all. A time before everything got so complicated.

This was our great tragedy, to have been born in this era of dead gods, a world unfeeling and unbelieving in itself. A world that for all its advancements and wonders was emptier than ever before. I carry the proof in my pocket, the candy-coated pills I ashamedly consumed in great greedy handfuls in my futile attempt to feel “normal.” But there was no cure for someone like me; and maybe that was the point. Maybe people were never meant to be cured. Instead of chasing after this grand illusion of normalcy, maybe we should’ve been content to just be alive.

In a different time my ancestors are happily dancing among the fires of the damned, their bodies gyrating to the rhythm of their burning sun god. With their spears and sharpened sticks in hand, these great warriors are honored by their tribesmen for having proven their manhood in the grueling hunt, bathed in the blood of the great beast which now rests in their stomachs. Today I am sitting atop a rusted hunk of forgotten American ingenuity, having conquered little other than a

midterm Math test and filled with a cheap feast of greasy pizza and stale beer. I was not a warrior, just a lonely and pathetic dreamer; trapped by the brief window of existence I had been allotted.

“We were supposed to be cowboys” Greg says finally, staring off into that cold empty world of ours. And as I let my hand dangle loosely off the edge of the world; the bottle of pills I’m holding falling into the void below, I wonder if maybe it isn’t too late.

"It's hopeless" I say with a weak smile. "The universe is at peace, they don't need any more pilots. Especially not any as useless as me." Busy feeling sorry for myself I'm barely able to react to the flight helmet Nero has tossed my way, panicking as I snatch the blue dome of polished metal from the air at the last moment.

"Don't give up hope" he says with a dumb grin, running a hand through his newly freed hair. "I mean who knows? Maybe you'll get lucky—"

"Maybe there'll be a war."

Chapter Five

Red

I haven't been sleeping much lately, a rather common ailment I'm sure plagues a number of my fellow classmates as we enter the final chapter in our High School careers, the stress of mid-term exams and college application deadlines weighing on our shoulders. Though as my peers grit their teeth and wipe their brows, I instead float among them like a disembodied spirit, entirely disconnected from the conscious world. I attribute this odd feeling to the pills, or rather the absence of their presence in my bloodstream. Recognizing that they did a poor job of masking my irregularities I've stopped taking them entirely, selling my collection of various feelgoods to the local toughs for pocket change. At first I resisted the chemical imbalance, fighting to remain lucid. Eventually thought I became content to simply lose myself in the empty stupor, invisible to the world and its mechanisms. My body continues to plod through the motions, performing the various everyday tasks that prove I'm not yet dead, yet my mind prefers to spend most of the day in hibernation. My only true moments of consciousness come at the end of the day, me awakening atop my bedroom mattress, shadows from the slowly spinning ceiling fan brushing lightly across my face. And as I drift wearily into its spiraling center, I try my best to remember if the events of the day had truly occurred, or if these fuzzy matte-paintings of dull color lingering in the back of my mind were simply dreams.

Days like today, I'm not sure if I remember the difference.

Slipping a pornographic magazine from behind the headboard, I find myself unable to muster immediate interest in any sexual exploits. Instead I simply survey one of the many facsimiles of my dream girl that I keep lying around. Greg once discovered this stash of mine, chastising me for my interest in boring regular pornography. Unapologetic, I punched him hard in the collarbone and made a mental note to relocate my collection. For now however, my attention is turned to page 24, a stunning redhead in a rather nondescript cheerleading uniform, smiling cheekily as her skirt rides higher than any respectable athletic organization would allow. She was far from flawless, a thirty-something trying her best to portray a teenager. Her fading youth was made even more obvious when outfitted in such juvenile attire; even despite the wonders of computer airbrushing. But it doesn't matter much, as in my eyes her true face slides away, mentally replaced with the indiscernible features plucked at random from the graying recesses of my brain. My prototypical redheaded lover, perfect in every way as she gazes at me from the glossy color pages of this back alley publication. The only woman I would ever love.

It was the only tangible memory I'd ever applied any meaning to, the only one that ever felt like it meant anything. I'd spent a long time trying to discern her identity, scouring through the few scraps of my former life I had available in a vain effort to place her appearance on my timeline. Unfortunately, I never could find her. In all likelihood her identity was of little importance, probably something as simple as a forgotten cousin or childhood babysitter. But in moments like these I allowed myself a few delusions. She was an angel wasn't she? A perfect goddess sent from the heavens to save me from myself? Or perhaps my lover from a previous lifetime, a summer bride I left alone and waiting somewhere in the past. And yet I don't even have the decency to remember her face, my recollection changing by the day. For all I had forgotten, this likely inconsequential memory was always the one that tugged at me, knowing that to forget the love of my life was a sin too egregious to be forgiven. I do my best to lose myself in the memory, my guilt sliding away as the scene plays itself through in my mind. She stands there in the corner of my eye, gazing longingly towards the vibrant orange sun as her silhouette burns black against it. It's then that she notices my presence, startled as she turns around. And as she realizes its

only me she smiles, a warm and perfect thing that reminds me that maybe everything is going to be alright.

I awake with a start several days later in my second period Spanish classroom, hormones violently humming like the edges of a black hole. I try my best to come down off the sexual high, glancing down with embarrassment at the tent in my pants and looking to see what sort of social faux-pas I've caused. Luckily the rest of the room is too busy lost in their own individual spectrums of boredom, most staring vacantly at their textbooks while a small contingent uses the heavy tome as a makeshift pillow. My teacher; a bony middle-aged brunette with a penchant for improperly peppering her dialogue with small bits of inconsequential Spanish; is a far cry from the fantasy heroine of my idle daydreams. She was one of those unfortunate women who disguised their lack of a noteworthy cultural heritage by clinging to the small fraction of ethnic blood coursing through their veins, a sad trend that regular boring members of the unspectacular Caucasian race seemed ever more eager to embrace. Trying to escape the past century of white guilt, people scoured the far branches of their family trees, latching onto a fresh cultural identity and wedging themselves into their new race with often awkward results.

"Alright **amigos**" she announces, and I groan inwardly at the unfortunate butchering of this supposed romance language. "The assignment is coming around so why doesn't everyone find somebody to partner up with?"

As around me people begin pairing together I note Greg's absence, his vacant desk sitting sadly off to the side. It was a common enough occurrence that I didn't give it much of a thought. Given the state of the American education system. very rarely did schools not find a reason to pass students, lest they bare the cost of continuing to educate these unenthusiastic dimwits. Greg took full advantage of this, feigning general idiocy as an excuse for his half-assed papers and skipping classes at will, days he spent chasing the carefree pursuits of youth rather than being spoon-fed the intellectual pabulum that comprised the bulk of the curriculum. I realize now in our final run towards the exit that I should've taken more opportunities to join him. My only true regret now is knowing that with Greg gone I'll soon be partnered up with Gabe, the

unfortunate sweatpants-clad dullard whose only known vice was the three or four pudding cups he ate in the corner of the lunchroom everyday, in-between bouts of scribbling Amazonian fantasy women in his spiral notebook. I turn to see him lumbering my way and sigh in despair. Though as the classroom door swings open behind me I realize I may have been too quick in my anguish.

“Friends, Romans, countrymen...” Greg declares as he pushes the door out of his way with a foot, appearing genuinely disinterested in the fact that he’s disrupted the class exercise. Mrs. Moore is a notable stickler for attendance, and everyone’s attention seems to immediately turn towards the intrusion, eager to watch their peer be harshly reprimanded.

“You’re late **senor** Gregory” my teacher chastises as I cringe again.

“With good reason” he responds sharply, opening the top drawer of the teacher’s desk and snatching the remote to the television mounted at the front of the classroom. Mrs. Moore goes to protest, but Greg’s not listening, already flipping briskly past the various soap operas and children’s programming.

“What’s this all about?” She demands harshly.

“Just watch” he says with a dumb grin, the class looking on with rapt interest as the stoic newsman announces the end of the world with sweat on his brow.

“Again, for those of you just joining us we have breaking news. The President has just announced that this morning at 9:00am eastern seaboard time Chinese naval forces stationed off the coast of Hawaii opened fire on American ships after Chinese authorities refused to back down in this apparent dispute over territorial waters. We have breaking news that several ships on both sides were destroyed in the skirmish. In response the United States government has temporarily suspended all trade relations with the China until further notice. Authorities at the White House say this move was considered a--” the droning voice continues onwards, but I’ve already collected the gist of the situation. A long tense cold war was finally beginning to come to boil, and brushing up on our sparse Spanish vocabulary skills for the impending test was suddenly of little concern.

As the rest of my classmates watch the news feed in stunned silence, Greg motions for me to get up. “C’mon” he mutters as I approach, turning to lead the way out the door. “Class is canceled.”

“Welcome to the brink of Armageddon” Greg mentions casually, setting up his equipment atop the broad flat stump before me. I lean back lazily against a nearby tree, briefly distracted by the assortment of wires and gadgetry he busies himself with. This season was a funny thing; the months of dreary New England winter somehow instantly forgotten on that first warm spring day. I watch with contemplative silence as once dead trees spring back to life, hidden as I was beneath the shade of this returning foliage. Lost momentarily in the brilliant green of our anonymous woodland retreat, I almost forget that we’re steadily approaching World War III.

“Maybe it’s nothing” I murmur hopefully. Greg scoffs at this.

“Yeah, I mean we only sunk a couple of Chinese subs. It’s not like that won’t just blow over.”

“China fired first” I defend.

“That’s what our government says, sure. And the Chinese are saying exactly the opposite.” Greg continues reasoning out the dilemma, not taking his eyes from his work. “I knew something like this was bound to happen sooner or later, it’s just a matter of time now.”

“You think we’re going to war?”

“I do.”

“Why would we go to war with China?” My apparently ignorant remark catches Greg off guard, as he looks at me in disbelief, shaking his head silently.

“C’mon” he mutters, before turning back to his work. “Don’t be stupid.”

“What?” I remark defensively.

“Really?” He questions, though I remain stalwart in my lack of comprehension. “Look” he states simply. “It’s pretty obvious this sort of thing was inevitable. This isn’t the first time we’ve

been in a stand-off with China. Back during the Taiwan liberation we had the exact sort of situation; we were more than ready to go to war in support of Taiwan's independence."

"Well there you go" I chirp in. "That whole situation blew over didn't it? Maybe this'll be the same." Greg shakes his head again.

"The only reason that whole situation 'blew over' was because China wasn't about to forfeit the fifty trillion dollars in United States debt they're still owed. Simply put the dollar was still worth something back then, China could've conceivably won the war, but at the cost of their own economy. So they conceded Taiwan. But now, the situation is completely different." I try to let my mind process this chain of events, too slow to rationalize as Greg continues onwards. "See-- China once had a vested interest in our prosperity. At one point in time the United States was the biggest economy in the world, as well as the largest buyer of Chinese goods. This is why China conceded to us on so many fronts. It wasn't that they were backing down from the conflict, it was that they knew the more war debt we accumulated, the more our own economy crumbled, and the less Chinese junk we'd end up buying."

"So what? China didn't kick our ass because we'd be bankrupt at the end of it?"

"Exactly. Even if we conceivably won every one of the minor wars that'd we'd threatened to fight, the resulting debt would be massive. Iraq and Iran after it is what ruined us, I mean hell, it costs something like five million dollars for an Abrams tank, not to mention the cost of keeping a million plus soldiers on salary. Forget what the history books say, the U.S. economy wasn't ruined by housing loans. It was war, plain and simple. And this little isolationist stunt isn't going to change anything when we've still got grunts stationed at every corner of the globe."

"You think this is about the DPA?"

"Fuck the DPA" Greg responds. "China could care less if we don't want to buy their shit; they've got other markets to worry about. China is now the world's biggest supplier of everything from televisions to packing peanuts. China doesn't care what we do at this point because they're completely dominant to us. That was probably their plan all along, rather than try and conquer the world one nation at a time, they just started buying out whole nations like some sort of corporate takeover. We've been China's bitch for quite awhile now; it's just no one cares to acknowledge it."

“But can China even collect on that debt if we start fighting now?”

“Collect what? Zero times fifty trillion is still zero. That’s the point, that once this debt was a strange peacekeeper. That we didn’t go to war with China because they’d dump our dollars and they didn’t go to war with us for hope of recouping their investment. But now, what the hell do they care if they bomb us back to the stone age?”

“But why a war?” I question. “Sure, they’ve got nothing to lose. But I mean, what real reason do they have to fight us?”

“Oh they’ll come up with some excuse” Greg asserts. “Accuse us of being a threat to the global community, a rogue nuclear state that demands intervention. The U.N. will eat it up, considering we’ve got few allies left who aren’t already slaves to the Chinese machine. Really though China simply sees us as the last remaining threat to their global supremacy, a rebellious dying superpower that needs to be put in its place. It would be a symbolic victory really. We’ve been on our last legs for awhile. Once America is broken the rest of the world will be more than ready to fall in line with the reds.” The truth of the situation starts hitting me now, as I wonder just how many steps ahead Greg has thought out. “And besides” he continues. “It’s been what? Fifty years since that whole one child per family rule went into effect? And now you’ve got ten billion Chinese men outnumbering the women at a good two to one ratio. A whole nation fueled by testosterone, and there’s only two things testosterone is good for; fucking and fighting— and there’s nobody around to fuck. “

“You can’t be serious.”

“Raging hormones” Greg grunts, twisting the ends of various colored wires together. “Isn’t that how most good wars are started anyhow?” He lets the thought sink in, going to pull a cigarette the pack in his breast pocket. Noticing the volatile explosives propped all around him, he apparently decides against it.

“So what? Should we be worried?”

“What do you think?”

“I mean in the immediate sense. We’re on the east coast, it’s not like they’re going to start bombing Massachusetts anytime soon, right?”

“Sure, we might not be getting bombed tomorrow” Greg begrudgingly concedes. “But honestly, a Chinese sub off the coast of California could probably take out half the farm belt if it wanted to. And it’s not like some kamikaze bastard couldn’t drag a suitcase nuke into the heart of New York.” I falter at his mention of atomic weapons, sure he must be messing with me.

“C’mon Greg, nukes? Really?”

“Really” he deadpans.

“They wouldn’t do that, would they?”

“Why the hell not?”

“Not exactly conventional warfare” I offer. He groans at this.

“Listen man, there’s no such thing as conventional warfare anymore. This isn’t going to be like Iran, Iran was an underdeveloped nation with outdated weaponry, we aren’t going to be fighting little ground skirmishes. This is a battle between two superpowers, each with military technology far beyond the point of reasonable. This can’t possibly be a conventional war, it’s impossible. Sure, maybe if everybody agreed to throw down their guns and fight with sticks and stones we could spare ourselves some casualties. But these days you’d be hard pressed to find a bomb that wasn’t designed to take out a few miles of surrounding city block along with its target. They just don’t build rational weapons like that anymore.”

“Rational weapons is an oxymoron.”

“And you’re a goddamn hippie. Here, toss me those--” he grunts, pointing behind him at the pair of pliers near my feet. I comply with little hesitation. “Then of course there’s the fact that for each of our untrained and unwilling recruits, the Chinese have ten testosterone-jacked bastards ready to die for their country, on paper they’ve got the advantage, just on sheer numbers alone.” Greg lets this thought linger as he busies himself with the pliers. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they bring back selective service.”

“You think there’s going to be a draft?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.” For some reason this idea is what finally starts to drive the immediacy of the situation home. I had somehow callously assumed that the workings of this

conflict would somehow play no part in my life. But the idea that a rifle would be thrust into my unsteady hands unnerved me. In a different lifetime my medical history would deem me entirely unfit for combat. Nowadays anyone not strapped to a gurney was pretty much fair game.

“Well what about us?” I rationalize, looking for some sort of logical step to avoiding global thermonuclear war. “Couldn’t we just avoid a conflict entirely? It’s mutually assured destruction if the nukes start flying. Why not just concede before that point.” Greg falters.

“What? Us?” Greg asks, turning to me with a laugh. That dumb grin of his slides across his face as he stands there, gesturing around him with outstretched arms. “Look around you! This is America!” he declares, holding up his fist in a show of nationalist bravado. “This is greatest nation on earth, the fucking great golden shining city of god. You expect us to yield to those Chinese sonsabitches?”

“You believe that?”

“Me? No. But I’m not in charge am I? They may have taken religion out of the constitution but the south still votes with god, and last I checked the entire cabinet was full of religious nutjobs more than ready to rush off to war. These guys figure the rapture is right around the corner anyhow, so what they have to lose?” Greg lets the hypothetical question dangle in the air, rather nonchalant about the entire series of events. I’m concerned for this apparently grim future Greg’s spelled out, though somehow his casual attitude puts my mind strangely at ease, almost as if nothing had happened at all. “Ok, it’s all set” he declares finally, jogging briskly over towards where I stand, taking note of the assortment of wires and various equipment scattered around in front of me. Greg takes the firing device from his pocket, handing it over unceremoniously. “Here, you do the honors” he offers with a grin. I’m surprised at the gesture; though I eagerly accept the jury-rigged remote from my beaming friend. With only a minor hesitation, I press the large red button at the center and watch as the show begins.

“So--” I wonder aloud, watching as the first in a brilliant volley of home-made bottle rockets fire into the air, showering the once quiet woods with the electric fizzle of sparks and muffled explosions. “What do we do now?” My words fight for clarity over the increasing fervor of the midday light show, my eyes following the interweaving trails left by the shooting stars, each

hesitating as they reach the apex of their arc before bursting suddenly into uncountable splinters of color. And as always, Greg just grins mischievously, his eyes lit by equal parts improvised explosive device and devious intention as the last and most impressive of the rockets steadily rises from the center of the commotion, the bright red craft propelled by an endless plume of smoke.

“Don’t you worry about that” he says, his words punctuated by the final flight of our flagship, the slick crimson shuttle blocking out the sun, his voice barely discernable as the lone craft explodes into a shower of burning embers. “I’ve got a plan.”

That night I dreamt of the perfect life I had once imagined for myself. I was a great pilot in the service of the empire, a hero of the people whose brave exploits were known to even the youngest schoolchild. Across the civilized universe great statues of my visage stood proudly, while my brilliant battle tactics were the focal point of many an academy textbook. And I found myself then standing proudly at the end of a grand hall, my uniform decorated with an uncountable assortment of medals and decorations, every conceivable award the empire offered adorning my chest. At the end of the hall the woman I love approaches, friends and comrades watching from the wings in anticipation. She halts on the step below me; smiling shyly as from a lacquer case she lifts a golden medal. As I bow my head to accept this final honor the onlookers erupt into applause, a great deafening noise which fills the hall. And as we kiss I; for the first time in a long while; feel complete.

I awaken to the sound of the emergency scramble alarm, panicking as I jolt out of bed and rush to grab my gear from the far wall. Outside the door I can hear the hasty footsteps of crewmates running in the direction of the flight bay, and I turn to join them. But as my wandering eyes pass the port window I realize it isn't a drill, freezing as I spot the remains of a neighboring freighter, scattered chunks of debris floating aimlessly around the empty void of space

And I wonder just how long I've been asleep.

Chapter Six

Luke 12:49

I quickly disregarded Greg's talk of global warfare, filing the information away in a dark corner of my mind and going about my business as usual. This whole situation with China was likely just another overblown media event, scare tactics used to pull in advertising dollars, same as all those supposed flu epidemics that always petered out after a few weeks or so. However it wasn't long before I was forced to acknowledge his apparently insightful grasp of the situation, the same scenario he'd spelled out now debated by the various experts of our times. Of course they had their own interpretations of the situation, of the likelihood of a draft, of the possibility of nuclear warfare, of whom or what was really responsible. But always they came to the same

conclusion. We were now steadily approaching World War III, and it was very unlikely either side was going to win.

Like most good Americans, my uncle remains firmly glued to the television like a vegetable, the sensationalist imagery that fills our rumpus room interrupted only by the occasional commercial break. I myself cannot watch more than a few minutes at a time of the seemingly endless newsfeed, the major networks all fighting for ratings in the wake of this impending global holocaust. It sickens me to know that despite the end of the world lurking around the corner; all we could really do is watch helplessly, apparently too busy to do anything about it. I expected some sort of societal outcry, some great outpouring of dissent in the wake of this war we were racing towards. But there was none. Despite the end of the world lurking in sight, people acted blissfully unaware, living out their lives same as they always had, those of us who weren't already brainwashed into complacency from years of blind patriotism being shoved down our throats. We were not ignorant people, in fact we all knew quite well the gravity of the situation. We were simply too ashamed at our powerlessness to acknowledge it.

But yet despite this melancholy air, Greg remains almost retardedly upbeat, passing through the slow sad crowds of our disillusioned classmates with a cheeky grin. At first I think he's simply lost it, his newfound optimism an unlikely side effect from years of mixing volatile explosive chemicals together. It isn't until a few days after the US-China peace talks break down that I realize something is truly wrong. Greg was a notorious truant, and was himself quite unashamed of it. So his claim of being too "preoccupied" with schoolwork to hang out is one I immediately regard as impossible. Greg had never; in the entire time I've known him; let his pressing scholarly obligations interfere with the time-honored American pastime of slacking off. Not to mention his want for solid academic credentials seems unnecessary, especially considering he was already on track to attend the local community college in the fall, a bargain-basement institution that accepted just about any dullard able to write their name. But despite the numerous inconsistencies in his flimsy alibi, he sticks by it. Any attempts to press him on the subject just leads to more of the same answers, vague mumblings of upcoming tests and papers.

“I just want to finish strong, go out with a bang. You know?”

I'd have pressed harder, but to be quite honest I was quite busy myself. In addition to babysitting my comatose legal guardian, I was in the process of deciding which school to attend, conveniently ignoring the fact that once the missiles started flying it would hardly matter. I had received acceptance letters from most of the schools I'd applied to, some with scholarships even, and my schedule was rather hectic as I found time to attend tours of these illustrious campuses. To be honest I held no real interest in the process, though I figured they'd deemed me worthy of a few thousand dollars worth of free education; I owed it to them to at least take a look.

Most of the tours were standard affairs, inhumanly enthusiastic student guides showing us the library and trying to convince the parents in attendance that their little saplings would be nurtured in a positive and rewarding environment. Not that it mattered much to me, as each of the campuses seemed to me like simple carbon copies of each other. There were tiny differences sure; whereas one had an active ultimate Frisbee team the other had a Taco Bell in the dining commons, but ultimately little differing one from the other. Nothing but old brick buildings full of young eager scholars much unlike myself, the future leaders of our dead generation. Still, I attended these guided demonstrations out of some strange sense of obligation, even though my mind could scarcely keep the minor details of each from spilling over into each other.

The only truly memorable moment though, came at the last of these tours that I attended. It was a small liberal arts campus only a few towns over, an oddly progressive liberal community surrounded by several empty miles of farmland. As the attractive cheerleader type led us past the library our tour was briefly interrupted by a student demonstration taking place on the school commons, a large mass of pre-adults gathering to protest the current situation with China. Here was a group of people who were actually fighting against what was supposedly inevitable, a crowd willing to reject their apparent helplessness and fight together, united for a cause. I regret to say that for a brief moment I was inspired. I had believed that everyone had just about given up, accepted this impending war as hopeless to stop. How happy I was then to be proven wrong. Quickly though I came to my senses, seeing them then for what they truly were.

This was not some grand contingent of the enlightened, some gathering of fervent revolutionaries. These were the sons and daughters of the bourgeoisie, kids who had never dirtied their hands in American soil once in their life. A pack of smug self-serving bastards, the whole lot of them dressed in hemp fashion as they sang outdated protest songs from the Vietnam era and happily snapped pictures for their internet journals. These kids weren't looking to save the world. It was simply another social cliché, a big party so that the privileged class could congratulate each other on being so progressively minded. So infuriated was I then to know that these were the dissenting voices that sought to represent us, those who deserved most to perish in the fires of Armageddon. Those who had worked for none of what they had been given, and yet were so afraid that these unearned freedoms might all be taken away.

I find a bathroom and dry heave into the sink, staring at myself in the mirror and wondering if any of these people deserved to be saved. Wondering why I supposed myself to be somehow different.

That night I search hard for my discarded bottle of pills, a distraction, something to dull the reality of this world. And finding nothing I can only lie there in the dark, too aware of the meaninglessness of it all. We human beings clung to life so desperately, lamenting our sad fate for as long as we could before we were dragged screaming to our graves. And yet why did we care so much? I look at my hands in the dim moonlight, furling and unfurling my fingers just to prove I had any control over anything. But that was the extent of my power, the ability to will this husk of organic flesh to action. Even those lucky enough to leave their mark on this world were eventually forgotten, as we all would be when the universe eventually collapsed inward on itself. So why then? Why did we struggle so hard to achieve such meaningless results?

“Finish strong.”

I almost laugh to think of it, but Greg was probably the only person I'd ever believed in, the only person I trusted to have some sort of grasp on this thing we called life. I think back to that cold autumn night, me and Greg standing amidst an audience of corpses as he decries the fate denied to him. It was a childish dream Greg talked of, an attempt to embrace the childhood

ideology of long gone cartoon cowboys. But still, it was something, no matter how haphazard it might've seemed.

"Go out with a bang."

Now though it seemed even he had submitted to the crushing burden of reality, accepting our brief and meaningless existence as satisfactory. Watching along with the rest of the world as we plunged further into darkness, praying to our dead gods and hoping the silence in itself was some sort of answer. We foolishly rushed headstrong towards our own deaths, believing that our tendency towards self-destruction was somehow beyond our prevention. All of us stupidly holding out hope, waiting for some imaginary savior to arise out of the dark.

"Don't worry about it." Greg had said. "I've got a plan."

I wonder just what he'd meant.

"I have come to bring fire on earth, and how I wish it were already kindled. I have a baptism to be baptized with, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I came to bring peace on earth? Not at all, I tell you, but rather division. From now on, five people in one household will be divided --."

"Where are we?" A voice interjects suddenly. The elderly man at the front of the room smiles kindly at the intrusion before responding without a hint of annoyance.

"This would be... ah, Luke 12:49."

I'm lured from my dreamstate by this break in the passage, the comforting lull of Mr. Jenks voice cut short by the errant interruption. Looking around I find myself surrounded by a contingent of bored teenagers, each waiting to be released from their cages back into the living breathing world. Seeing the fair weather outside, I didn't blame them for their impatience.

I was required two literature courses for graduation, though while most students opted for the hipper subsections of modern fiction; classes like "Transgender Literature" and "Graphic Novels & Culture"; I had actively chosen "Bible Studies," a class usually reserved for those students lacking in the initiative to submit their course sign-up sheet in a timely manner. It's not

that I'm a religious person. To be completely honest I wouldn't even know where to begin if I decided to start living piously, which of the ambivalent dead prophets would be best to spend my nights apologizing to. Still, I had my reasons. One part of it was the small pleasure I got from watching the senseless debates that erupted almost daily over the obviously sensitive material, the scoffing atheists and zealous faithful each fervently denouncing the other side for being ignorant un-savable fools. Another was that I knew Greg would be copying my class schedule verbatim in an effort to have someone to cheat off of, and I figured I might as well try to expose him to some legitimate literature other than the comic books he wasted his time with. But the real reason was that I, for some reason, have always found something strangely compelling about the Bible. The words of men who had seen gods, these days such writings would be lunacy. But when left to gestate over a period of two thousand years, such hyperbole becomes the foundation by which men live their lives. Stories of boys triumphing over giants, of sad kings turned prophets and of gods disguised as men. There was just something truly profound about it all, the idea that something as simple as a worn faux-leather bound copy of the King James Bible could stir even a religious dullard like myself to emotion.

"Now then, can anyone speculate on the meaning of this passage?" Mr. Jenks asks in his quiet aging voice. I quite liked our teacher, a boyish old man with a collection of sweater vests rivaling that of a children's television personality. I likened him to one of those aging monks waiting in secluded mountaintop temples, enlightened individuals prodding you towards the secret of life with wry smiles. As a few hands around the room go up our sage points towards one of the girls, a blonde blue-eyed Aryan nation potential with an unnecessary level of enthusiasm.

"I'd say that the fire like represents Christianity" she begins in a valley girl drawl. "So Jesus is like, talking about how he's come to spread the word of god and die for our sins you know? And he just wishes like, that everyone could've just been good Christians to begin with." Mr. Jenks nods at this rather vanilla interpretation, pointing to the sullen angst case in the corner.

"I'd say Jesus didn't care if people were good Christians, seeing as how he was a Jew and all..." the hollow-eyed boy says this with a noticeably mocking tone in his gravelly voice. The waspish athletic in the corner looks upset at the jab, possibly valley girl's boyfriend. I briefly

envision him pummeling the shit out of the darkly dressed bastard, a great show of antiquated masculine bravado. “Anyhow, I think that he’s referring to the fires of judgment, how humanity had been judged as wicked and how their punishment is to be forced to crucify their own god.” Our instructor nods as others interpret the passage, not offering any sort of hint as to whether he agrees or disagrees, rather letting the discussion carry itself through its natural course. I’m interested in the material but despite my best efforts I find myself drifting in and out of lucidity. I briefly imagine what it would be like to be crucified. It didn’t seem like one of those terrifying ways to die, things like the drowning where the impending immediacy of death is the primary concern. Rather crucifixion was a long and slow process, one dying gradually over a couple of days. At first it would hurt sure, as those nails were driven through your hands and feet, bleeding out as you hung from your own wounds. Though gradually crucifixion becomes less about the pain and more the torture of annoyance. The dull aching of wounds, the hot sun beating down overhead, your body left in that awkward position for days before living itself becomes an exhaustion . I can only imagine how Jesus must’ve felt. That he; the son of god; had come to die for our sins, and we didn’t even have the decency to make it quick. Humanity, God’s annoyance. A mass of gibbering unruly children constantly crying out to be saved from the consequences of our silly mistakes. Never giving him a moment’s rest.

God offered forgiveness. We didn’t really deserve it.

Lost for a moment in my daydream, I realize suddenly the classroom is looking at me for an answer. Flustered I look towards my ambivalent instructor for guidance. “Yes?” I respond to his awaiting gaze. He smiles that sagely smile of his, looking down at me over his horn-rimmed spectacles.

“I asked” he reiterates. “What do you think the passage means?”

“Well—“ I stall, never much for public. Hastily I try to construct an answer best I can. “I guess... well when Jesus says he’s come to bring fire on the earth I agree that he’s talking about spreading the gospel, though I think the fire would mean he’s preaching a destruction of the old ways of the world. That he kind of intends for this fire of his, his gospel, to burn Rome to the ground.”

“Jesus never burned Rome to the ground” one of the shrill female intellectuals chirps in, seemingly unaware of the literary convention known as a metaphor.

“Of course not” I concede. “I don’t mean he intended to actually burn Rome down. But obviously Rome eventually fell, and today the Roman Catholic Church has the largest Christian following in the world. Not to mention the countless number of civilizations which were also converted to Catholicism in the two millennia since Jesus died.” Mr. Jenks seems intrigued by my interpretation, and feeling confident in my analysis I continue. “Everything Jesus preached was about rebirth, and that’s what he’s talking about here. He did not cast off the sinners but instead he baptized them, he did not murder the wicked but instead died for them. And he came not to destroy the world, but to burn it beyond recognition so it could be born again. And it worked. All that he laments is that it had to be him to do it. That he’s prepared to die for our sins, but he’s just... disappointed I guess. Disappointed that we weren’t able to simply save ourselves.” The room is strangely silent again, as if confused by my rather lofty dialogue. I couldn’t blame them for their surprise; these two statements were likely more words than I’d spoken in their presence all semester. I think there was still a contingent of the student body that assumed I was a mute.

Luckily I’m soon snapped out of my cringing anxiety by the voice of Mr. Jenks, offering a very unfamiliar tone of approval.

“A very interesting interpretation” he muses, and I wait for him to refute it with the correct answer. But as I wait to be proven wrong, I’m instead treated to some unfamiliar words of praise. “Very good” he comments finally. I’m surprised at the compliment, Mr. Jenks was not one known for offering such concessions. But before I can thank him for this brief moment of academic validation, it’s suddenly cut short by the sound of the classroom door swinging open. Along with the rest of the class I look up to find Greg entering rather casually, glancing at the clock to find he’s more than half an hour late at this point.

“Can I help you young man? Are you looking for someone?”

“Yeah, uh... It’s me Greg, Mr. Jenks” he explains. The old man adjusts his spectacles, squinting quizzically as he tries to identify the intruder. It was a common scenario, Mr. Jenks

seemingly unable to remember people based on sight, relying instead on the never changing seating chart. Greg points at the empty desk. "I'm in your class, that's my desk" he elaborates. Mr. Jenks thinks for a second, smiling as he apparently feigns recognition.

"Ah yes, well why don't you just take your seat then" he offers, about to return to the discussion at hand. Greg however cuts him short.

"Actually I'm not sticking around" Greg admits.

"Is that so?" Mr. Jenks questions. I'm as confused as he is.

"Yeah, I'm actually just here to drop off my textbook." The class continues to look on as Greg fishes around in his bag for the heavy tome, eventually finding it and dropping it atop the stack of excess books in the corner of the room with a loud thud. Greg's eyes catch mine and I gesture my confusion. He waves me off.

"Well thank you" Mr. Jenks says, still confused. "Are you... dropping the class?"

"Oh no, no. Uh... I'm not dropping the class; I'm actually—" Greg seems a bit flustered, scratching the back of his neck. "Well I'm dropping out. You know? Dropping out of school." My peers seem surprised, though their own reaction is nothing compared to my own, my mouth agape with shock-- completely unprepared to process Greg's sudden declaration.

"Is that so?"

"Yeah" he confirms with a stupid smile. "I guess I just decided it's not really for me, figured it was time to try something new you know?" I can only assume he's lost his mind. A month shy of graduation and Greg's unable to muster enough interest to finish? I would protest but I'm unable to find the words, simply wondering what the hell he was thinking. It had been one thing to abandon his likely foolish childhood dreams, but to cast aside his future without any apparent semblance of a reason seemed like lunacy. Not the rational and calculated actions I'd come to expect from Greg, but the foolish whims of a confused kid. From what I knew of High School drop-outs, most of them either ended up homeless booze-swizzling degenerates, or under-equipped military cannon fodder. And neither of those seemed like rational career paths at this point. Then again maybe the spirit of nihilism had finally hit, his well-calculated facade of normalcy cracking beneath the weight of the impending global conflict. "Oh" Greg says suddenly,

again swinging his messenger bag around and searching through it. Finding the item in question he goes to hand it over to our teacher, his stained and frayed bible. "Guess I should return this as well." Mr. Jenks smiles at Greg's earnestness, though waves him off.

"That's all right, why don't you just keep it?" The old man offers. Greg shrugs at the offer, throwing the book back into his bag without a thought.

"Well alright then, I guess I should say my goodbyes" Greg addresses the class. "I wanted to say that, well, I didn't really get the chance to know a lot of you to be honest." The joke is lost on the still awkwardly silent classroom, though Greg doesn't seem to notice. "Anyhow, I'm going to be heading out of here, and I probably won't be coming back. But I do want you to know that I wish you all luck with your endeavors and all that. It's a pretty crazy world we live in right now, and I guess I just hope that if any of you have the chance to make a difference, then you'll go for it." He finishes, smiling proudly as he basks in the imagined applause following his ad-libbed speech, before turning for the exit. "Its been fun!" he remarks once out in the hall, before his voice is lost behind the thud of the door swinging shut behind him.

I'm still speechless, unable to process this bizarre turn of events. I'm not sure what to do, if I'm supposed to do anything at all. It's then that I first feel the twenty-something pairs of eyes staring at me. I glance around in surprise as my classmates eye me warily, though it takes me only a second before I realize why. After all, I was his friend right? I must've been at least partially responsible for my friend's lapse in sanity. With all eyes on me I rise to my feet, sighing as I do.

"Fine" I groan. "I'll go talk to him."

"Greg-- what the hell-- are you doing?" I ask, out of breath as I finally catch up to him down the hall.

"Good, you came," Greg responds, turning to find me out of breath, a sight he regards with a chuckle of disbelief. I'll admit I bordered on pathetic, though it's not as if I'd ever claimed any athletic prowess. Thankfully, I shortly regain my composure.

"What's going on? You're dropping out of school?" Greg shrugs.

"Is it really that surprising?"

“Jesus Christ Greg!” I exclaim, punching him in the arm. He barely flinches. “What the hell are you thinking springing this on me suddenly? I mean we’re almost about to graduate and suddenly you can’t tough it out anymore? What the hell is wrong with you?!” I’m visibly upset at this point, though his expression is unapologetic.

“Hey now” he protests. “I didn’t know you cared so much. Besides, what do you care what I do? We’re not married you know?”

“I just hate to see you throwing your future away” he scoffs at this.

“C’mon, where’d you steal that tired line? You sound like a—“

“Like what?” I challenge.

“Like a damned guidance counselor!” He says with a laugh. “Not that they even have those anymore. You would’ve made a good one you know, telling kids how to live their lives despite never having lived your own.” He may have a point.

“Fine” I concede, letting our tempers flare down. “Still, what are you doing Greg?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“You keep saying that, but of course I’m worried” I reason with him. “I don’t know what you’re doing anymore.”

“Listen” he begins with a sigh, clearly in no mood to explain his position though he does anyhow. “I’ve just.... I’ve finally reached a point in my life where I’ve realized I’m sick and tired of seeing the world the way it is and sitting around doing nothing about it. You remember all that stuff I said? About wanting to be a hero, all that nonsense?” I pause, waiting for the appropriate gears to turn into place, the events of that forgotten October night slowly fading back into memory. I nod. “Yeah well, I’ve been thinking a lot about that” he admits. “And you know, I decided yeah—it isn’t too late. I’m still young, we’re still young you know? We don’t have to sit idly by anymore. Sure, we could graduate, we could live the rest of our lives as boring normal people, all the while waiting for the bombs to hit. Or we could take a chance, get out of here and try and do something about it.”

“Do what about it?” I argue. “We’re just kids Greg, we can’t stop a war. That’s nuts.” I wait for my obvious reasoning to catch up to my friend’s fevered mind, waiting for him to come to his senses and hopefully return with me to class. Instead though he weighs my declaration and simply grins like an idiot, turning to again continue his pace down the school hallway.

“It is nuts, you’re right” he admits, shrugging as I follow him towards the exit. “But you know what? This whole world of ours is nuts. I think I’m just doing my best to fit in.” Greg uses this cue to stop suddenly by the exit door, un-ceremonially lifting the safety latch on the nearby fire alarm before slamming the lever down without a second thought. My eyes are wide with surprise as instantly my ears are filled with the horrible tones of the blaring siren, a high pitched echo which fills the hallways behind us. I look to Greg for some sort of explanation, only to find him slipping on a pair of biker gloves, conveniently obscuring the fresh ink marks on his hands. I take a quick look behind me, spotting the first wave of decent fire-fearing youth stumbling out of their classrooms in orderly lines, turning back to find Greg has already slipped through the heavy double doors and again begun walking off. Not knowing what else to do, I again take chase after my errant companion.

“This is it?” I ask almost harshly. I find myself standing with Greg in our predetermined evacuation spot; a field at the far end of the parking lot. Around us a steadily growing contingent of our student peers stand as well, chatting eagerly about interrupted exams and the prospect of the school burning to the ground.

“Just wait” he assures me, smug smile on his face as we watch the rest of our classmates file out the various exits, assuming safe positions a fair distance from the illusionary fire. All the while I find myself waiting with stunned disappointment for the eventual ‘all clear’ and our chaperoned return inside. This was apparently the extent of Greg’s big plan, nothing more than petty mischief. As I contemplate my disdain for the situation the few remaining stragglers empty out of the school, crossing the street towards where we are. Greg nods his approval, contemplating the situation. “Alright” he declares. “That seems to be everybody.”

“What now? You going to start a food fight” I challenge, making no effort to mask my impatience. Though as Greg whips his black messenger bag around to the front and begins hunting through it for something, I’m admittedly curious. It’s when he comes up with that familiar firing device of his that I know something is amiss. “What the hell’s going on Greg?” I ask, finding myself strangely uncomfortable. Greg is slow to answer, looking at me for a second as he considers his words.

“Look” he says finally. “We’ve been friends for awhile now, and nothing will ever change that. You’ve been a real good friend to me.”

“Thanks” I reply hesitantly. He chuckles at my skittishness.

“I mean it” he reiterates with a nostalgic smile. “I mean, I’ve had a lot of good friends over the years, but to be honest you were probably the best of any of them.” I’m surprised at his earnestness, strangely proud of his approval. However the smile soon drops from his face as the mood grows serious. “I’ll tell you right now, I’m about to embark on something rather grand. Rather grand and also rather dangerous, and probably pretty damn stupid. And you know... I can understand completely if that isn’t something you’d want to be a part of. I honestly couldn’t blame you. But I know you feel the same as I do sometimes. Feeling like you’re tired of waiting around for something to happen.” The look on my face must reveal that he’s hit his mark. “Well, this is it. This is our chance to do something about it, to get out there and live our lives. I guess what it really comes down to then is if you trust me?” It takes me a second to process the question.

“What?”

“Do you trust me?” he repeats without explanation, looking at me with a level of sincerity I didn’t think he was possible of expressing.

In all my knowing him, Greg had never asked anything of me. Our friendship was something I had thought would forever remain unspoken, but now he was asking me to validate these bonds between us. Something greater than the simple teenage friendship you see everyday, careless relationships tossed away after a matter of years and never spoken about again until the next class reunion. I’m still not sure what exactly he has planned, all I know is that I’m about to embark on something much, much bigger than myself. If I wanted I could stay out of

it all, ride my boring monorail of a life to its gradual conclusion and never leave the comfort of my seat. But I had always trusted Greg, and now, perhaps blindly, I trusted him still. And I knew my answer before he even asked the question.

“I trust you” I say finally. Greg hears this and immediately that familiar grin of his breaks across his face, looking as though a huge weight has been lifted from his shoulders. His attention then turns to the device in his hand, extending the long metal antenna towards the sky before holding it out to me, presenting it as if the sacred relic of our newly rekindled convent. I often contemplated fate, the idea that someday my life was destined to come to fruition, that everything would work itself out in the end. Only now did I realize the truth. The universe may have been steering me towards some grand conclusion, but my own destiny was mine to control. I just had to figure out what to do with it.

“You do the honors.”

Once; in science class; I'd watched an old government film showing the explosion of an atom bomb. Despite the grainy footage it was still beautiful to watch. For a brief instant there's a vacuum of empty noise, waves of sound trying their best to catch up to the spectacular light show. And then suddenly you can hear it, the tremendous sound of atoms being ripped apart.

I press the button. And as I'm briefly blinded by the flash of light, my senses overloaded, this is all I can hear. The sound of the universe tearing in half.

As my eyes adjust I find the natural conclusion to my actions. Dooley McFinnegan High School was gone, replaced by a pile of smoldering rubble, the red hot embers bellowing endless trails of thick black smoke into the blue sky. Shattered glass and broken red brick lay everywhere, debris propelled by the blast haphazardly around the schoolyard. Never had I seen destruction like that up close, to see something that had once seemed so immortal suddenly fold and crumble like dust. The once proud towers now toppled like the building blocks of a child. I'm unable to tear my eyes from the sight, only barely aware of the speechless crowd, all of us looking on in shock. Only one of us is truly able to put the situation in some sort of perspective. And there he stands, hands in his pockets, jacket flapping in the wind as the final shockwaves of the blast flow through us. I look on in abject terror of the destruction we had wrought but find myself unable to put it into

words, every emotion fighting for dominance over the others with no one truly claiming the title of victor. And yet Greg knew exactly how he wanted to feel, eyes transfixed on the majestic spectacle in front of us, a grin breaking wide across his face.

It's then that a familiar noise jars me back to reality, reminding me that this quaint desolation was not an illusion. The entirety of our group is as confused as I am about the interruption, our scattered brain signals slow to process the nature of the noise as we look around. Finding the source though, it makes perfect sense. He was a large boy, one of the school's resident metal-heads, a group of leather and piercing clad youths with a penchant for loud music and disobeying authority. Thunderously he slaps his leather-gloved hands together, his thick arms propelling the enthusiastic applause over the stunned silence of the crowd.

"They did it man!" He yells. "They fucking blew up the school!" His unbridled enthusiasm surges around the crowd. And as I look around I see the first hint of a reaction from the crowd, each of my classmates slowly coming out of their states of shock, awkward smiles sliding across their faces. And suddenly, it erupts.

These kids knew not who they clapped for, but they clapped all the same. More and more of them joined in, a domino effect of massive proportions, until finally the world was filled with this deafening wave of applause, one which seems to me louder even than the blast itself. The band geeks, the drama fairies, the nerds, the jocks, the punks, the preps, the intellectuals and the dropouts, the high and the low and the poor and the rich and the young and the younger. The teachers looked around in terror for someone to blame, trying to regain order in what they saw as an attack on everything they stood for. And when they found no one, they gave up, defeated. And when Greg pats me on the back, as if to congratulate me on some great victory, I feel the most odd sense of pride that I ever have in my life.

Again though, I'm unable to bask in my moment as Greg's grabs my arm and begins to drag me off towards the parking lot. "Let's get out of here" he tells me, with no real explanation given or requested. Though I fully understand the urgency of the situation, I find myself unable to keep up with his quick pace, stumbling as I walk, unable as I am to tear my eyes away from the empty space where a building had once stood. I knew my knack for forgetfulness, which is why I

refused to look away, almost as if I could blink and it would all have been a dream. This was one moment that I never wanted to fade away. One I wanted to burn into the recesses of my mind for all eternity. But I realize then that I needn't worry. There was something about the blast, something that had helped knock me at least partially back to my senses. I no longer needed to struggle to resist being pulled back into my dream world, fully lucid and awake without need of pills and potions. It may have been the blinding flash of light, or the ear-shattering explosion. But more likely it was the idea that I was no longer bound by the chains of my mediocre existence, finally able to experience the world without getting lost in its repetition. I was alive at the center of the world, every one of my senses overloaded with stimulus. Alive for the first time in a long while.

Right before we leave Greg drives the car over towards the main entrance, weaving between the wreckage to get as close as possible. I see then the remains of old Mr. Dooley McFinnegan himself. Fitted with his own set of explosives the ancient and tired old man had shattered from the inside out, his eternal visage reduced to rubble as off to the side his paper mache arm slowly burns itself away to ash.

"I told you I could do better" Greg says about a mile down the road.

He couldn't have been more right.