

A Stranger in a Land of Strangers

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The concept– "intentionality"–was first described by [St.] Thomas Aquinas in 1272 to denote the process by which humans and other animals act in accordance with their own growth and maturation. An intent is the directing of an action toward some future goal that is defined and chosen by the actor. It differs from a motive, which is the reason and explanation of the action, and from a desire, which is the awareness and experience stemming from the intent. A man shoots another with the intent to kill, which is separate from why he does it and with what feeling.

Walter J. Freeman in *How Brains Make Up Their Minds* [3]

[P]erception is a continuous and mostly unconscious process that is sampled and marked intermittently by awareness, and what we remember are the samples, not the process. The fact that consciousness need not enter into the description of intentionality opens a new vista. Consciousness is not a good place to start a theory of brain function. . .

Walter J. Freeman in *How Brains Make Up Their Minds* [3]

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Acknowledgments

I dedicate this book to all of those who helped me along the various stages of my conversion to a friend of Jesus Christ. Those helpers are not to be blamed for my failures in that great task. On the other hand, as my Creator/Sustainer, Jesus and His Father and Their Holy Spirit deserve the credit and blame for my inherent strengths/weaknesses if not for the ways in which I developed or failed to develop them. And . . . An honest man must admit it be hard for us to understand which of our traits be strengths or weaknesses in the ultimate sense—when we, if so blessed, share the life of the Son of God in the World of the Resurrected.

It is a great truth that we are the way we are, so incomplete and so defective, because we are part of a tale which develops by way of evolution and development and not part of an epic which is a cycle, one or many, of Golden Ages and Silver Ages and Iron Ages and Trashy Ages.

Preface

This be one of the causes of the moral confusion of the modern world:

We have inherited moral systems of thought, embedded in our culture—including our educational systems, which assume there are abstractions called ‘virtues’ and ‘vices’ which are embodied, somehow, in flesh-and-blood creatures. Or maybe they float about, part of souls which are attached, somehow, to flesh-and-blood creatures. Or perhaps we have souls in which virtues and vices play the part of pistons and sand.

Yet, all those wrongheaded speculations are highly intelligent and extremely mysterious. And they are thoroughly unintelligible in terms of what is now known about God’s acts as Creator.

God’s Creation is dynamic in multiple ways, one being the multi-layering in which it all makes some sort of sense—enough for us to discuss this world and all of Creation in intelligent and intelligible terms. That sense, the intuitions and reasoning which make up that sense, change as more is known about Creation, as more false knowledge is jettisoned. As I state above in another way: we have much false knowledge around now even as we chant the lie: there is no conflict between science and faith. There is a conflict—precisely because our faith, our understanding of Creation and even our understanding of revelation, is tied to past empirical, or ‘scientific’ understandings of Creation. We need to re-understand all of God’s Creation, all aspects of it, in terms consistent with evolutionary biological understandings of human animals and much else, quantum mechanical understandings of thing-like being and the strange being from which it comes, relativistic understandings of space-time. . . And more.

I stand with one foot in the world of empirical knowledge and one in the world of revelation. Johnny Waters, the protagonist of this novel, stands nearby and in a similar position.

I stand upon the solid foundation of but one Creation. The same is true of Johnny, the protagonist of this series of novels, a man who bears some resemblance to me. But not much.

Introduction

This is the second novel in a series about the spiritual conversion of a man who was born in 1955 and passed his tests for his driver's license in 1971. He grew up in a small town, Jenkesville, near Springfield, Massachusetts. If such a town were to exist, it would be in a protected valley, that of the Chicopee River which is oddly spelled as 'Chickopee' on some older maps. All of this hardly needs saying, though Johnny Waters became more particular over his years as an underachieving so-so student in college and his ensuing years as an underachieving corporate employee of the nomadic variety. I could consider his decision to become an author of serious books during a period of increasing moral disorder and intellectual decay, but that would threaten to turn this story into one of pain and frustration. Is it possible, after so many centuries of Christian comedies, that we've discovered that Christian tragedy is a possibility? Or is it merely the case that Christian comedians can misinterpret their own pain and frustration so that they see themselves as tragic heroes? Or non-heroes not able to stir up the moral courage and moral strength to rise above the forces which can trap and constrain us?

In any case, a quite selectively biased part of the early years of Johnny's story was told in *Gathering the Silence* [4]. Another part of the story is told in the pages which follow in this book strangely named *A Stranger in a Land of Strangers* [5]. At least one more part remains to be told. That third part remains a mystery to me but I fear for the possibilities of still more disorder and decay and a loss of safety for children and elderly folk, and everyone else as well.

This second part be different, greatly different from that first part, *Gathering the Silence* [4]. Johnny has re-entered the bubble under which he first lived, as hinted in the beginning of his story, but he is an American adult and the magic is gone. Yes, that magic seen in the beam from a light on the

roof of a nearby church is gone. An illusion, yet one that hints of grand realities and perhaps Realities. An illusion which also supports the retreat of Christians into a fundamentally pagan view of the world. Ordinary things are not so much in contact with the holy. Sacramental Christianity no longer makes sense. Things exist independently of God, though He might be able to overpower them or control them in a more gentle way.

That loss of a sacramental world, part of a true Creation, might be comfortable to those Christians who read the Bible to discover Jesus was a nice man who loved children and to also discover that ancient Hebrews didn't know that Adam and Eve were Africans and not Hebrews. It might be comfortable for those psychopathic Christians and Jews and pagans who would rather rule on Earth than to aim for everlasting life in Heaven.

But an author isn't supposed to say even that much about his own books and certainly not before the reader has had a chance to form his own views about the story. Ah, I'm not only that cliché-creature known as a "bad Catholic"; I'm also a "bad author". But, at least I'm not a writer, good or bad.

So it is that I've continued the bad habit of a bad author—I've included a few references in this fictional narrative, as if it were a parody of a non-fictional work.

This story must be fiction because it isn't my story and Johnny truly (truly!) isn't me. Perhaps he's a character who emerged in my mind as I tried to recover sanity, as I tried to purge mind and heart and hands of so much that was forced upon me by a horrible accident of birth. Not only was I born and raised in the United States—I was raised in a smalltown in New England, the source of the moral infection which has destroyed American minds and hearts and hands.

Read Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, *The Birth-mark*, and contemplate the self-serving, calculating coldness which defined the human being of the Calvinists of the Northeastern states. Contemplate the effort required to warm up, to turn to Creation and the Lord who made it. Contemplate the sheer confusion of a man wondering why the world seemed to make no sense and then coming to think...But no...Then returned the fear that it was true...But what was "it"? And why did no one around him seem interested in the truth of what the Puritans of New England had done to themselves, what was done to self by immigrant Calvinists and the other Calvinists of surrounding states taking into themselves...Even immigrant Catholics drinking in the poisonous brew, the coldness which wasn't even

evil for it was indifferent to what was true and good and beautiful rather than using it to make their way in the world.

At least the Southerners, for all their own sins, had to be beaten and then culturally pulverized to make them give up some sense of . . .

Part I

A Stranger in God's Creation

1 Preparing for an Author's Life

Over the previous ten years, Johnny had owned houses and maintained them himself to the extent possible. He had been ever surprised by his lack of practical skills. His father had been a skilled mold-maker who'd developed at least basic skills in handling the pipes and walls and wires and even electronics of an American house of the 1960s and 1970s and on to 1990 or so when his cancer returned. Mr Waters had clearly been motivated by financial need but had also seemed to be interested in acquiring a modern set of skills comparable to those of an old-fashioned American homeowner who'd maybe even built his house from the sawing of logs to provide timber right through the plastering and painting of walls and maybe the installation of a floor of some sort. To be sure, Johnny'd had friends whose fathers were also machinists or general factory-workers but were bereft of many home-maintenance skills. He'd had friends whose fathers had been lawyers or insurance agents or other white-collar workers; some of those families had an uncle or close friend who would do small plumbing or electrical jobs for a six-pack or maybe a few bucks to tide them over a difficult time; others had relied upon the odd-jobs workers with a variety of skills. And there were plenty of reasonably priced plumbers and electricians, including some who worked at Chapman Valve or Monsanto or American Bosch and did side-jobs.

Some of the friends of his youth had trouble naming the most basic tools hanging over a homeowner's workbench. Others could do a pretty decent job of plumbing a new connection up to a sink or adding a ceiling fixture to a porch which was being upgraded. All of those tasks had been mysteries to Johnny in his youth, as if he'd been protected from acquiring the basic skills of a working-class youth of the United States in the 20th century. To be sure, he'd not been much interested in cars and barely interested in basic maintenance of his bikes; he'd missed some opportunities to learn basic tool

use and maybe to exercise his geometric imagery.

Most of what was needed to keep a house going if it was in decent shape was simple indeed, but Johnny couldn't do much of the like and had found he was somehow crippled by a lack of confidence which made it hard for him to learn even simple manual skills. Worrying about the issue, he soon enough learned that some boys and men, including the Portuguese and Polish immigrants in his town, were prone to just jump in to tasks they'd never done before; confident that they could learn by doing, they had, in fact, learned by doing. But the boys in many of those families were taught the basic skills and even some of the advanced skills of working men, and engineers or applied scientists, from a young age.

Johnny had learned quickly enough in his career as a homeowner that one good way to risk injury with power tools was to be tentative with that use—a circular saw would kick back if not used with confidence. It seemed to him he suffered yet from the destruction of confidence which had occurred in college when he found he couldn't just casually learn enough to get almost automatic A's as had been true during the first 12 years of formal education.

Or was it the case that he had been raised to be soft boy? He knew he'd been raised in a way bereft of strong religious beliefs and anything corresponding to a deeper patriotism. Regular attendance at church services and respect for the flag were all that was required, along with a belief in the superiority of the New England Congregationalist attitudes, independent of any demands by God, and in the superiority of the American Way of Life, whatever that meant in a country of Scotch-Irish hill-peoples and Jewish Brooklynites and American Indians stuck on their reservations and white swamp-dwellers in Louisiana and black swamp-dwellers in Florida and Scandinavian farmers in North Dakota and...

"Wow. Not much melting down in that list," and then someone responded, "But some of those Jewish students from New York City I met in college weren't that much different from the middle-class WASPs who fled to Haight-Ashbury."

A thought interrupted the internal debate as Johnny wondered if American culture was so toxic as to be destroying even the intellectual talents of Ashkenazi Jews? Said to be the smartest people in the world?

Yet...

Yet...

In his heart of hearts, Johnny knew his lack of moral character was the bigger problem; he was lacking in the sheer gumption which would have driven him to work hard enough to do well in college. And when he'd gradually and gently built up better work habits, he'd learned he had only to study a couple of hours a day to get A's and B's in moderately difficult mathematics courses—this was after he'd dropped out of the courses for physics majors and for ambitious mathematics majors.

But that way of thinking dealt with a symptom and not the disease of a decadent moral character. The point of going to university wasn't to get good grades—that was a measure of progress towards the goal he'd once held: to become a top-notch theoretical physicist. Under the soft peer-pressure of a college environment conducive to more partying than studying, he'd lost sight of his goal. He'd lost contact with his own self.

“Maybe my moral character actually has some potential for strength? Maybe I'm a strange creature born outside of any social structures which helps to form moral character? Maybe those social structures only reward those who show firmness in moral character? And maybe the firmness, to some extent—perhaps a great extent, exists in a society which is itself morally good?”

On some level, that train of thought made Johnny feel better until he remembered that this wasn't an intellectual exercise but rather part of an effort to recover something which had been taken away from him.

“But I didn't fight to hold on to it. Whatever 'it' is.”

In any case, he knew he'd not ever developed the high level of learning and thinking skills he'd seemingly been developing before American secondary education and mass culture got in the way. And the skills he had developed early and partially re-developed in the later years of college had shallow roots and died away after a few years of corporate life—including squeaking by on his actuarial exams. And so it was that he tried to return to learning mathematics and physics only a few years after leaving college with a BA. And so it was that he found himself struggling to read even the first chapters of books for courses where he had done well. And the effort had continued for a good decade with little in the way of results other than knowledge of some general principles read out of the introductions and early chapters of many books of good repute.

A vision suddenly came to Johnny of a fellow coming from two successful families of men and women of strong character. A Nigerian Uncle who was both a tribal chieftain and a scientist. . .

Anthropologist? Geophysicist? Paleontologist? Infectious disease researcher? Something of the sort...

But the fellow of concern. The nephew...

Protagonist? No, but the protagonist...

"Narrator... But maybe protagonist as well..."

That mysterious fellow's maternal grandfather was an American engineer of great wealth and power. Welsh.

"Pure Welsh? Or a mixture?"

Johnny went with pure Welsh and returned to imagine that fellow, half-Nigerian and half-Welsh. Smart but he'd never adopted the disciplined ways of his paternal uncle nor those of his maternal grandfather. He'd acquired a bit of introductory knowledge of science at many a fine university before heading off to...

"Visit high-priced courtesans in Hong Kong? Or simpler streetwalkers in Paris?"

Johnny wondered about that turn in character for...

"Dylan?"

The question seemed strange but then Johnny remembered this poet coming to ghostly existence in his imagination was half-Welsh, but what could be his last name? He jumped up and walked out of his small office to see his Golden Retriever peering cautiously out of the door to Johnny's bedroom. The apparently confused beast didn't follow as his master walked down the stairs and looked for the 1950s encyclopedia which was sent down by his Uncle Bill and Aunt Mary when Johnny was in junior high school or so. He found nothing inspiring and left the house to go to the public library diagonally across the street.

A half-hour later, Johnny returned from the public library having learned that a recent President of Nigeria had the surname 'Shagari'. He went with 'Dylan Shagari' though not sure if he might be mixing the ethnic groups in Nigeria. It seemed to him that the poet was Ibo while Shagari might be a name from another tribe.

Thinking he should clear that up before the book was published, Johnny moved on to write some quick notes in a fresh spiral notebook, after labeling it with a title from *Moby Dick*:

The Open Independence of the Seas.

Continuing he started writing about this young man of undisciplined behavior. . .

Few words came before Johnny's sense of guilt made him realize: "But his misbehavior is one heck of a lot more courageous and more interesting than mine was."

And then he moved into a theological mode:

"Heaven is taken by those who act with the proper sort of violence. . ."

"And what sort of violence is that?"

"The sort that is practiced by a God-centered man who has the courage to face up to the sometime brutal truths of this world created by God."

"Can you make yourself into such a man of courage rather than an American who goes with the flow, who accepts convenient stories rather than trying to find the truth?"

Still in a little bit of a theological mode, Johnny asked, "Can a man be a true Christian if he doesn't crave the truth, however harsh or inconvenient? If he doesn't have any sense of being fed lies by the powers of the world?"

"You mean, 'the enemies of God'?"

"Isn't that going too far? After all, we all. . . Almost all of us have our own desires which may not conform to what God wants. Do we have the right to condemn others who have stronger illicit desires or maybe just a little bit less moral strength? Or maybe just less moral formation than. . ."

Vaguely, he remembered some quote from perhaps a prominent figure in history:

If you must sin, sin with energy and courage.

"Or something like that."

"Are you thinking yourself to be just another coward who sins or not depending upon external pressures?"

"Of course. That's why I'm feeling so guilty that I didn't do something about my situation. I failed to develop my talents or to. . ."

"To do the work that God called you to do?"

"Yes. Dammit. Yes."

"Maybe you are doing the work God called you to do. Maybe your suffered through years of frustration and failure in order to play some role in helping to turn things around in this country and the other Western countries."

“That would be a heavy responsibility. And it might be egotistical for me to think I could play that sort of role. I’m smart, maybe even damned smart, but my mind is ill-trained.”

“So what? Didn’t Einstein say something about ignorance being an advantage to the creative thinker.”

“I remember something like that but my memories are often wrong when I check something.”

And the poet came back to mind, though Johnny couldn’t picture him, but for the scars where the spear had gone through one cheek and then another, taking out a few teeth. Not quite sure why a poet would have had such scars, Johnny remembered:

The poet had a friend he’d met while visiting his uncle in Nigeria.

The author was on a roll but with no more than 20 or so words set down in electrons, he realized that friend of Dylan Shagari was a 400-pound gorilla who probably sat wherever he wished. *Draco* came to mind, but why would he have thought of a constellation? Why, more specifically, would Dylan Shagari name a family of African gorillas after a constellation in the upper regions of the northern hemisphere?

“And one named after a dragon. . . Family?”

Johnny looked around to see who would be so surprised, but Rebel was lying on the floor, jaws upon his fore-paws and not looking much surprised. And that sort of surprised Johnny. If Rebel was so responsive to his hormonal flows, why didn’t the gentle fellow respond—if only in confusion—to Johnny’s brain chemical changes, to the change in state of his brain-cells and networks of such cells? Maybe there were some thoughts radical to human conception which weren’t really disturbing in the way of a surge of hormones correlated to anger or other forms of emotional aggression?

There were so many things to learn before speaking truly of the world. Or more?

“There’s work to be done and I have to start doing the work God called me to do before. . .”

He hesitated before telling himself and Rebel, “Before I can do that work God called me to do?”

Johnny feared there was a paradox and a presumption in his thoughts. And he returned to see a kaleidoscopic display on the screen of his computer, multi-colored swirls which somehow. . .

“Relieve my pain? A pain some can see in me but only a few? But it’s only the pain of a man exploring the world as a part of God’s Creation and finding himself alone. . .”

He found himself struggling for thoughts because he couldn’t quite categorize the attitudes his fellow-Christians had towards the world; some thought of the world as if separate from God and salvation; some even thought of the world as evil, as made of matter which was irredeemable, forcing man to seek a spiritual salvation. But Johnny thought Aquinas claimed that what is truly human is embodied. And he thought the priest who instructed him had made similar claims in explaining the Sacraments and the sacramental world. God gave man the powers to provide the bread and the wine, the flesh and the blood; God Himself had to provide what was spiritual.

But Johnny couldn’t feel confident in any of his lines of thought, in any of his claims to himself or in his books—unpublished and essentially written only for his own edification. After all, it was painful to admit the facts—he’d struggled through the first 40 or 50 pages of a good number of serious books on math or physics and the later chapters. . .? And those serious books were still at the undergraduate level.

Johnny still froze when so much as browsing through the later chapters of his textbooks in partial differential equations and applied mathematics. He’d never been able to carry out his plans to properly learn some of the basic mathematics he should have easily handled in college. Why did he have so much trouble moving on to abstract algebra when his college professors had told him he was more than adequately skilled in manipulative algebra of an advanced sort of high school algebra? Moreover, some had told him he was smart enough that he should have been able to learn sophisticated mathematical thought with some serious effort but relative ease compared to even most mathematics or physics majors. Maybe it was the long bull sessions? Or the nights of beer or the nights of whatever the happy-hour drink was that day at the Aladdin Bar & Grill across from the medical center? Or the pickup basketball games and football games? Occasional games of tennis? Long runs through the park or around the indoor track in winter?

No. Some of that would have been better skipped but Johnny couldn’t

honestly regret the many hours devoted to sports around the neighborhood or at the Boys' Club a block away; he couldn't regret the long runs in college or the pickup basketball or even the occasional and usually embarrassing games of tennis with those fellows from New York City where tennis was more respected than in Jenkesville.

He wished yet and would ever wish that he had been better directed in studying and reading when his mind was forming in his adolescent years. He would have liked to have taken on serious books in mathematics and various sciences, historical works, novels and poetry, works in other languages. He especially wished he had been taught how to learn languages in a disciplined way and had been exposed to some truly abstract mathematics when he was instead wasting a year at a time covering material he could have covered in a couple of weeks, and often he had read the entirety of a textbook in a few weeks during the boring hours of classroom blather.

And music. . .

His mother had been an accomplished pianist and organist. Why had she not raised her children to be musicians?

Johnny knew his mother had a love-hate relationship with her mother. . .

Had she been hurt differently from him but still hurt deeply? Did she shy away from continuing her hard-earned accomplishments or encouraging such hard-work in her own children. . .

"Did you work so hard to become valedictorian and to conquer several musical instruments to earn Granny's unqualified love?" He feared she had set herself to an impossible task and he knew he would never really discuss it with her.

Hearing a sigh just as his chest heaved, Johnny wondered if he really had been capable of chewing up the college courses. Certainly, he could have at least done well in the ordinary tracks of physics and mathematics, tracks oriented towards most science and engineering majors, but his bad work habits and his weak moral character had made that impossible. . .

"Am I just not suited to being a freestanding individualist?"

"Maybe you need to have a strong-willed woman at your side?"

"No. Maybe if I'd become an engineer or had not let my attention wander from actuarial work, then I could have been isolated enough to mature properly by my late youth, but it's not possible to isolate yourself in that way as an author. You have to pay too much attention to all that hectic and increasingly disordered action in the world. And that, along with

the emphasis on workmanlike products which reflect the weakening literacy levels. . .”

“You could have become such a writer and then maybe written better stuff in the pre-dawn hours like Hemingway supposedly did when he was a journalist.”

“Not me. I like getting up early but the stuff about working and playing into the night. . . Well, 18 hour days of working and drinking don’t appeal to me.”

“The drinking is probably necessary for all the rest to happen.”

“Exactly. And depressed drunks kill themselves too often for my tastes.”

Johnny decided to cut short that conversation between parts of himself. He intuited that it was a conversation he’d have to complete some day, but he wasn’t ready. He didn’t understand himself well enough. Didn’t understand his world well enough. And it came to him that, though a little bit shielded from the world, he wasn’t separate from it. Looking over at his two crowded shelves of books, many of them about relativity theory and mathematical physics in general and abstract algebra and topology and chaos theory and other such fields, Johnny wondered if there could be some sort of key in those fields, a key to improve his understanding of himself and of his country and town and Christian communities and so on. And he realized he would have to study a bit before even being able to formulate the questions properly. Still more years of study would be needed to see even a direction towards a possible solution.

Years?

“And suppose I make a good effort and find, five or ten years from now, that I can’t even formulate good questions?”

But, “Hemingway?”

Johnny didn’t understand Hemingway at all. Didn’t understand why an intelligent and knowledgeable man would pander to a world of prose without ideas. The other stuff about short words and short sentences didn’t bother Johnny much. His tests of his own novels revealed a mere tenth grade level for vocabulary and sentence structure; the ideas which were so bothersome to some but noticeable to all who read his works were found in the complex use of simple parts. His early attempts at nonfiction hadn’t yet resulted in anything he would have much cared to submit and it did seem to have a bit more complex syntax than his works of fiction. He was wondering about computer networks as a way of distributing some writings. . .

“I’ve read about hookups of universities in California and even across-country. And about NASA and some universities having a system for sending messages and even reports. . .”

“You’ve got to get on the ball and learn about what’s going on in the world. Here it is 1994. . .”

Johnny shuddered at the realization it was almost a year since his father had died. He resolved to. . .

“Grow up. Here I am—nearly 40—and not even truly making my own way in the world. And my head is filled with illusions that I can change the world for the better.”

And he thought about his way of changing the world—writing books that would deal with the modern world and its empirical knowledge from a Catholic viewpoint. A Christian viewpoint? Well, it seemed likely that his poorly formed thoughts were directed towards a sacramental understanding of Creation and that would seem to be acceptable to more than just Catholics. Acceptable? Given the failure of Christians to truly adjust even to modern physics, let alone evolutionary biology and literature and art and music, Johnny thought modern Christians to be in desperate need of openminded efforts to understand a world which was, and is, a work of the God of Jesus Christ.

“God is speaking to us and we don’t listen. To understand even the dogmatic truths of the creeds of the ancient Christian Church, we have to understand the words and concepts in which they were stated. And, as Newman tried to tell us, those words and concepts develop, change in various ways, independent of their use for the statement of truths revealed directly by God. . .”

That suddenly struck Johnny as odd. . .

Not to worry for now. . .

How to get back to a good understanding of God’s Creation as best understood after the creative destructions of Darwin and Einstein? Einstein and Darwin?

“What has priority in the great changes in human mindscapes? Is it space and time and matter or the evolutionary processes which shape them in this universe? And how does that human mind fit in?”

Johnny had gone far, far enough to wonder if all Creation were subject to the truths Einstein and Darwin had discovered for this universe.

“World?”

Johnny was attracted to the idea of the universe being a world but he wasn't sure what a world would be in that sense.

"But it's mathematics which must be the way to a greater understanding."

And so it was that Johnny sided with Einstein, not rejecting Darwin but giving him secondary status.

He had a vague intuition that space and time—spacetime?—and matter dictated the possibilities of evolution. "And development."

And Johnny saw it coming but couldn't put it off. He had circled around, somehow, and was about to repeat himself—though in a new way.

Several times since he'd graduated from college, Johnny had tried to refresh and then extend his mathematical knowledge and skills. Such efforts had rarely lasted for long, partly because he found that he now had trouble regaining skills he'd apparently conquered—he could be sure that he had conquered those skills because of markings and comments written into his college textbooks. And, yet, what did it mean to claim he'd conquered such skills when he'd found it so hard, bordering on the impossible, to move more deeply into these fields by way of self-study?

At times he wondered if he'd had somewhat better learning skills in college than he remembered. Was it some sort of fear of tests? But he hadn't done too badly, mixture of A's and B's once he'd set up regular work times and hadn't just moved with the hour's wind. And now he did his best to keep to a schedule of studying background material to the long-term goal of... WHAT??...

What worried Johnny most was the possibility that he'd shown so little moral character in his life as a corporate nomad. Perhaps a little more than he'd shown in his years of boredom and decay during those horrible high school years; perhaps a little more than he'd shown during his freshman year of college when he'd not responded to the signs of poor study habits, poor attitudes even when he was inside a major university library... He had still been so susceptible to various sorts of peer pressure that he'd gone on beer blasts he didn't enjoy and had spent days at a time in meaning-free bull-shit conversations dealing with matters none of them knew much about. Why had he not paid attention to the high school history teacher who'd told the class: "You have no right to an opinion until you know some facts about the subject."

Johnny smiled at a feeling of comfort. He'd come through the same line of thought but in a way that seemed calmer and maybe even more

insightful, though in a hinting way that itself hinted of Plato and some other philosophers.

“How about Melville?”

The thought came into his head and not out of his own mind that Melville was a bit of a philosophical novelist.

“At least I think so.”

But he wasn't sure if he'd really thought that after his very forced reading of *Moby Dick* in a course in 19th century American literature.

“Or did I read it in some sort of review essay?”

He sighed at the realization, itself a repeat, that he'd fallen into the habit of occasionally reading literary reviews but rarely reading novels. And never poems. He'd utterly failed to make it much of the way through *Moby Dick* after buying a hardcover *Barnes & Noble* edition. The effort to read it seriously had actually caused headaches and a bit of insomnia.

Then Johnny realized he was truly trying. One of the older librarians at the Jenkesville Public Library had told him he was almost the only one taking out the classics. Not that the Jenkesville Public Library had too many classics left. And brief explorations had left him cold to the new novels...

“Maybe it's better to just concentrate on reading good math books for now.” And he was honest enough to add, “and starting to read the good math books piling up on bookcases and in boxes.”

Johnny had spent a fair amount of money on those good math books, but the end result...

Johnny had half-heartedly and weakly jumped towards a more sophisticated region of mathematical thought and had fallen into some sort of abyss and dared not to even look up to those higher plateaus. And some of the skills so hard-won were fading from lack of practice. It was the same as in tennis: he'd occasionally played tennis with more highly skilled athletes and had made some progress which was undone by long periods of not picking up a racket.

“How long does it take to reform a mind damaged in childhood and youth?”

And then another thought came: “Re-form?”

It occurred to Johnny that neither might be possible and so he roused himself from a state of reverie and found himself in front of his late father's workbench in the basement of what was now the house of his widowed mother. He looked to the right and saw shelves holding various grinding and

sharpening tools and some saw blades and other miscellany. The shelves were mounted on a wall which divided off the small room his youngest brother had built for his own quiet space in a house full of human life. That was the room which had recently been the cave for an author named Johnny. Originally, it'd had only one outlet and that in the socket of the utility-grade ceiling light.

But there was now a board held by masonry screws into the foundation. By other than coincidence, that board was just behind the spot where his computer desk had been, now replaced by a simple desk built by one of his brothers as a school project. Now, there was no extension cord drooping from the ceiling light. The outlet and the power cords were now behind the desk where once had sat the computer and printer. Not quite hidden but still more dignified. The place was a little more respectable as a small library with that small desk for working on books he didn't want to keep up in the room which was now his office, a bedroom of sorts with no hanging closet. Almost certainly, meant for use as a nursery or laundry room.

Johnny sighed as he thought about recent efforts to write serious literature in a cubbyhole in the basement of his mother's house, a cubbyhole he had shared with the meter where the water main came into the house. He walked into that cubbyhole and sighed again as he looked at 7 boxes of his books stacked with substantial order on metal shelving more suited to a workbench area in a garage or a . . . basement. And he sighed once more when he thought of the nearly 15 boxes of books in the attic of his mother's house or the basement of his brother's house.

2 The Farm

It had been a paradise of sorts for Johnny and his siblings when they were young. It had also been a place for a nice, relaxing Sunday afternoon for the adults in the family.

Substantial acreage, though Johnny had never asked for the details from his cousins or his aunt or his parents.

“Wait a minute!”

Johnny could see his mother look over at him and he wondered if his objection as a developing author had been audible.

“Objection?”

She looked over again as he made sure to silently tell himself, “It’s only a pointer to an objection. I hadn’t quite formed the objection inside of my own mind and now it’s gone in the way of an early morning fog.”

A sigh came and Johnny looked over to see his mother looking at the passing houses. “When your Aunt Margaret and Uncle Merrill bought the house and land from the widowed farmwife, there were only a few houses along Rocky Plain Road.”

Johnny made quick glances to left and right and saw successions of small cape-coddors and ranch-houses. He saw a few that were relatively new—in places where his younger brothers and sisters once hunted for sight of mama-moo-moos. Most were. . .

“When did they build most of these houses?”

“When Westover Airbase expanded in the 1950s. They continued building more after we returned home in 1958.”

The phrase “returned home” bothered Johnny, partly for the sake of his father from Oklahoma and partly for his own sake. His father had often seemed unhappy. A sociable sort of fellow, much more than his wife, Mr Waters had become almost hermit-like at times in response to the determination of his wife to socialize with only a small set—mostly her relatives.

Johnny thought he was maybe being unfair to his mother as he noticed Rebel up and whining with delight or anticipation or something and he took over from the automatic pilot, shutting the engine off. And he looked around the cabin of the car and then the hood; a simple, dark-blue Plymouth Acclaim, four or five years old. In his more ambitious days, he had planned on driving a good sedan—maybe a small Lincoln or Audi—with a sports-car sitting in the garage for weekend playtime. And he didn't even own this car, though his mother was prepared to sign it over to him after he had sold his two-year old pickup truck to one of his brothers for the remaining payments. And he no longer owned a house and saw no possibility of once again owning one. At least no plausibility.

Rebel was jumping around from one door to the other in the backseat of the Acclaim, but Johnny was caught by the sheer lack of a barn and by the badly damaged green ash which had once stood beside a barn and barely within a field which sloped down to a creek and a small pond. From Johnny's viewpoint, the tree was asymmetric, missing most of its left to that fire. The field itself was merely cleared, kept mowed and in good order, though it had once held antique fairs and, between those rare events, the horse of his cousin, Mary Jane. The pond wasn't even in good shape. After the death of Uncle Merrill at the age of 40, Aunt Margaret had stopped maintaining the pond on the advice of her insurance agent who had labeled it an "attractive nuisance" or something of the sort.

And the cows. . .

Up through some unremembered point during his high school years, there had been an active farm across the street and that farm had a small dairy operation. The cows had been set out to various pastures each day, including his aunt's field—she had refused to accept even a token payment for allowing that, saying she had no other use for the field. She had also refused even a holiday turkey from the turkey-farmer on the other side of the creek; she had allowed him to build a fenced path to the pond for his birds to get water.

Walking around to the other side, Johnny let Rebel out the door and he went right to the fence where he and Max, a rather unfriendly German Shepherd, set to work threatening each other. And Johnny looked back to the void where once a wondrously fragrant barn had stood. A barn which had held marvelous things even after the horses and other animals were faded memories—though it had been the shelter of choice for pets which had escaped the office of the veterinarian down the road a little ways and

across from the turkey farm which was now a development of five or six modest but seemingly nice houses.

That barn had held boxes of not-nearly antiques which had come in with the more valuable goods from estate sales managed by Aunt Margaret or Great-aunt Joan who'd lived and had a store over in the town of Minnechaug. Those contents had included books which smelled of old, old glue and old paper and sometimes old leather.

None were quite like the occasional Christmas presents Johnny had received—old books suited to boys enamored of early New England, tales of skating on pond or river, adventures of sledding on hills in the midst of wilderness. Inspired by those, he'd been immediately drawn to his public library's collection of perhaps 20 books relating similar, probably fictional, adventures of famous early Americans.

The books in the barn were more like those in Aunt Margaret's bookshelf—a mixture of modern history books, including the abridged version of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* [8], great novels going from the 1920s back into the 1800s, and good-quality novels from various book clubs circa 1950-1970.

That made Johnny wonder: "Great-Aunt Mary, may she rest in peace, was one of the labor leaders suckered by Stalin and his minions during a 'Potemkin Village' tour back around 1930 or so." Was she convinced by Solzhenitsyn of the true nature of that brutal and exploitive system which she had been tricked into seeing as a noble and virtuous option for all mankind? Or was that book unread by Aunt Mary, perhaps coming from Mary Jane or from another relative?

Johnny remembered the days when boxes of books would pass from one house to another in his mother's family—often novels or histories from the *Book of the Month Club* or *Reader's Digest* reprints or paperback mystery novels.

"A literate family in a society still at least somewhat literate?"

Johnny shook his head clear of the word 'decadence' before re-remembering that the barn had held at least one box of pictures and maybe some papers from Great-aunt Mary, Aunt Margaret's "Boston mother," her biological mother. Mrs Waters had been cousins with Aunt Margaret but knew her as a sister after the 13 year-old Margaret went to live in her aunt and uncle's house and, thus, became a sister and second mother to the new-born who was Johnny's mother.

"Mary Jane. . ."

His cousin had given her grandmother's papers to Radcliffe College but Johnny didn't know if she had gotten all the pictures and papers in the barn which had burned five or six years after Mary Jane's early death. Suckered by Stalin during her trip to the Soviet Union, seeing only some—real or artificial?—bright spots in the Soviet factories and perhaps the housing of some favored or lucky workers, some of whom might have been thrown into slave-labor camps in Siberia before too many more days had passed.

Yet, Great-aunt Mary had her good points for sure. On the trip over, the delegation of labor leaders had gone to a London hotel where they'd been told that the African-American delegate wouldn't be allowed to stay; she'd immediately led the entire party out the door with uncertain prospects. Johnny had known her well enough to know she would have been truly willing to sleep on the streets if that had been the only other choice.

“Are we boring you with our women's talk?”

Johnny smiled at Aunt Margaret and confessed he was just lost in his thoughts. His mother gave him only a glance and the two women returned to talking about some clothes that Aunt Margaret needed. They were making arrangements for Mrs Waters to buy them at a department store in Jenkesville which still carried old-fashioned house-dresses, as he thought they were called. Rather than returning to his own thoughts, Johnny looked down at the magazines on top of his aunt's dining table. He picked up a copy of *New England Ways* and saw there was an article on the Cocomanut Grove fire which Johnny knew to have been back in 1941, though he learned some years later that the terrible fire had occurred in 1942. Though seeing the scene in his Aunt Margaret's living-room, he had even mis-remembered his mother going down to the Naval recruiting office only a short time after the nightclub fire, but it was a year before, 1941, that the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor had occurred. She was a Navy reservist months before that fire. In a sense, it was a small error but one which bothered Johnny.

And Johnny returned from past and future and greater future to look up as his Aunt was agreeing to go out for lunch at the Friendly's restaurant in East Longmeadow. He admitted to not being sure how to get there from Somers, but his aunt told him, “Don't worry. I'll get us there and by a short-cut through some side-streets.”

It was a pleasant time as it almost always was with Aunt Margaret. She was one of those, along with Johnny's youngest brother and a few others, who could cheer up Mrs Waters. Johnny remembered, or perhaps mis-remembered, that it was during that expedition to Friendly's that Aunt

Margaret had told him about the time she had gone with her mother to lunch at the White House with the Roosevelts'. She spoke of the young adults being released to go outside to talk and socialize in the Rose Garden. She mentioned James Roosevelt in particular—later an officer in the Marines and perhaps already some sort of junior Lieutenant at the time of that lunch at the White House.

3 Out with the Boys

Much had changed and much hadn't changed at all. This meant not necessarily that much was like unto much.

What had change to do with stability?

Or was it simply a summer rerun?

A moving image came of a white-garbed man smiling at Johnny. A sarcastic smile? A smile offering healing if only. . .

Johnny shot up, angry at the very suggestion he'd surrender and become part of a society which wasn't his though it had penetrated him, misshaping his mind and heart, damaging his habits which were good when he was young. He'd read. Go out and play some sports with the guys. Return home and work on a jigsaw puzzle and then do some of the more interesting problems from his sister's math book—she was three years older than him. He had a young boy's version of the good work habits of a. . . A physicist or mathematician? A historian? Something else which required intense efforts he was no longer able to make after attending a high school. . .

Noticing that Rebel was eyeing him intensely and with a worried expression, Johnny took a few deep breaths and managed to calm down. "I've been over that. . . Over and over and over. Haven't I, good boy?"

A doggy grin was returning to a face lying on the floor and then a tail began to beat against the wooden floor of Johnny's bedroom and reading room.

"A face lying on the floor? That's clumsy and not too accurate a description. Is that what we face when trying to speak of creatures with anatomies shaped differently from ours? Do we face similar problems in trying to speak about or from the perspective of human beings from radically different physical environments and cultures than our own?"

Johnny realized he was suffering from anticipation nigh onto dread of a get-together which would bring back the memories and the reality of expe-

riences which he found somewhat pleasant at the time and quite unpleasant in the overall context of his life. Drinking beer or Scotch in a quiet pub or on the back-deck of his house in Stamford had been satisfying because of the conversations about God and the universe and Western civilization and maybe interesting movies or books. There had been something deeper and more substantial even in some of the discussions in various bars around the world during Johnny's Corporate Period.

But 'substantial' made it seem perhaps more objective and less personal than it was. Johnny cared about the great scientists and their work and even their lives. Johnny didn't care about over-paid professional athletes. Johnny wanted to care about serious musicians—Celtic and American traditionalists as well as classical composers and musicians—but really didn't care about most rock or other pop music.

"But I'm addicted to some of it, just as I'm addicted to American junk culture in general."

The day passed in an energetic sort of calm as Johnny worked on the novel about the Olde Yankee who was waiting for mastodons to return to New England. He wondered how in the world he would be able to explain how he'd lost a good job and then walked away from a good-paying career to write books that he'd wish to read himself.

And then his childhood friend, Tom, picked him up and they drove off to meet another childhood friend, Father Charlie who had just been named the Pastor of St Adalbert's in nearby Dunfries, a very small town founded by Scots who hadn't gotten along with the Olde Yankees in Jenkesville and had left to set up metalworks of some sort a bit further up the Chicopee River. Johnny remembered being at a town-fair in Dunfries and noting a pretty high percentage of red-haired people and had wondered if the Scots who founded Dunfries were some variety of Gaelic Scots. Not that redheads were totally unknown among Saxons or Celts of French or other persuasion.

"Or Picts?"

"Did it again. I'm assuming something when I have only a vague idea of what the facts are. Or maybe some good idea of what the facts **might** be. And I don't even know as much about Picts as the little imagined by historians. Nor do I know much about the distribution of redheads among the various peoples of the British Isles, though they seem common among the Irish and the Scotch-Irish of the United States."

"What are you talking about, Johnny?"

"Sorry, Tom."

“I was just starting to tell you about my decision to give up my law firm and go to seminary, and you. . .”

“Faded away. I’m getting used to living inside my own head.”

“Only one around who’s smart enough to understand you?”

Johnny opened his mouth but couldn’t get a word out because there was some serious truth to that. He wondered if he’d been taught to be ashamed of being smart. More than that, there was a moral critique he could make about the many who drew strong conclusions from little knowledge and little in the way of thinking skills. Though he didn’t know if it applied to Americans more than others? Only Americans? All human beings?.

But then a pregnant though intentionally polite question arose, “And you went to a Bible school run by clergymen and lay scholars from a non-denominational denomination?”

“Yeah, the *Disciples of Christ*. Though there are closely related groups. Non-group groups, in a sense.”

“Barton Stone and the Campbells, father and son.”

There was silence and Tom looked at his friend with a bit of surprise for a few seconds before asking, “You’re familiar with them?”

“Before I became a Catholic in Connecticut, my last Protestant church in Atlanta was loosely associated with a group called the *Church of Christ*. I guess loose associations are the only sort allowed. The minister was a good man, and so were the men who made up his team of something like 10 assistant ministers. Though one, supported entirely by the church in Atlanta, ran a church in Hawaii, serving the impoverished natives.”

“I might have heard of him. . . Timothy. . . Something British for his last name I think.”

“Actually, it was Timothy Dalton. Saxon last name. I found that out once when I was trying to figure out if the correct pronunciation for another Saxon place-name and personal name was ‘How-ston’ or ‘Hyoo-ston’.”

“A real church builder.”

“He was up to 300 in the US and 300 in India when I left his church in 1987, when I was on my way to Connecticut and on my painful way into the Catholic Church.”

“A good man and a good minister of Christ’s church.”

“He certainly had some very good qualities. Interest in history, even the history of Christianity or his own nondenominational denomination, wasn’t a quality he had. Or even valued.”

Tom laughed as he was pulling into the parking lot of the Fairview Mall. “Did you have a parting of the ways with him over those histories?”

Father LaFontaine was waiting near the entrance door to *Murphey’s Irish Birdwatcher Pub*, the name having famously come from the owner and head chef who’d been not a “birdwatcher/spy” but an author of a few modestly successful spy novels. But, Ian had always added, “I spent several years in the DIA inserting maps and pictures of tanks in a lot of reports. Well, I started out emptying wastebaskets and driving bigshots around Honolulu so they could buy presents for all the grandchildren back home.”

Charlie was still as slender and sandy-haired as a Scotch-Irishman from North Carolina, though he was a French-Canadian on both sides of his family. Johnny wondered to himself and not for the first time: “Was he from some part of France where the Celts had physically survived? Even if they had lost their culture and their language?” And some deeper part of him added, “And their way of worshiping Christ?”

“Are you trying to start a theological argument before the first drink?”

Johnny looked over to Father LaFontaine to see both a smile and a puzzled expression. Shrugging, Johnny said with a slightly wavering voice, “I’m still working out my conversion.”

It was Tom rather than Charlie who said, “That’s true of all of us, including Augustine when he was still in this mortal realm.”

For a moment, Johnny thought of responding and trying to keep that conversation going, but then he told himself, “That is a strange position for a man who’s a minister in a somewhat self-ignorant Evangelical Protestant denomination.”

And he remained mostly silent as Charlie and Tom spoke of the possible draft picks for the Patriots leading Johnny to remember he wasn’t even sure of a single name on the current roster of a team he’d once spent a fair amount of time following.

4 Remembering Mary Jane

Johnny had not adequately appreciated his cousin Mary Jane at the time. That is, he'd realized how smart she was; she was dedicated to a disciplined approach to the testing of human minds. The statistical analysis was demanding, beyond the capabilities of almost all of the psychologists Johnny had met.

He remembered when Mary Jane had given him and some of his siblings IQ tests; it was practice of a sort for one of her classes as she worked towards a PhD in psychology, specializing in testing. She had borrowed Granny's apartment which was across the park from the Waters' house. On the way out of the apartment building, Mary Jane had said to him in a flat voice, "You must be awfully bored in that school." Johnny had said nothing in response.

The screen in front of Johnny was displaying rapidly changing geometric shapes, very colorful and very disruptive to his line of thought.

Johnny looked back on his relationship with Mary Jane. She was the big sister he had needed, partly to protect him when young from the bad decisions of his parents... Or was it his mother? Certainly, his mother hadn't wanted him to advance as he was trying to mature intellectually. She thought there was some good in holding him back to spend four years in a school which offered absolutely nothing to him—actually, he could have done himself some good if he'd made an effort in foreign languages and maybe if he'd participated in the music programs. He would have been far better off in a school with teachers who themselves knew how to learn advanced and difficult material suitable to a young fellow with some academic talent.

It suddenly occurred to Johnny that Mary Jane and his mother had once been close and then had gone to a coldish relationship. Had that happened because he and one of his brothers had tested with extremely

high IQs? Had Mary Jane argued with the gentle and well-meaning but quite stubborn Mrs Waters? Quite conventional for that matter, no matter her self-delusions about being an independent thinker.

Mr Waters had once followed a great business opportunity and the Waters had moved briefly, returning to Jenkesville when things didn't work out. Johnny had learned recently that the school system down in Woodbridge, Virginia had recommended moving him into ninth grade instead of fifth grade. His parents had never spoken a word to him to find out where he stood. He had been the sort of boy who would have accepted his parents' decision, but would have liked—looking backwards—to have made his opinion known. Turning school into a job, a bit of a challenging job if things had gone right, would have been fine with him. He'd never grown dependent upon socializing in school; the neighborhood pickup games in baseball and basketball, the mixed-age capture-the-flag games as evening settled in, the pitch games, board games, watching movies together occasionally, had provided more than enough healthy socializing and physical activities. And Boy Scouts had been okay.

Johnny felt a shiver go up his spine as he remembered how he'd failed Mary Jane as she was dying. He'd visited her with a friend and had caught signs something was up but asked no questions and conveniently didn't learn that her kidneys were failing and the medical system regulators had told her they couldn't approve her for a transplant. Her organs had been damaged by a period of misdiagnosis and non-treatment of her diabetes when she was young.

Johnny shot up from his desk-chair, throwing the keyboard and wrist-pad a few inches into the air. Out of the corner of his eyes, he could see Rebel jump up, looking at him with a trusting, submissive, and somewhat wary expression.

“Do you realize, Rebel, that she died angry at God, not accepting her fate, her unfair fate. . . Her organs damaged because of a doctor who doesn't sound competent and a mother who trusted the doctor more than she worried about her daughter's deteriorating condition. . .”

There was a pause as Johnny admitted for the first time that Mary Jane had, in a manner of speaking, more reason to be angry at her own mother, his Aunt Margaret, than to be angry at God.

“What could I have done, Lord? I was fighting to regain my own faith at that time. . .”

And he re-remembered. . .

He'd really had no well-formed faith when he was young. Jesus was a nice man who told good stories to children and other people. He wanted us to be nice also.

“Or, is that ‘good’ rather than ‘nice’?”

Knowing that it was sometimes good just to talk to a good listener, Johnny turned to his gentle friend and said, “How could I have given what I really still don't have... much. And I didn't really have it at all at that time?”

Which left a Creation-sized question hanging in Johnny's mind? What was “it”?

“Would I have gained ‘it’ if I'd given it to Mary Jane before I had ‘it’ myself?”

5 Settling In

“Time to settle in. . .”

“But I’ve been here at my mother’s house for more than six months and I’ve got parts of three different novels written out by hand and lesser parts typed into my computer. . .”

And Johnny looked at his Radio Shack computer running Word under Windows.

He thought again about that other operating system he’d heard about—Linux? He had almost bought a book about it and it contained a floppy with a program which could supposedly shrink a DOS or MS-Windows system down to one. . .

“Partition?”

Yes, that was the word Johnny remembered. And then another partition would be created to install a Linux system.

Johnny sat and stared at the screen with Microsoft Word displayed for several minutes before driving to a nearby bookstore where he wandered through the computer aisle, drifted off to mathematics and then to history, then returned to the computer aisle and picked up a book on Slackware Linux which had the floppies for a basic Linux system and also that software which could squeeze MS Windows into a part of the hard-drive so that he could install Linux on the rest of the drive. On his way to the cash register, Johnny went back through the mathematics aisle and picked up Hocking and Young’s introductory book, *Topology* [7]. Johnny had taken a course from Professor Young on the qualitative analysis of differential equations which had almost been a turning point—he’d almost come to accept the possibility of continuing to graduate school in math or physics. . . But, that’s not how things had worked out. In any case, he hadn’t realized the book had been republished in an affordable Dover Publications edition.

“I don’t know when I’ll get to this, but it can at least join the company

of 40 or 50 other physics and math books covering all the stuff I should have covered during my undergraduate years and during the first couple years of graduate school that never came about.”

Before he got to the checkout line, Johnny stopped at the discounted book section and picked up a one-volume collection of Joseph Conrad novels and a biography of Genghis Khan.

Characters began to come to life in Johnny’s head, characters much more than plot-lines or abstract ideas. Having recently reread the book of Genesis, Johnny had been struck by the slight and strange reference to Lamech; perhaps that reference is all that is left of a complex myth, an epic about a great man of violence or a man of great violence or a great man of great violence. Johnny shook his head and thought about other strange characters who passed through his mind when he entered contemplative, dreamlike states. He wasn’t quite having daydreams about them because he couldn’t really imagine them moving around and wasn’t even sure what their attitudes were, their relationships to God or Creation or to other creatures. And maybe that was the right way to think about this way of writing novels—Johnny was developing relationships with his characters before setting them loose in some sort of an environment so they could do something or the other.

The next couple of months were such a blur that Johnny was oblivious to the advance through autumn and greatly surprised by an early winter. He’d ordered a new computer by mail and had set up a Linux partition on it only to find himself looking at a command line prompt on an otherwise black screen. It brought back memories of his first desktop computer at work—DOS; it brought back even older memories of a lugable which ran APL inside some sort of similar command-line environment; it even brought back memories of a terminal much like a typewriter and connected to a system of Digital VAX mini-computers.

There was only a basic system inside this Linux partition. Johnny couldn’t do much, though he found he could do some programming in C, a language of little interest to him as Johnny was interested in printing books and in doing some sorts of simple tasks to make his work easier and also exploring some. . .

Some somethings. And he had some understanding from past experiences of the effort involved in programming mathematical tools from scratch. There were only 24 hours in the day and he had too much to do to acquire basic knowledge in various fields and to write.

Mostly, to write.

His general environment had changed some few months after he'd run the new power-line and made other improvements in the basement room built as a getaway by his brother and then become first a storage room and then an office and now a crude library. One of his sisters had moved out with her daughter and Johnny had not only moved to a better bedroom, he had also moved his desk and computer up to the small room he'd been sleeping in, the same bedroom he'd had in high school. It had given him some privacy but was barely big enough for a twin bed and a chest of drawers—it didn't even have a hanging closet and seemed to have been used originally as a laundry room or nursery.

It was big enough for a computer desk, a small writing desk, a bookcase, and a file cabinet. Johnny moved his office up to that small bedroom and smiled with pleasure that he still had room to walk to the door so long as he didn't swerve more than a foot or so. And he ordered a new telephone line so he could install more software on his bare-bones Linux system.

Johnny set to work, learning how to work with files within Linux and how to program in two languages: Perl and LaTeX. He cast looks to the side at various Lisp-type languages, Scheme and Common Lisp. Then, after adopting Emacs as his editor, Johnny found himself learning both the commands of that extensible editor and also some of the Emacs Lisp in which most of the editor was written.

Perl, written by Larry Wall who was apparently as much linguist as computer scientist, allowed quick-and-dirty work to be done safely and reliably; after all, it was first written to process email and to do other administrative tasks at NASA. LaTeX was a set of commands written on top of TeX, itself a typesetting language created by Donald Knuth, a distinguished mathematician and computer scientist who was upset by the low-quality of the computer typesetting systems which were taking the place of the last generation of human typesetters skilled enough to produce good-looking pages of mathematics.

So it was that Johnny spent some entire days, some part-days, digging into these computer systems. He also spent much time reading novels and some poetry and some history books and many books of science and mathematics, though he found he was still held back in some strange way from truly engaging with serious scientific and mathematical thought. Was he still lacking backbone and it was showing up as laziness? Had his intellectual confidence been so badly damaged by his cowardly and lazy transition

from a weak high school to a demanding college?

He was gaining more confidence in his writing. This was a bit odd since he was still sending out proposals for the only novel he'd yet finished, a sort of spiritual conversion novel. It was the novel almost published by a Catholic press which had withdrawn its tentative offer after deciding it was too demanding for modern American Catholic readers. As he might have expected but for an odd optimism which surprised him even as it took him under control, the secular, mainstream presses were still less interested than that Catholic press had been. Whether he sent out only a synopsis or sample chapters with the proposal letter, he received no more than the flattest sort of rejection as if he were doing no more than annoying the busy editors who had important work to do. The important work had apparently to do with that strange, mindless stuff showing up on the new books tables at bookstores, small and local or large and belonging to international corporations.

At times it mattered little. Johnny would put pen to paper and something would appear in blue on white:

The column moved forward, each soldier walking a bit more proudly when he became aware that General Lamech sat in his jeep watching as they walked by. It wasn't a parade but rather a forced march from one battlefield where they'd been victorious after ten hours of bloody struggle and towards a new battlefield on which some of their fellow-soldiers were retreating rapidly before the Emperor's own bodyguard troops, the dreaded Shark Team 666.

Johnny set pen down and went over to his stereo, rather boombox, to put on a recording of Beethoven's First Symphony before fetching a double-shot of Bourbon and then sitting to stare without focus at the computer monitor. After a minute or so, he spoke to himself, "Well, I'm not so skilled with commas as Oscar Wilde was, but I have mastered the general skill of spending much time on few words." In a more cheerful voice, he added, "Maybe I'll soon be able to spend much time manipulating a few punctuation marks."

He knew that would be a problem since he already tended to put in a high ratio of punctuation marks to words, in comparison with the modern style. He flattered himself with the hope his sentences were that much more

complex because his writings had real ideas in them and ideas were hard to communicate. New ideas or variations on old ideas might well be hard to communicate as efficiently as well-practiced and threadbare ideas. After all, the ideas were but half-formed before an author struggled with them, the same way that some sorts of mathematical ideas were said to be but half-formed before a successful effort to program them on a computer.

After a sip, Johnny added aloud, “What’s remarkable is the number of ideas which have been around so long and are still exciting.” After a few moments of further contemplation, he added, “But most of those are ideas which lead to ever more ideas as we learn more about our world and ourselves.”

The idea of the Incarnation of God as a man. . .

That seemed to Johnny to be a bit misleading. The usual telling portrayed God as being somehow surprised by the rebellion of men and the incarnation as being a response by God when His plans were thrown awry. That usual and traditional telling seemed to argue against God’s omniscience and all-powerfulness. . .

But the would-be author told himself he should be concentrating upon Lamech. After all, he had let his career go to pieces even as he had been writing bits and pieces of various novels, some of which remained yet alive, if ghostly, in his imagination. Then he had completed that conversion novel. Of sorts.

“What do I know of a conversion? Maybe I know what it’s like to be suffering through a conversion which doesn’t seem to be settling down. Or was it settling down before I became an author? I’m in the midst of some sort of ongoing conversion, perhaps in the very early stages of becoming an author. How is it going to turn out? How will this second conversion affect my first conversion to Sacramental Christianity?”

Wondering why he described his conversion as “to Sacramental Christianity” rather than “to Roman Catholic Christianity,” Johnny turned back to. . .

Back to a man willing to destroy much for revenge. . .

Revenge? Not as usually defined. Johnny envisioned a man who’d suffered much injustice, or better yet—had endured the suffering of. . .

Maybe a sister. What had she suffered? But it was more likely it had been a wife and children. Perhaps it would be a mystery? The reader, and the author, would know only what Lamech himself revealed and he was a

tough military man of few words, a man not given to seeking of sympathy, a man certainly despising anything that smelled of pity.

“Emperor is a bad idea. It would have to be a struggle against...”

This was a matter of puzzlement. Until Johnny could settle his own thoughts about the people of whom he was one...

The United States was not well-structured to be the center of a coherent empire, nor are the American people honest enough in their self-serving brutality to be a good imperial population—sure, most would be fated to collapse into an impoverished proletariat and the American people had already made themselves ignorant enough and functionally stupid enough to be labeled ‘proles’ but the poverty had not yet arrived. More importantly, the Empire would need a base of cynical but competent people not self-deluded ‘do-gooders’ with little understanding of reality.

Something dark, perhaps evil, was forming in the world and it hovered already over the so-called Northeast corridor of the United States, Washington to at least New York City and maybe to Boston. But what was it and what shape would it take on as it matured?

A shudder passed up his back and then he finished his whiskey and rose to return to the desk of a writer who hoped to be an author, however much the distinction would be lost on most of his fellow Americans.

That idea brought his feelings to a better focus, though he wasn’t quite sure what that idea was...

From the cheap spiral notebook was a page torn as Johnny watched. Not knowing what else to do with it, he crumbled the false start and then tossed it in the basket.

Mighty was Lamech and impeccable his dress. His uniform was ordinary cotton twill and bore hardly any decoration, a couple of small campaign pins and a single star set in a circle of blood-red. He was a heavy-set man but carried no extra weight. Manly without a hint of the savage. It was hard to guess if his uniform had been tailored to his powerful body or if he had tailored his body to a uniform of the proper proportions for a man seeking seventy times justice and only seven times revenge.

“That will get me in the running for some sort of contest for a horrible beginning, but I might be able to work with it.”

6 Not Sin But Rather Glory

Lamech marched once more through the battlefields of Johnny's imagination and a young man was by the side of the man of great vengeance. . .

"Or should that be great man of vengeance?"

But someone suggested, "Great man of great vengeance?"

In any case, Johnny was looking as a contingently different version of himself, a Johnny who was a trusted advisor to the man of action.

A dark cloud had fallen upon the United States, other and lesser clouds over other regions. Lamech came marching down from the northern reaches of New England. . .

The young man stood aside but a little behind Lamech, though few doubted his important position as the prophet. . .

"Prophet?" Johnny put down his pen and read the incomplete sentence. It was an image and words he'd not have predicted. Or planned. What did those words mean? Whatever they meant, Johnny felt them to be somewhat a distortion and greatly, painfully personal.

"Prophet? I prefer 'trusted advisor'." After a moment of contemplation, he wondered, "How about the women I'd known when I was growing up. . ." Johnny realized that the action was set in his hometown of Jenkesville. The army of Lamech was coming from the north as many guerrilla bands were converging into larger units to fight in more conventional ways and one of those larger units was forming along East St and North St near the main bridge into the town from Springfield.

"Does authorship include the power to take revenge, vengeance?, for all the injustices of life?" Looking down, Johnny discovered a glass with a double, maybe triple, shot of Bourbon whiskey; he wondered if it was always possible to distinguish between injustices and bad breaks and bad responses due to weak moral character. After a sip, he shuddered at the thought of a

great misuse of the talent he maybe had, a misuse for personal revenge of a sort, In any case, he was happy to realize, “Although my life was set badly askew in my early years, I don’t really blame individuals. At least not in my calmer moments. After all, those who acted as if deliberately keeping me from developing my talents, while glorifying my lazy and low-level use of those talents, were. . .”

It took two sips before he could confess, “Americans. And New Englanders at that.”

Lamech marched on, perhaps to glory and perhaps to some great tragic end. As for Johnny. . .

Isolated and a worldly failure, he found himself oscillating between dreams of grandeur such as the Lamech story and dreams of dying a miserable death of cold or hunger or both in the woods with only the raccoons and the deer to watch and certify his suffering. Wolves? Bears?

But his triumphalistic dreams came sometimes without Lamech; Johnny himself led the armies out of the north to wreak revenge for. . .

“Or should I simply ‘avenge’ rather than ‘wreak revenge’?”

“No, wording changes would be beside the point. Beside both points.

“First, I’m a Christian. . . At least, I try to be a Christian. I shouldn’t be engaging in acts of vengeance.

Second, the point isn’t my lack of optimal opportunities for developing my talents. Many have suffered from that, even in morally well-ordered societies. The point is that we don’t have a well-ordered society and that hurts all and is an insult to God who wishes us to become people who can share His life.”

Johnny shuddered and realized he was bothered by the thought that human beings should subordinate themselves to their society. . .

“But such strong individuals as George Washington [2] and George Patton [6] put country first and they certainly weren’t communists or socialists or ant-like people.”

It took only a few minutes of floundering about in his own mind for Johnny to confess to himself, “That doesn’t cut it. There’s something more, something which has to happen to us before we can enter Heaven.”

Remembering his one trip to Disneyland, Johnny thought of joyful throngs spilling into an American Heaven to join the far greater and far more joyful throngs already moving from ride to ride, music show to music show, restaurant to restaurant. . .

“Well, I guess some will concentrate on but one form of Heavenly... Bliss?”

Johnny had a momentary vision of a sedate pep-rally. Men dressed well, though only in casual summer suits of linen; women dressed well in pastel-colored summer dresses; children dressed so as to be informal but not so much as to encourage more rowdiness than would be expected in a game of badminton. A few men, the leaders?, dressed a little better despite the warmth of the air and the greater warmth of the sun’s rays. . .

A temporary stage had been resurrected. An American flag stood on one side of that stage and an indistinct flag on the other side. A cross, bare of God, rested upon a table ten feet behind the speaker’s rostrum. There was a loudspeaker system being installed by young men supervised by middle-aged men. . . Or perhaps those young men were doing what they knew to be right while their insurance executive fathers, their doctor grandfathers, their lawyer uncles, pointed here and there and spoke harmlessly about power cables and speaker wires. . .

When would the assembly gather more closely around that stage? When would the speakers put their civilian hands to heart or reservist hands to forehead to begin pledging allegiance to the flag of God’s chosen country? When would a prayer calling down blessings upon a country clearly blessed around and over and under and throughout by prosperity and power, a country humble enough to accept still more prosperity and power from a God who saw clearly who it was that so freely served the cause of freedom for the brethren of Christ?

Would there be poems? Hymns? Speeches calling forward the ideas of Emerson and Thoreau, Lincoln and Wilson—the Fathers who had helped Americans to see the Truth so clearly?

Johnny began his apology: “Lord, we only sinned so greatly because you made us so powerful and wealthy before we were ready.”

And that seemed wrong, though not quite blasphemous.

And it all seemed so familiar. Though also a little different than what he might have remembered. If he remembered it at all.

And suddenly did Johnny think of a new chapter for his novel of spiritual conversion. Since it had been rejected by Catholic and secular publishing companies alike, he’d considered the possibility of making that novel still less accessible to those who were willfully deadening their minds and imaginations.

“That scene in the park, so Americanly Christian, could be a good lead-in to the scene where he meets the woman who takes him to . . .”

“Sends you to?”

“Sure. Anyway, it could lead into the strangeness of the sort-of philosopher who’s dressed in all white and looks like Peter O’Toole.”

7 Spiritual Hibernation

It was nearly a year before Johnny was faced up to a bad situation: he'd not attended a single Mass since returning to his hometown. He'd grown up as a member of a Congregationalist church but had lived in a neighborhood in which most were Catholics. He lived there again though the neighborhood now had some of the aging parents and some new homeowners not seemingly practicing any mainstream religion, though talk of Buddha was in the air along with light refracted through many a crystal. The old-timers, old-fashioned in most cases, went to some church most Sundays or maybe early Saturday evening if they were Catholic. Some others dressed up on Easter and sometimes Christmas. Egg-hunts and trips to the mall Santas seemed fairly common, though sometimes with grandchildren rather than children.

He wondered what was wrong with him?

"6 years!"

"More. 6 years this past March and it's nearly Halloween!"

"Could be worse."

"How? By adding to those years?"

Johnny rose and walked to the bedside table where he picked up his RSV, Catholic Edition, and turned to Romans12.

Part II

A Stranger in His Own Homeland

8 Unleashing of Creative Powers

8.1 Day 1

“Time to get to work, time to let the creative juices run freely...”

8.2 Day 2

“Got it...”

Parnell Lopez watched as his wife Marie...

“That’s a beginning but she has to do something...”

8.3 Day 3

“I might be back on track...”

Parnell Lopez watched as his wife Marie pulled up her line to reveal a two-pound, squirming small-mouth bass, greenish scales shimmering in the sun.

A few hours later, Johnny called it a day and went for a run before joining Father Charles and Tom for a beer and burger at a local bar-and-grill named *Jenkesville Tavern*.

8.4 Day 4

“Got to get up.” Excited as he was by the prospect of continuing his promising but not yet fertile efforts, Johnny rose though the June sun was just rising above the tree-line. After making a pot of coffee and showering, Johnny sat down in front of his computer. . .

“Something’s wrong. . .” He reached for his coffee mug, finding only air and knew what was wrong.

A couple minutes later, he took a modest gulp of hot coffee and set it down on the ceramic coaster with the image of a mallard drake rising from the water. He set to work. . .

Parnell Lopez watched as his wife Marie pulled up her line to reveal a two-pound, squirming mass of bullhead, white-belly shining in the sun.

“Better. Much better.”

A couple hours later, Johnny has improved the line to:

Parnell Lopez watched as his wife Marie pulled up her line to reveal a squirming, two-pound mass of bullhead, white-belly shining in the sun.

“One line down, 500 pages to go.”

With sinking heart, Johnny feared this really would be a fairly long novel. Many months before having something to. . .

“Is it worthwhile to send this out to publishers? Should I release it on the Internet as some were encouraging for intellectual works?”

Twenty minutes later, Johnny was a mile out and ready to turn back as he was just gradually increasing the distance of his runs after letting himself get nearly 20 pounds over his weight when he had returned to Jenkesville. And he self-confessed with a bit of reluctance, “If I release it on the Internet for free download, it’ll be because commercial publishers aren’t interested. It’s not a matter of intellectual generosity.”

9 Multiple Lines of Thought-like Brain-events

Johnny's mind was in a state of fertile chaos and he was living on the edge of a state of nervous collapse.

Lamech had sent his armies marching from northern regions in the direction of New York City and beyond. As those armies marched on, a prophet resembling an author marched with them. Gorillas also shuffled along, grouped around a young man spouting poetry and accompanied by a dozen or more attractive women in provocative clothing. Another young man not yet born followed, a spacey expression on his face, a plastic protector filled with pencils in his shirt pocket; that young man was contemplating some matter and then was writing frantically on a pad held by a clear-plastic clipboard.

That part of the army had barely passed. . .

“Down East St in Jenkesville?”

Sure looked like it, even to the nearby clock-tower rising nearly four mill-building stories above East St. That puzzle remained open as Johnny turned to look for his parents' house but was distracted as a 30ish man of mixed African and European blood ran by at a goodly pace. He somehow knew that nighttime would bring out the Demmies to climb lamp-posts as they reached for the full moon. . .

He rose and walked over to his wall-calendar to check if there would be a full moon and saw it was yet three days away.

“This is ridiculous. I'm forcing my imagination to merge separate stories occurring in. . .” ‘Separate worlds’ seemed a bit much of a term. “Perhaps, different possible developments of this world?”

Johnny had connected the leash to Rebel's collar before even realizing he was on the move. His mind was moving fast and the rest of him wanted

to move and catch up. He knew he was once again violating an important rule of modern authors—he was getting inside his own writing and looking out as often as he was looking upon the events of his story. Or stories in this case of all the jumbled up confusion of his current thoughts.

“This must be why the Biblical writers could switch viewpoint so often, speaking in the same psalm or narrative from God’s viewpoint and then from. . .”

Rebel was pulling slightly as they approached the little park half a block away from the Waters family house. Some interesting smell was ahead and Johnny let the Golden misbehave a little. He’d heard it was good to occasionally let a dog, or a child, get away with something.

“Anyway. . .”

A moment of mental struggle let Johnny to recover his train of thought—just as Rebel reached a bush and was seemingly in doggy ecstasy as he sniffed away at some of the branches, a leaf near the bottom of the bush, and then at the ground below. . .

“Dammit, what was I thinking about?”

Coming out of a fog of sorts, Johnny realized he was heading up one of the busy streets in Jenkesville—East St. He could see three people in the next quarter-mile or so of north and south sidewalks. They were several blocks away and it seemed likely they would turn into one of the small stores between them and him. And so he continued on past *Pope’s Hardware Store*, a place owned by brothers and given the nickname of the older one, a devout Catholic by any standard. That made Johnny think of the recent announcement that the national chain, *Hard Warehouse*, would be building a local store just a mile or so over the border between Jenkesville and Minnechoag.

“Are family businesses dead?”

He thought of all that Jenkesville had been and partly still was, a town in which the local businessmen and doctors and lawyers lived among their fellow-citizens—a little more prosperous to be sure, but sharing their general lot in life. Looking ahead, he could see a few more pedestrians headed his way. Not wishing so much as an exchange of greetings, not wishing to have to hold Rebel while someone afraid of dogs walked by, Johnny turned left on Trinity Lane, thinking that to be a strange name for a byway in a town founded by. . . Sort of founded by. . .

“Anyway, the Puritans were around, at least as close as Worcester.”

As they ascended the hill, peaking at twenty feet above East St, he looked around at the modest but well-maintained houses. There were a scattering of small, 2- or 3-bedroom bungalows. Some small colonials, but probably more than 1200 feet and perhaps having 4 bedrooms. A couple each of duplexes, triplexes, and quadruplexes.

“Mary is her name. Mary Pride. Sounds vaguely Puritanical. Maybe...”

“No, Prudence Pride might be too much.”

Then again, he wasn't sure why he wanted a smart and sweet-tempered woman to have a Puritan woman's name.

“And a cute brunette, girl next-door pretty. Probably British with maybe some French-Canadian on her mother's side, but looking like Linda Ronstadt.”

Once again, Johnny knew he was violating some sort of rule, thinking of a girl with British and French blood as if she looked German and Mexican.

“Jake. Jake the Snake. A slender young man inclined to load up his hair with pomade. Moves smoothly and knows what he wants.”

A minute later, Johnny protested, “Does that mean he gets Mary Pride?”

Ignoring the woman who stepped off the sidewalk and moved to the other side of the street, Johnny began his descent of the other side of the hill, wondering, “Are Mary and Jake going to mix it up with Parnell and the Poet and the missionary engineer and Milt Jackson the slightly schizoid professor of philosophy.” After a groan, he protested, “Now, I have to deal with a philosopher who ponders the big questions while another part of him becomes fabulously rich selling...”

Johnny grew silent as he realized Milt dealt in death and the limited immortality available in a universe which might last no more than another 15 billion years or so before going into a state of deep-freeze.

“The burdens of being an author instead of a writer. Besides the authoritative poverty versus the pandering profits.”

10 The Moon is so Breaking on the Pretty Ocean Waves

Johnny woke up during the night as a movie played in his head: the Demies were brought to the ocean at low-tide and were allowed to go running towards the moon-speckled water where gathered the sharks who knew this game and checked this stretch of beach north of Boston every night—usually without catching anything but...

Before turning over to return to sleep, Johnny told himself, “This is part of the reason Lamech is bringing his army south to destroy a country gone rotten.”

11 Just a Wonderful Girl

The next day, Johnny sat down to work on a nonfiction book he was trying to write—with little success. He sat back and pictured a sweet-natured girl of brown hair.

“Linda Ronstadt, a brunette version of a tomboyish Linda Evans not raised a rich girl, a tomboyish Suzanne Pleshette. . .”

Confusion came as Johnny realized he prided himself on not being so captured by popular culture as were most Americans and. . .

“Is this why my ways of conceptualizing and even of describing characters and telling stories seem so complex and abstract to most who’ve read some of my writings?”

But she was pretty and smart but a good student rather than intellectually inclined.

“Brown eyes. A slender figure, not as well-curved as some men liked but awfully nice. . .”

Very well dressed but more in the style of *Land’s End* than in the style of a Fifth Avenue boutique.

“Fifth Avenue?” When Rebel looked up but didn’t enlighten his master, Johnny asked, “She moved to New York City?” The big Golden shifted his head on his paws, seeming to say, “Aye aye, Captain.” And Johnny realized she’d done well in college, business plus some psychology and sociology, and had received a pretty good offer to join the human resources department at an industrial conglomerate with home office on Manhattan.

The author joked, “Must be before Lamech and his army reach New York City,” but Rebel’s look of indifference reminded Johnny an author should avoid inside jokes about his own works. There was a lot an author should avoid, though Johnny felt an urge to pull out of the harness. “Why should academics and book-sellers set the standards for creative writers?”

And it came to mind that the historian and literary critic Jacques

Barzun had once noted that “ain’t” was a valid contraction for first person singular, though not for other cases. He had claimed the rules laid down by editors and the grammar police weren’t the reason for declaring it “verboten,” rather was it the case that no great author had ever put, “I ain’t,” into a novel or other literary work. He was wrong in terms of absolutes because John Henry Newman, already a great historian of Christian thought but not yet a Roman Catholic Cardinal, had used that contraction in a novel.

“One swallow doesn’t make an alcoholic and one ain’t doesn’t make a new rule of grammar.”

After a moment’s effort to bring an unfocused thought from the depths of his mind, Johnny added, “Serious thinkers and even stylistically brilliant poets set the rules, not academics, not publishers and editors, not newspaper columnists, not half-educated high school teachers indifferent to the subject they taught.”

It wasn’t clear to Johnny why the depths of his mind had added “half-educated high school teachers indifferent to the subject they taught.” As hard as it was to think of a math or science teacher who had been qualified to teach even the basics as defined by the national standards his high school had supposedly met, he did remember some good teachers of English and history and . . . Maybe other subjects if he thought hard. At that, he could remember math and science teachers who—maybe—could have picked up the pace to teach up to those national standards but couldn’t really do so because of the way students were grouped in large ‘divisions’.

“Does it matter in the end? What matters is to serve God the way . . . One of the ways? Which the Almighty leaves open to you.”

12 In Diapers, A Prophet Babbles and Drools

The prophet answered a call to speak *Prophecy Formatted as Poetry*:

Cursed be he who prefers his dreams to My world.
Cursed be he who would claim Me as his servant.

I serve men and offer a share of My life for days without end,
but serve only those who give to Me their all which is Mine.

Be without fear, be filled with faith.
Respond to what is, whether it seems good or bad to you.

Shape yourselves to the things I have made.
The humblest of those things is an object of my love.

Fear the sword of man rather than My wrath,
and you shall die by the sword, unsaved by Me.

“OK, God, here comes some prose:”

Sons of apes, think you to make your own way to a land
of easy pleasures. Become a God-less and god-less people, you
send your titanium servants aloft to kill the children of others,
thinking they must deserve to be killed if killed by you. You
send your sons and even your daughters to lands where they
survive by killing young girls and elderly men bravely standing
with guns in their villages, even in front of their homes.

Think you can fool Me, the All-knowing God, by washing your sins from your own minds, repenting not and going forth to kill more innocents and to destroy more that belongs to others, more that they need to feed themselves and their children?

You are fools who say in your hearts, "There is no God who will demand of me more than what I'm willing to give Him."

You worship in your marketplaces. Not idols do you worship for you are a modern people, a people of advanced and civilized ways. You worship movement through the marketplaces. The mere acts of buying and selling are more important than the value of what goes from hand to hand. You trace movements of goods from mine to factory to warehouse to shop to consumer and then to attic, counting each as the act of a god, counting each act and tabulating it to present it as proof of your faithfulness to what is dearest to your hearts.

Daughters of apes, you do no different from your fathers and husbands and sons. You are little different though you do well to bear the next generation of bipedal featherless creatures.

There is no place of eternal pain or land of easy pleasures, but only the final grave of the beasts or the world of those who will share the life of My Son.

Children of apes, you go to the region of unending pleasure not alone but as a part of the Body of My Son.

"But . . . Human beings aren't apes nor were our ancestors. Apes are our cousins and contemporaries, the gorillas and chimpanzees and orangutans and gibbons."

And then . . .

"Have I denied that Hell exists? Have I claimed there is no resurrection but for those who will be saved?"

A few minutes of contemplation and Johnny told himself, "Hell has never been a matter of great importance to me. More important, by an infinite far, is the question which bothered the Episcopalian priest, Albert Nock, so much as to cause him to leave his ministry and to become a libertarian disbelieving in the resurrection from the dead and maybe disbelieving in the existence of God:

"I cannot see in most children of men any spark of true life, any life which would allow them to even enjoy living with God in Heaven."

Confusion came upon a autodidactic thinker struggling to learn how to learn and to learn how to think. And it occurred to that conflicted man with a powerful but undisciplined mind that a prophet should be more careful in his statements, especially if he had no editor or—far worse—no trustworthy editor.

Johnny had limited resources, no more than his own partially disciplined mind, some relatives willing to help him scrape by, and a dwindling stock of correspondents who gave him some encouragement even it was clear they were annoyed by him and didn't understand what he was up to. He needed to muster his courage and try to keep in mind what was important that he might use his inadequate resources in the best way possible. And it came to the struggling author that *There Was Something Which Truly Mattered Most of All*:

To Your Precious Body does all Creation collapse.
 To Your Precious Blood does all Creation collapse.
 From Your Precious Body does all Creation expand.
 From Your Precious Blood does all Creation expand.

“Limited resources and, yet, I can see an infinity into spacetime. I can see the foundations of all created being. I can see the meaning of it all.”

Johnny had no more than had his insight when he began to wonder why it was that he was sinking into a comfortable and safe state of poverty when he knew he was doing work that was so important. True enough it was that he wasn't sure he was doing that work well or that his efforts would survive the test of time. . .

“Hell, they can't even survive a test of now. . .”

Wasn't that true of many serious works? Serious works which proved to provide answers useful for a century or two? Serious works which proved to be inspirational to those who would provide such good answers? Even serious works only of historical interest in raising important questions that mainstream thinkers and leaders, Christian and not, were ignoring?

The prophet collapsed to Johnny felt an idea growing inside of him. No, it was multiple ideas. No, it was multiple clouds from which he could draw vague feelings threatening to become thoughts.

First came to him that quantum mechanics tells us something about being and the Real Presence tells us something else about being. Something about being dealt with God's way of creating this. . . Creation?

“A bit circular that. I’ll work on it but I’ve got to get going before my thoughts vanish. . . .”

And they were gone reminding Johnny of an ironic comment of one of his math professors: “I’ve solved many an important math problem while lying in bed but didn’t have paper and pencil to write down those solutions; in the morning, those solutions had vanished.”

Then it came again but it was no more than a vague intuition that the Eucharist involved a communitarian side to human nature—but, of course—communion.

Johnny rose. “OK, Rebel, it’s time for a walk.”

He didn’t even see the Golden jump up and run out but he did hear him thump down the stairs. . . .

And hit the wall on the landing.

“Poor guy. I took out the old carpeting just when his hips really starting going bad.”

Rebel was soon confused as Johnny headed up East St, his new route, despite the need to sometimes squeeze Rebel against a storefront to falsely protect those afraid of dogs.

“Mary. I need to see Mary, even if she is a figment of my imagination.”

And soon enough, a man and his dog passed the family-owned hardware store which was a fixture in town but rumored to be on its way to closing when the elderly brothers went to their rewards as devout Catholics.

A few minutes more and he was seeing Mary again in his imagination but the more he struggled, the less he could see her family-members. . . .

But for her grandfather, an intelligent but simple man of great common sense and good skills in building and repairing. . . .

“Everything, more or less, made by the minds and hands of men. Including the colorful birdhouses he made with Mary.”

Johnny sighed with contentment. So much had he seen clearly that he thought that the novel was almost written.

13 An Author Unwisely Turns to Metaphysics, More Unwisely to Theology

Johnny sipped on his double-shot of Bourbon and thought he would speak *As Perfection Fragments into Things*

God so loved the world that He brought it to be.

“From such a promising start, I can do little that is worthwhile. But maybe speaking of my failings is itself a little I can do for God and for His children and for the Body of Christ.”

Though I do wrong,
fail at all my pitiful efforts. . .

Though I remain
but a shadow upon a lump of clay. . .

If that shadow
be an object of God’s love. . .

If that shadow
play a role in a story God is telling. . .

“Where does such a pious line of thought go when it seems more appropriate in this world. . .”

Johnny grabbed a pen and a fresh notebook and soon had vandalized a clean sheet of paper with cynical words edged with nastiness and seeming to be titled, *Metaphysics in the Freezer Compartment*:

CHAPTER 13. AN AUTHOR UNWISELY TURNS TO METAPHYSICS

What do you do with a frozen soul?
Can you lick that frozen treat?
She might be pretty ice on the whole.
She might be frozen bad and neat.

Frozen bad to the bone
and quite a babe at that.
Frozen so she was one hot dish.
Alaska baking in Babylonian heat.

Could that ice-babe be yet hot
by standards of a frozen world?
Could she steam you to slush?
And bring you to sub-polar paradise?

And what about the tropics?
Melt all about and even steam.
Are we close to the source of what is?
Or merely a few degrees south of Eden?

Oh, to be photon so massless.
Better still that neutrino
Passing with barely a nod
through parsecs of social lead.

Johnny screamed silently inside of himself and felt it proper when he heard Rebel jump up and run out of his office and then down the stairs. When the poor brute ran into the wall of the landing, he was happy that the sound was less than before but felt guilty he'd not put the new carpet strips on the treads—said strips were sitting on the side-porch with staple gun and cleaning supplies.

Not a scream but a feeling of horror came upon him as did an image of impending violence, violence wreaked upon a world insufficiently obedient to the demands of a country so prosperous and so good, so determined to remake all the world into its image. . .

14 The Battle Hymn of the Indispensable People

The armies rolled past and then past what lay ahead only to pass beyond that. Vast bodies of infantrymen with automatic rifles slung over shoulders, carrying grenades and flares and the supplies a soldier needed when he would see neither barracks nor home for days or weeks or months. Maybe he would shortly see them from ethereal regions.

Tanks. Motorized howitzers and self-propelled artillery pieces of various sizes. Trucks filled with stuff still more material than the hardened soldiers who had already fought many battles for masters of the Free World. Other soldiers still grimaced with a tense idealism.

The righteous men and women marched on, droned on, flew on overhead, moving towards battle against orcs and evil giants and cruel dwarfs, Nazis and Commies and a variety of Evil Axes, all man-like but twisted to monstrous shapes resembling the evil which they had drunk in, had eaten, in cruel harvest celebrations and in horrid rites conducted upon the battlefield and upon the fallen or still living enemies they had conquered. The righteous men and women were determined that they and their comrades would escape being ritual meals of evil, would not be the victims of torture or rape as the evil once-men finished releasing their evil desires.

Yes, they had drunk the blood of good men and eaten the flesh of good women, uniting themselves with dark spirits and twisting their very bodies into shapes of evil.

One. They aimed to merge all men into the evil they served. Men were not even to be individuals living on evil ground and breathing evil air; men were to be one with evil, mere cells of a communal organ of those evil forces. How could anyone give in to a system so evil that demanded surrender of a man's own self, the death of his self to serve their allegedly greater good.

15 A Word from Creation's Sponsor?

As if feeling his own body from a distance, Johnny knew his body was rigid, ankles to neck. If he could ascend more fully from inside his own interior. . .

“Lord, please have mercy upon me.”

A whisper came: “Son of man, intelligence lies not in your thoughts but in your efforts to understand your thoughts.”

And then, a period of silence during which Johnny could make no sense at all what had happened in his dream and no sense at all of those words whispered perhaps by God or by Satan.

“Or maybe by me?”

16 Understanding Nada

Johnny woke and stared at the ceiling, thinking only, “Well, our enemies are evil. After all, they’re our enemies.”

And then he realized that Lamech as envisioned was dead, unless Johnny could learn to suppress irony well enough to write a novel about a man seeking. . .

“I still don’t know what Lamech was seeking, but I think the point is that such a tale should respect the man enough that the irony resides at the highest level of the story. It would be a joke on all of us, just as much of the Old Testament books are.”

Vengeance. . .

Johnny felt a desire for vengeance far too often, not so much against those responsible for deforming his development, obstructing his natural inclination to start maturing intellectually at the age of 12 or so. It was as if they’d forced a talented athlete to run as slow as the average boys of his age, as if they’d forced a talented pitcher to continue playing only wiffle-ball and hopscotch through his high school years. . .

Having read a few books about the human brain and some articles on intelligence and its measurement, having talked a little—far too little—with his cousin Mary Jane about those issues, Johnny knew that men and women were at similar levels of intelligence on the average but most high-IQ human beings were male as were most low-IQ human beings.

“Should boys and girls even be educated together?”

An image came of a reasonably happy boy in in an elementary school classroom with a good mixture of boys and girls and of children of different levels of skills in reading and rithmetic and a common lack of writing skills.

“Was that a problem? Is it a problem that writing skills aren’t taught to proficient readers of a younger age? Is it good to force a delay of natural maturing processes when some threaten to get ahead of the herd?”

His father, partly on a lark, had taken a couple of education courses from the evening school division of a nearby state college. He'd done this along with a friend, another worker with a college degree he'd not been able to use because of the financial difficulties of starting a new career when a man was supporting a family.

"But... As Western Civilization was only headed upward in science and math... Perhaps already headed downward in other ways?"

Johnny contemplated how little he knew about the history of his own civilization. Even in just the past few centuries.

It took not many minutes to contemplate the vacuum inside of him.

It took more minutes to recover his line of thought and to remember...

"Daddy told me that the education courses had turned out to be courses on brainwashing young students. The teachers were being taught to socialize the students to the purposes of a society not yet born, one Daddy didn't understand but feared." After a few seconds delay, his mind jerked ahead like a car not quite repaired well enough for the highway—let alone the raceway. "And there was the case of Barbara..."

He thought of Barbara, pictured her. A young woman who'd been in his course on differential geometry.

Or at least, "I think that Barbara was her name. Didn't really know her except for occasional short conversations before class started."

She had plans to be a math teacher of gifted students but had run into a problem. The school of education, even at a research university!, had told her she had to stop taking advanced math courses after her sophomore year and move fully to the school of education.

"And so, everyone's mind gets trained to the level of the middle-of-the-roaders, though in that case middle-of-the-roaders at a good university."

17 Running with Milt Jackson

The pounds weren't melting off but they were coming off slowly, with occasional reversals—small gains of weight. Lots of pain for little loss.

“A little pain leads to a little gain? No pain leads to big gain?”

And Johnny remembered his doctor's warning that it got harder to keep weight off as you got older and much harder to take it off.

He picked up the pace, pounding the sidewalk through quiet neighborhoods, up and down modest hills. . .

“Will these hills be so modest when I turn 50? About three years away.”

Heck, 50 was nothing to a man reading the book of Genesis.

“Will these hills be so modest when I turn 55? Only eight years off.”

Heck, 55 was nothing to a man reading the book of Genesis.

“Will these hills be doable when I turn 60? Only about thirteen years off.”

He picked up the pace again but backed off after a few steps. His breathing was still labored but not nearly so bad as when he'd run in March the first time—2 weeks ago—after two and a half months of winter layoff. Johnny no longer felt the need to stop and rest every five minutes. He had reached a point where he could run his shorter route, more or less a mile and a half, sort-of non-stop. And in 12 minutes or so.

Perl. He was learning that computer language developed by that guy with the off-the-wall sense of humor—Larry Wall. A language to suit the sense of humor of a linguistics major who'd wandered into systems administration. Another reason he'd developed a powerful language with ugly notation which could move rapidly through text to find patterns or even to reformat it on the fly; it could also handle the operating system commands in ways that used existing capabilities to do powerful tasks, numerical as well as textual. Other languages could do this. LISP, a language used by high-level researchers at MIT and NASA and some military agencies, was

more powerful. . .

Johnny thought, “Probably?,” as he remembered his low-level skills and knowledge as a programmer. A software engineer with striped overalls and a hand on the steam-whistle. “So to speak. . . So to think?”

And, though attracted to LISP, a language developed by John McCarthy—a respected member of a group of scientists who’d set out to figure out how human beings actually thought. . . “And they’d wanted to answer the question: why are human beings so irrational or at least sub-rational?” Johnny wasn’t sure that McCarthy held to the cynicism implied by that question and he was sure he didn’t, but his objections was gut-level and he’d not had time to pursue the issue.

He shook his head, drawing a somewhat crooked smile from a pretty, middle-aged woman coming out of her house towards the public sidewalk.

Anyway, Johnny had decided to program a running diary a couple years back and had put together something that worked in Common Lisp, but it’d been a mess. After 30 hours or more of work on a relatively trivial problem—and he’d not finished formatting some reports of miles run and average time and all that, he’d finally gotten some insight to the use of a powerful and flexible language to build up reusable code and use it as if a personalized tool-box of commands. Or something like that. But his program was somewhat a mess of different styles and of a certain disorder. He’d been planning to rewrite that Common Lisp program but had then decided to reprogram it in Perl.

“For the heck of it.”

And that caused an elderly couple, hand-in-hand, to smile at him in a tolerant but questioning way. Questioning but maybe a bit on the side of love.

“Christian charity? Love for other children of God? Other brothers and sisters of Christ?”

That look was sufficient to make him think about returning to the practice of the Catholic Christian faith he’d entered 12 years prior. A year of faithful attendance and of struggles to reshape his insides as he was being instructed in the faith. Then a year of participation as a member of a parish near his house in Stamford. Three more years of joyful participation as a visitor to the brother-sister communities of St Mary’s Monastery and the Priory of St Scholastica up in Rockshire. Then seven or so years of non-practice after returning to Jenkesville.

Johnny sighed and seemed to be a passive observer as his mind returned to remember that he'd run a good amount during his years in Rockshire, though he'd taken long breaks during the winters up on those hills in central Massachusetts. And he'd run little, eaten too much, and had even started watching television during the seven years since he'd been back in Jenkesville. Johnny didn't watch too many of the series on television. Mostly, he'd watched documentaries and sometimes movies, especially the older ones. He hadn't watched any series regularly since his college days in the mid-1970s and hadn't kept up with any at all since he'd sometimes watched *M*A*S*H* and some other shows with his parents during his visits. He'd also stopped watching sports for the most part though he couldn't yet keep himself from watching the *Celtics* play the *Lakers* if only to watch Jack Nicholson in his purple sportcoat making a joyful fool of himself.

"Why is it so important to me to emphasize that I've decided to give up television? And to stop paying attention to professional sports? And other crappy entertainment of recent decades? Is it the difficulty of walking away from a central activity in my culture? No matter how morally dangerous that activity is? Am I reluctant to claim my freedom. . . No, not even 'freedom' so much as. . ."

Johnny envisioned a grayness which wouldn't quite come into focus and wondered if it was a sort of freedom. . .

"Is it a freedom to move towards a moral order which is that of my truer self?"

"Is it a false freedom to move towards a dissolution of my self into some sort of infinity of conditions, few of which could possibly be me?"

Johnny reached the top of Chesterton St, a block east of his mother's house and entered a sad excuse for a sprint as he ran down the sidewalk along the old school complex. "I always told people I could roll out of bed and land in my classroom from first grade to seventh."

Out of the corner of his eyes, Johnny detected something which wasn't supposed to be there. He turned his head to see that across the park, there were a police car and two fire-trucks on the street of his mother's house.

18 Aging is More Than a Few Wrinkles

Johnny was near the far corner of the park and, to his own later bewilderment, sprinted down the outside sidewalk rather than cutting across the park. As he was in front of his mother's house a policeman asked, "Do you live here?"

"Yes, is she. . . Is anyone hurt?"

"The elderly woman and the woman with her are okay. You can go inside."

Johnny had been about to head right up without permission, but he politely said, "Thank you. My mother and my sister."

Alice was straight ahead, in the kitchen, surveying the mess of charred wall and cabinets and white powder of some sort. She smiled ruefully and said, "I got a bit enthusiastic with the extinguisher."

"That's okay. Is Mother all right?"

"She's upstairs, worrying herself into a tizzy but nothing to be done about that for now. We'll be able to talk to her and maybe take her to my house or to lunch or something in a little while." Alice looked towards the nearby stairway and motioned Johnny into the front room where she said, "I think she's more worried about dementia than she is about having nearly set herself on fire."

Johnny closed his eyes and drew in a breath.

Before the afternoon had ended, Alice had discovered that their mother's doctor had retired. They spent the remaining hours before dinner trying to find out where he had sent his patients' files.

The next day, Alice spent hours trying to find a GP willing to take on Mrs Waters as a patient. Finally, "Success," as she hung up the phone in the scorched and singed kitchen of her mother's house. "I don't know much

about him, but his office is on our side of Springfield, near the *Metroplex Cinemas*. Got an appointment for Mom next Tuesday. I'll take her shopping this weekend and we can gather Sunday afternoon for a picnic at the Farm. I'll check with Suzie and see if she and Ted want to come with you and Mom and me and the kids. Billy's arriving with his girlfriend Friday night." After a moment of silence when she seemed to be entering deep thought, she shook something out of her head and said, "I'll go up and talk to Mother about the appointment."

She came back down and said, "She's not here."

Johnny went up to search with Alice right behind him. After checking the four rooms and the bathroom, he said, "Rebel's not in the house. Mother must have taken him out for another walk. They must have gone out quietly when we were up in the attic looking through those pictures and old papers."

"Let's talk."

Johnny shifted his glance away from Alice before nodding his head and leading the way down the stairs and into the living-room.

"I spoke to Dr Hackman and he told me we should have Mom tested. He's going to recommend a small outfit run by a psychologist who employs mostly RN's with masters degrees in cognitive psychology."

"I don't know if she'll agree to that."

"I think she will but she's not going to cooperate much. She's got back pains and... I don't know for sure, but I believe she thinks she's in danger of ending up in a nursing home in a wheelchair." Alice paused to seemingly gather her thoughts. "When she had a disc removed 15 years ago, an orthopedic surgeon observed the operation... Dr Palermo, the one who liked to have Mom assigned to his difficult cases. And he told me afterwards that another disc was also in bad condition and she might not be able to walk if that one had to be removed. I don't know for sure what the neurosurgeon said."

"I met Dr Palermo once. Mom was being prepped for her cataract surgery and he noticed her on his way into the operating room area. He came over to offer his best wishes to her. But why did he observe another doctor's operation if he wasn't needed?"

"He felt guilty on behalf of the hospital and maybe the entire medical industry. Mom's back was getting back-aches for a few years though nothing serious. But, once, she was leaving the locker-rooms to head home and she looked into a recovery room and saw an unattended patient on a bed which was folding up. She went in and lifted the woman up and put her on a

gurney in the room. Fortunately, the woman was even smaller than Mom but, still...”

“I think Dad had told me that story.” Johnny rose and went to the front windows of the living room where he peered out at the houses now occupied by strangers before turning and asking, “Can you take Mom to the psychological tests? If she agrees to go?”

“I think she’ll agree to go. It’s a back operation she’s focusing on and worried about. But we have to wait for her to see Dr Hackman so he can refer her. His secretary will call me tomorrow to give me the appointment information.”

19 Trapped in the Medical System

19.1 Monday on the Phone with Alice

Johnny felt himself drifting away as Alice told him, “I can’t break away from work for the Tuesday or Wednesday appointments, but I’ll join you and Mom on Friday for her MRI.”

After a few seconds pause, Johnny heard his own voice as down a long tunnel: “So, Tuesday at 10 in the morning at Dr Hackman’s office for a general examination and blood-draw. Maybe some planning and then Wednesday at 2:00 at Dr Collins office for a set of memory and cognitive tests with Ms Torretti? Then you and I can drive Mom down to the emergency room at Sisters of Charity Hospital on Friday at 7:00 in the evening.”

“You got it. I’ll drop by tonight when I leave work with the schedule and the telephone numbers for all those medical offices.”

That brought relief to Johnny as he looked down at his own sheet covered with doodles and the single numeral ‘2’.

19.2 Tuesday with the General Practitioner

Dr Hackman took Johnny into his private office, an austere place with metal furniture which might have come from an auction of government surplus supplies. He moved a file on his desk to just in front of him and opened it up before taking up a pen and writing a few words. Then he looked up, some puzzlement in his face.

“And Dr Bain ran the standard cancer tests on her?” Johnny nodded and Dr Hackman added, “Including a mammogram and a colonoscopy?”

After a short period of thought, Johnny said, “Yes. My niece went with us to her grandmother at the mammogram tests and Dr Kreider did the procedure at the hospital.”

“Kreider is a good doctor, but I can’t get hold of your mother’s files from Dr Bain’s office and I can’t even get a way to contact him. Even the Sisters of Charity Hospital can’t provide me with information on his retirement residence or the location of those files.” He clicked his pen to retract the ball-point and then tapped it on the file contents a few times before asking again, “A colonoscopy?”

Johnny remembered taking her to the gastroenterology practice where she went into one of the rooms provided for the patients to undress and put on a hospital gown. An attendant stationed in the common area near those rooms smiled at him, a pleasant and somewhat boyishly cute lady with short blonde hair and muted but attractive curves. That set him to thinking about a possible character in one of his novels. . .

“You might as well go back to the general waiting-room and make yourself comfortable. You have plenty of time to go down to the cafeteria or the coffee-shop.” He recalled he was turning to the door when she added, “It’ll be a couple of hours from now before we revive her and bring her out. She’ll be ready to go home at that time but she’ll be groggy and will need watching. Whoever brings her out will have a sheet of instructions and you can ask questions.” And he turned and informed her, “My sister will be here in an hour or so and she’ll help take her home.”

He heard Dr Hackman ask, “An hour? You mother is finished and ready to go home. And you won’t need any help caring for her. I didn’t use any medications.” He added, “She had a colonoscopy?”

“I think so. I took her to Dr Kreider’s office and then to the hospital where he did the procedure.”

“Okay.” Dr Hackman sighed before telling him, “I didn’t give her any drugs here but I’m going to give you a prescription for a high dosage of Ibuprofen. There’s some reason to believe that non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs can bring down swelling in the brain and maybe ease the progress of dementias.”

“That’s something she fears.”

“What? Drugs?”

“No, she was a nurse anesthetist. She knows the good things and bad things that can come from their use.”

“So, she’s afraid of dementia?” When Johnny nodded, Dr Hackman closed up her file and rose. As he led Johnny out the door, he said, “It’s pretty rational to be afraid of dementia.”

Ten minutes later, Johnny and his mother were in a booth at Friendly’s restaurant where he was enjoying his cheeseburger and growing worried as he saw his mother merely picking at her Fishwich and fries. She usually loved the food at this restaurant which had been a part of the local culture for years—an upgrade over the simple burger and cone stands but not expensive.

“Mother, why don’t you call Aunt Margaret and see if she’d like a visit and maybe a trip to a restaurant on Wednesday after your appointment.” Mrs Waters nodded her head with little enthusiasm and Johnny knew she was underwater and maybe not coming up unless she were to learn she didn’t have dementia and her back was OK.

19.3 Wednesday with the Nurse-Practitioner Psychologist

Johnny drove into the parking lot of the 1960ish building in the vaguely defined region between downtown Springfield and east Springfield, not far from Dr Hackman’s office. He was wishing that Alice was able to be here from the beginning—she said she’d be here in another hour, half an hour after the testing would begin. Out of the corners of his eyes, Johnny could see his mother was still tense—she wanted to be somewhere else, maybe walking with Rebel or maybe down with her sister in Somers or maybe shopping with a daughter or daughter-in-law.

Somewhere else, to be sure. Yet, she’d calmly and passively agreed to the appointment and had asked few questions, though one had been, “Why?” Johnny had felt obligated to answer in an honest and straightforward way. He’d gotten the impression that still more of her will to go on had flowed out of her as the remaining air might flow out of a nearly flat balloon.

It was about an hour and a half later, that Johnny and Alice looked at their quiet but clearly distraught mother as she was brought out of the test-room. The nurse-psychologist looked calmly professional but she was also, at first, reluctant to look Johnny in the eyes as she said, “It all went well.” After shifting her eyes from Johnny to Alice, she shifted her eyes

again away from Alice's direct gaze to the right and added, "We'll send the report in a couple of days to Dr Hackman's office. The doctor or one of his nurses will call you as soon as possible."

She led the small group to the receptionist's desk and handed over some paperwork, seemingly an insurance form—a few items were checked off. She told the young West Indian lady, "No follow-up in needed. I'll give you the report tomorrow afternoon and a copy should go over to Dr Hackman."

The receptionist—Jamaican accent?—and nodded with a large and pleasant smile on her face. Having taken good care of business as she seemingly tended to do, she turned and smiled at Mrs Waters as if she truly believed the client was always the most important person of those present and said, "I hope things go well with you, Mrs Waters. Do you have plans with your children for the rest of the day?"

Mrs Waters raised her hands in not quite a gesture of helplessness as if she still had some control over her situation and maybe over her children. "My daughter called my sister down in Somers and we're going down to take her out to lunch." "That's good, Mrs Waters. It's just a bit before 12, so down to Somers and then to maybe the Somers Inn?"

When Alice shrugged to let everyone know the decision was yet unmade, the receptionist added, "Well, I'm sure you and your family will have a good time at some wonderful place."

19.4 Thursday at Dr Hackman's Office

The nurse-psychologist and her assistant had worked fast and Dr Hackman had the report late afternoon on Thursday. He called Johnny, explaining first that he wasn't really sure if he should be calling him or his sister. "Either is fine." After a silence of a few seconds, the doctor said, "It'd be better if I had a clear idea of who is the decision-maker or center of information for your family..." Another short silence and Dr Hackman added, "In case someone has to make a decision, if your mother is unable to make her own decisions."

"I'm easier to get hold of and I am my mother's healthcare proxy and the executor on her will and I have power of attorney if anything happens to her." Johnny tried and failed to remember the terms of the power of attorney; Mrs Waters attorney had explained, if Johnny remembered correctly, that ordinary powers of attorney were very limited and properly so

for most cases. Attorney Hennessy had told him, “If you need more powers, a probate court will allow them to you or to me to exercise for the benefit of your mother or her estate.”

Johnny’s thoughts were interrupted as Dr Hackman added, “I would appreciate a copy of the healthcare proxy form. The other stuff isn’t any of my business.” And then he said, “Even though the report said she is in the early stages of dementia and quite confused in some ways, I . . .” There was silence before he asked, “Are you sure she got a colonoscopy and not a sigmoidoscopy?”

“What’s the difference?”

“A sigmoidoscopy doesn’t go as far up the colon.”

Johnny paused and wondered if he’d made a major mistake. . .

“I didn’t even know. . .” He paused as the memory came back of his last conversation with Dr Bain where the medical man had spoken of his frustration with his failure to find a cancer he was sure was in Mrs Waters and Johnny now remembered Dr Bain saying, “Medicare won’t approve a full colonoscopy. A sigmoidoscopy is all I can do unless you or your mother wish to pay thousands in cash for the more complete test.”

When Johnny confessed his confusion out loud, Dr Hackman asked, “Are you sure that’s what Dr Bain said?”

“Not at all. It fills in a blank in my memory but I’m not sure if I’m just making it up to make sense of matters.”

Dr Hackman looked at him with puzzlement on his face but then arose and said, “I’m going to try and schedule some tests for her as soon as humanly possible.”

19.5 Friday in the Radiology Department

Friday evening, about 8:00, Johnny and Alice and their sister Suzie were taking their mother into the emergency room of *Sisters of Charity Hospital*. The other admission desks were closed and Dr Hackman seemed greatly relieved to have found a free slot at just a few hours notice; Alice said it would be a special sort of CAT scan. As they had barely entered the building, they stopped dead in their tracks. They were looking upon an overflowing waiting area. Nearly all were Hispanic and most of those seemed to be 12 and under. After a minute or so of silence, Suzie said, “The lady over at the admissions desk is waving us over.”

Alice went in front, guiding her mother. Johnny and Suzie stood back but near enough to hear the woman ask, "Which of you needs help?"

Alice pulled her mother a little to the front of herself and said, "My mother has something scheduled for 8:30. I think the doctor called it a CT colon scan?"

The woman smiled at Mrs Waters, nodded in an ambiguous manner, and told her, "I just need a little information to check you into the system and then I can let you through those doors to your left. You'll go a little bit ahead to reach the radiology department and then just register at the receptionist's desk. Whoever's there will finish the check-in process."

As the receptionist pulled a single-page form from her drawer, Alice asked her, "Why do you have so many people here? So many children who seem healthy?"

"They're mostly from Puerto Rico, recent arrivals and haven't gotten their medical cards yet, so they come here for colds and flus and even the flu-shots when we have some available, though our official policy forbids us to give shots of that sort to walk-ins in the emergency room." After a pause and a quick look around, she spoke in a softer voice, "Some are from various countries and are in this country. . . unofficially and have a better chance of getting medical care without being picked up if they go to an emergency room."

Johnny was glad they were able to take care of his mother because he knew Alice, assisted by Suzie and him, would have raised a ruckus if they'd had to wait with these other people. After all, their mother was a possible cancer victim and needed an emergency scan. And then he felt guilty. He didn't feel at all guilty that all these people from dysfunctional countries were in some sort of need and wasn't currently concerned they were using the resources of a people who had worked hard to build things like hospitals and sewer systems. He couldn't get over having not remembered the tests his mother had undergone, but he was still uncertain if he had really been clearly told the name of the test or told about the dangers of doing that scan compared to a full colonoscopy. He was pretty sure he would have discussed such a matter with Alice or someone else in the family who was knowledgeable about medical matters.

As Alice and their mother finished the check-in procedure, Johnny and Suzie went over to the waiting area where she picked out a *People* magazine from a nearby rack and sat down to sort-of read it. Very sort-of since she was watching her mother and Alice out of the corner of her eyes. Johnny

sat near her and pulled a recent issue of *Scientific American* out of his backpack and read it the way Suzie was reading her magazine.

A few minutes later, Suzie looked up and watched along with Johnny when a medical staffer of some sort came over and asked for “Mrs Waters.” Alice and their mother rose and went with the young fellow. Alice returned five minutes later and the three of them waited for more than a half-hour before a thirtiesh man came out and gestured in Alice’s direction. She walked over and talked to that man in green medical pajamas, as Johnny labeled them in his own thoughts. That man, likely a radiologist, showed Alice some images that were in the envelope he was carrying and, after a very short talk, put them back in the envelope and walked away from Alice and through a door to the left of the waiting-area.

Suzie put down her *People* magazine and, coming to himself, Johnny looked down at his *Scientific American* and wasn’t sure where he’d stopped reading on the page. He put it in his backpack, and rose to walk over to Suzie’s side. He was there a minute or two before Alice and their mother emerged and walked toward them.

Mrs Waters looked calm but Alice seemed a bit stressed. Johnny and Suzie kept quiet except for Suzie asking her mother if she wished to go out for ice cream or coffee on the way home.

19.6 Saturday in Alice’s Living-room

The next morning, the Waters siblings were gathered at Alice’s house, enjoying a buffet breakfast of scrambled eggs and ham, some pastries and bread for toasting, and a good selection of melons and berries. Feeling guilty, Johnny ate well. As he brought his plate and cutlery into the kitchen, he remembered that he had felt tired but mostly well as he was caring for his dying father—and taking his mother down to the hospital every day before returning home to read and write and then go back to pick her up. Then, the day after the funeral, he’d violently upchucked a couple of times early in the morning and had stayed in bed while the rest of the family went to the cemetery for the interment. It had taken a couple of days before he was functional enough to run or to read serious books or do much writing, by hand or on the new i486 generic-brand computer he’d bought to replace his i386 computer—Johnny was consistently staying 2 or 3 years behind the mainstream standards.

As from a distance, he heard Alice saying, “Don’t crowd Mom. She’ll just get suspicious. Go by for short visits and ask her if she needs to go to the store or wants to go visit Aunt Margaret but just let me and Johnny and Suzie’s daughter, Sarah, get her through her medical tests and exams. She’s got about five of them in the next six days. It’s definitely colon cancer. The radiologist said it looks like a near total blockage. He’s judging that from the big gas bubbles but he sees signs her stomach is filling up—probably with half-digested food. We’ll try enemas but Dr Hackman doesn’t think they’ll do any good at all.”

20 Am I My Schizoid Protagonist

Johnny had a day to himself. No appointments. He'd been in the house the prior evening, but uninvolved, as Sophie, an RN and wife of Carl—the youngest of the Waters, had tried to give Mrs Waters an enema. Suzie and Alice had been in and out of the small bathroom. It hadn't worked. As expected. Afterwards, the daughters and daughter-in-law had taken Mrs Waters downstairs and had sat in the living-room to drink tea and nibble on some old-fashioned, made-from-scratch spice cake enriched with a can of tomato soup. They all nibbled, hoping Mrs Waters would just take enough to taste but not to put more into her stomach; Sophie had gone with Alice to see the pictures from the scan and talk with Dr Hackman and she had told them her mother-in-law's stomach was overflowing with partially digested food that couldn't go anywhere. A surgeon had already been selected and he'd told Dr Hackman not to bother with a cleansing because the blockage was pretty much total.

Johnny was going to see the surgeon with his mother and his sister, Alice, on Tuesday with the operation maybe being as soon as Wednesday—there was possibly an open slot in the schedule at Sisters of Charity Hospital, but it would take at least a week to get an operation scheduled at Springfield-Wesson Hospital. Johnny could only say, “Dr O'Neill, it's up to you,” as his part of the conversation.

Feeling the family had done all it could but to chauffeur their mother and be there at her bedside if she came out alive from the operation, Johnny tried to clear his head by getting back to some writing or at least some thinking about one or more of the five novels he that were forming in his mind, front and back, conscious and unconscious. One embryonic novel seemed particularly relevant at the moment. So, the question arose: “Is Milt Jackson outright schizophrenic?”

“Who cares? The real question is: do I view reality through a brain that

misfires so to cause distortions much of the times and. . .”

“Well, Johnny, you might have views as distorted as any mortal man and you might even be said to be of two minds or far more—especially when thinking things through or trying to put them on paper. That doesn’t necessarily make you schizoid or schizophrenic.”

“As long as we’re on the topic, schizophrenic doesn’t mean split personality, in the way of Milt Jackson. It means you don’t have a very good relationship with reality. Or something like that.”

The mental ping-pong ended after Johnny noted, not for the first time, the mental strangeness of a conversation inside his own mind in which he really seemed. . .

“Am I schizoid because I haven’t learned to live with the crushing of my spirit and enthusiasm, the destruction of my good work habits, when young?”

“No, probably it be that I am schizoid because I have no one to talk to about what interests me. I’m interested in God’s Creation, the history of the physical world and the history of man, the stories and poetry of man and the attempts to describe and understand atoms and planets and apes and mentally disturbed human beings.”

“So, I think myself superior because I’m not so interested in the flimsy products of the human imagination, the stuff of modern books and movies, the stuff of modern music and architecture and art?”

Johnny wondered how he could consider himself even decent or normal, let alone superior; after all he had wandered away from the Catholic faith he swore to practice.

And, threatening to become a prolifically bad poet, he versified, if not quite only to not himself:

A third of a way through three-score,
 the path paved by Poe and Serling led me astray.
 “What a long strange trip it had been.”
 “Did longness or strangeness lie ahead?”

Walking a loop-de-loop, head to bottom,
 A would-be author saw his future stretch flatly,
 and came around to see his youth stretch behind,
 so tediously flat. Ennui!

A revelation had come as it had to Baudelaire,
 who saw more when young and degenerate
 than when he was an old church lady,
 but probably never understood much.

“Head to bottom? Why not toes to top?”

That didn’t seem to matter fully as poetry was symbolic and toes seemed not so symbolic as heads. . .

“Anyway, I guess that surrealist dreams provide what Odysseus found in the mythical dreams through which he passed. Is the strangeness of my memories of much of my life due to some problem in me or is that strangeness to be found in the modern? At least in the United States? Or is Europe more advanced than we are in sinking into the manifestation of schizophrenia and other forms of psychosis, the manifestation in our very relationships and our understandings of our own selves and of other human beings and of the other parts of God’s Creation?”

“But I have to be careful writing or speaking so confidently about the likes of Baudelaire when I’m barely acquainted with the man or his work. Just one reading of *Flowers of Evil* in a collection of translations into English by various poets.”

“And all of this is meaningless you know.”

“Yes, but it might mean something if it reaches the proper readers.”

And Johnny tried to pray, but his prayers turned to anger against his mother and any others who’d failed to respect his abilities and his patterns of development. And it came to the son of a woman dying without so much love and respect as she deserved:

We all die alone but none of us really do, unless we were truly cursed by a bad life.

We all die as members of various communities. Our deaths leave small or large or even devastating wounds in those communities.

Was that just mysticism? Pious words which had only an accidental connection to reality?

Johnny remembered the words of that psychologist from that high-level executive recruiting firm in Boston: “You are far and away the most people-oriented high-IQ person I’ve ever tested.”

Were his feelings about community neither insight nor mysticism but simply a result of the way he was made? By God?

21 Meeting the Surgeon

Dr O'Neill was a young man, 35ish and probably—according to Alice, just out of his surgical training and board certification. He was the son of a partly retired surgeon—who only consulted and didn't operate. The son was said to be as good a surgeon and as good a doctor in general as was his father.

The young surgeon was easy-going yet professional, even as he leaned forward, looking directly at Mrs Waters to say, "The surgery will probably be successful. And you'll probably not awaken afterwards."

Mrs Waters barely nodded and Johnny knew, as likely did Alice and Dr O'Neill, that she wasn't hearing anything she hadn't known for a while. Johnny asked himself, "As long as she's been hiding her symptoms to avoid all possibility of going to a nursing-home?"

22 The Operation and the Aftermath

The surgeon, Dr O'Neill, came out after the operation to speak to the family.

“I was a little surprised at how large the tumor was and how it had grown into several organs. But I was able to take care of it. If she wakes up, then she might get a good year or even two of comfortable life, at home. She should regain enough mobility to make it up and down the stairs and to go for walks, though probably not such long walks as before.” He looked over at Alice, who had made it clear at the pre-operation meeting that Mrs Waters dreaded life in a nursing home or even life as a convalescent at home. “I’m leaving for a few days but I’m not that important right now. I’ve already spoken to another Irishman, Dr Riley, a pulmonologist... A respiratory specialist who runs the ICU. He’ll be handling your mother’s case personally. He’s as good a doctor and as good a man as you can find in the medical field in this neck of the woods.”

The next day, Johnny was in the ICU with Alice and Sophie. It was organized in a circle around the nursing station, about ten small rooms with glass above thirty inches or so. A maximum of four of them could be in the room at a time but Carl had chosen to stay outside. In fact, he’d asked them if they wanted anything down at the coffee shop or in the convenience store, so he was planning on getting away from sick and dying people if possible. He’d been even worse when his father had died, only coming to the hospital twice though Mr Waters had been hospitalized for 30 days or more in his last six months. One of those visits had been the night of the passing of their father.

“Passing to what?” asked Johnny and not entirely to himself. Alice knew of her brother’s habits and looked over as if to confirm she also thought their

mother would be passing on to death or to some greater life before long. Johnny chose not to correct her error, though they'd once discussed the known tendency of human beings, as they aged, to lose their inhibitions and to vocalize parts of conversations with those not there; younger human beings had those conversations as well but kept them silent after a short learning period in childhood.

A man walked in wearing black medical scrubs and stopped at the nursing station. He was very lean and somewhat gloomy of expression, looking a little like Hollywood's idea of an undertaker, a man to finish it all rather than a man to save lives, but Sophie said, "That's him, Dr Riley. As Dr O'Neil indicated, he's a man with a well-deserved reputation as a good doctor, an emotionally detached but empathetic doctor."

As the man in black checked the charts for the patients in the ICU, about six that Johnny could see, he glanced over a couple of times. He wrote a couple of notes on the last chart he had read and then walked over to a patient in the room two down from Mrs Waters' room.

Johnny and the others with him kept an eye on Dr Riley but mostly turned to their mother, watching her silently as the respirator worked. Johnny looked towards the other three with him and asked, "It's not unusual for a 78 year-old woman to need a respirator for a while after an operation. Is it?" Suzie shrugged as if to say she knew little about the matter, Alice looked uncomfortable, and Sophie said, "It's not unusual, but it's not a good thing." After a short pause, she added, "Dr Hackman had qualified his assessment of her, writing that her lungs were in good shape for an ex-smoker who had smoked for decades. That probably means..."

Dr Riley walked into the small room at that point and walked right to Mrs Waters side to watch her for a few seconds before turning to them and saying, "We're going to try to take her off the machine in about 15 minutes."

Ten minutes later, the staff began coming in and one of the nurses suggested, "Maybe you could go get a drink or a snack. If you wish to stay and watch, you'll have to go over to stand near the nursing station."

Another ten minutes and the two nurses, respiratory tech, and Dr Riley were gathered around Mrs Waters. Johnny honestly didn't see, or didn't understand, what happened in the next few minutes, but one of the nurses left a couple of minutes later, followed by Dr Riley who picked up a clipboard hanging on Mrs Waters' bed and came over to the station while he was still writing. A few seconds later, he hung up the clipboard at the nursing station and turned to meet, first, Johnny's eyes and then the eyes of the

three women from the Waters family. In a voice calm and steady, he said, "It didn't work. Her lungs don't seem to be working at all. We'll try again in a couple of hours. I'd recommend you spend a short time with her, talking to her and touching her, and then you should go off and prepare to make a decision if we can't get her breathing on her own."

Alice asked Dr Riley, "Do you want us to be outside when you try again?"

"Yes, but be out there before six to come right in if she doesn't start breathing on her own."

He looked at Alice who said, "We decided to let her go." The doctor in black panned the group, meeting the eyes of each before he nodded and then said, "I know from Dr O'Neill that she's comfortable with the idea of dying rather than being a convalescent. But the body doesn't always let go so easily. She might well panic and try to get oxygen. If it doesn't work, and you... I'll recommend strongly you let her go. We'll not take her off the respirator completely if she doesn't start breathing. We'll call you in and start her on the anti-anxiety medicine before we take her off the respirator the last time. She should just calmly go. You'll be able to be there at her side. You could maybe have..." He looked over at the cubicle where Mrs Waters was lying and said, "It'd be against the rules, but you can maybe have seven or eight in there. We'll wheel out the respirator as soon as we disconnect her and then you'll be able to go in. We'll keep you out of the cubicle, standing right here, until that time. Even under the best of circumstances, it's likely she'll take a few minutes to die."

Suzie sobbed and asked, "Isn't there any chance she'll start breathing when you disconnect her from the respirator?"

Dr Riley looked towards her, a calm sympathy showing on his face, and told her, "Not much chance. Go and talk and have some dinner if you wish. I'll be here through the evening and we'll be ready to disconnect the machine at about six. I'll try to contact a chaplain to be there. Does she practice some religion?"

Johnny felt almost ashamed as he asked, "What if we don't give you permission to disconnect?"

"Don't do that to her. Assume that she's still at least partly alive in there, trapped. And, if she's not in there—whatever that means, it would be a meaningless act to keep her... body breathing."

In a flat voice, Johnny said, "She was a member of a Congregationalist church. We'll try to contact her minister."

"I'll try to get a hospital chaplain here, just in case."

A short while later, Johnny and Alice and Suzie were on their way to Somers to speak with Aunt Margaret. Sophie and Carl went home to talk to their six year-old and the two older children from Sophie's first marriage. They were also going to call the others in the family.

Johnny felt ashamed again when they pulled into the driveway at their cousin's house and prepared to go into the mother-in-law apartment. He'd spoken to Aunt Margaret by phone at about 7AM or so before leaving to go to the hospital and she'd said bluntly, "Do what's best for her. Let her go. Don't worry about everyone being able to see her that last time. Let her go."

In front of Alice and Suzie, Aunt Margaret simply said, "Let her go. You maybe should have done that this morning."

Alice nodded and asked, "Do you wish to go for a quick meal and then to the hospital? They're trying once more and, if it fails, they'll start medicating her to keep her calm as..." Alice took a sobbing breath and continued, "As her body shuts down."

Johnny knew it was a little bit of a fib because they'd not actually told the doctor they'd definitely let their mother... die.

"Release her from her sufferings."

The others looked over at him and he felt his stomach tighten up but the tears didn't come as he had been expecting for a while.

An hour later, they got back to the hospital to find Suzie's husband Bill waiting for them. Bill was from North Carolina, a devout Methodist and some kind of approved Bible-studies instructor. He looked uncomfortable as he told them, "I've been to the ICU. The nurse told me they couldn't get any of the chaplains here, Protestant or Catholic or Jewish or... Whatever. Did you get hold of her minister?"

When Johnny shook his head, Bill raised a red, leather-bound book and said, "I'll say a prayer after we recite the 23rd Psalm together." And he pulled a small packet of cards from his pocket, the sort you get at funerals.

Johnny had to smile as he took one and saw that the translation of the 23rd Psalm wasn't from the King James Version of the Bible but rather from the Scottish Psalter with its word order inversions. He remembered that version being distributed at his father's funeral and realizing that there was apparently a tendency for Scots to put verb or even object first if more important than the subject. A friend of his in Rockshire had pointed out that Johnny had that tendency—had he picked it up from hearing Granny

and the others speaking Scots to each other? Scots was close enough to English that he could understand most of it and he had. . . Or had he?

As they were walking off the elevator and heading into the ICU, Johnny's mind went blank. And it remained blank as they were called in after Mrs Waters had failed to start breathing on her own. They watched from the nursing station as a pole with a drip bag was put next to her and the IV needle placed in her wrist. They they disconnected the respirator for the final time and wheeled it away. Johnny watched as the nurses and the respiratory technician dropped their eyes as they passed the gathered mourners. And so it was that they did gather around Mrs Waters bed, watching as she calmly took an occasional very shallow and inadequate breath. Only Alice and Bill and Sarah recited the 23rd Psalm out loud. Johnny found it impossible to gather a single silent thought as Bill prayed for God to have mercy on Mrs Waters and on her loved ones and all the medical personnel who had cared for her during her time of troubles.

Dr Riley was at the door to the cubicle, his head bowed in prayer. As Bill pleaded, "We ask that you grant us our petitions in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ," the man in black crossed himself, pulled out a crucifix which hung around his neck, kissed the crucifix, and turned to walk towards the next cubicle in which Johnny had noticed a tiny body. A young child?

23 The Funeral

The Union Church of Christ was small but not tiny. It was packed, with Mrs Waters' children and their children, some extended family members, and various friends.

It was a quiet and dignified service, not gloomy but... Johnny didn't know the Reverend Albert Downes, but he thought well of the man for not turning it into some sort of mindless celebration "of a life" as he'd heard was becoming common. The music was raised to a somewhat higher level than in most modern church services by the well-trained voice of a woman married to Alice's former boss and also by the presence of some from the Stevens family—their mother had been one of Johnny's Sunday School teachers when he was young and also a backup director of the youth choir for his short and undistinguished career as a boy soprano.

As he looked around the people just rising from their seats as the service ended, Johnny asked himself, "Did She Believe in God or Just in Going to Church?" In fact, she'd not gone to church for many years, preferring to stay down in the nursery, caring for the babes in arm and reading books to the wide-eyed infants.

Turning to Alice but speaking loudly enough for Suzie and the others to hear, Johnny said, "She'd always dealt better with babies and with children five and under. As we got older, she pulled away from us, becoming distant from us, though more self-tortured than cold."

Flat of voice, Alice responded, "I know. When her problems had become known a couple weeks ago, she apologized to me for being distant as we grew older. She said she was afraid of hurting us the way her mother hurt her."

"She talked to me about those issues a bit also. A mother-daughter love-hate relationship. Who would have thought such a thing could happen?"

To himself, Johnny added, "Uncle Albert had told me she should have never moved us back to Jenkesville after Dad's accident. He said we could

have struggled through for a while before Dad was fully back to work, but she showed she was willing to sacrifice Dad and us to stay close to Granny and to try to win her unconditional love and approval.”

Aloud, Johnny said, “Two wonderful women and near each other—they drew out each other’s worst characteristics. Uncle Albert told me it started almost as soon as Mom was able to walk around and to speak. She just refused to be what Granny wanted her to be—a replacement for Mina.” Johnny felt a small pain of sorts go through his mind every time he thought of Mina, his mother’s older sister who’d actually died before his mother was born—of an ear infection that went into her brain before the discovery of antibiotics.

24 Another Home that Wasn't His

Johnny looked around at the boxes of clothes and the many more boxes of books. He was taking only a desk and a few pieces of furniture for a bedroom. Alice and Jack already had living room furniture in their in-law apartment and the kitchen had more pans and dishes and kitchen implements than he'd had even in his days of house ownership. His computer. And backup disks with the files for five books finished, a few more in sort-of finished states, and other stuff which hadn't come together yet.

He was a little proud that he'd taken care of the house and the furnishings and the financial assets so efficiently—at least in his opinion. The house looked nice and was bought by a nice young couple with three children who were members of the Union Church of Christ, Mrs Waters' church and only a block away. There was a drugstore and a convenience store and the town's post office and several good and simple restaurants—all within a few blocks. Johnny hoped they would also take advantage of the public library nearly across the street. And the two nearby parks—one with trees and a gazebo and benches and the memorial for town citizens who had died in service in a war.

Alice and Jack lived only a quarter-mile away, but Johnny was getting sick of being rootless.

Part III

A Stranger in the Pilgrim Body of Christ

25 Meeting Up With Old Friends

Johnny was on the front stoop of Alice's house when Al Compton drove up in a dark-blue Toyota Avalon. As they shook hands down at the street, Johnny nodded at the car and said, "Pretty upscale car for a postal worker."

"Well, my wife and I are both supervisors at the Postal Service. Me at the bulk processing center and she's down at the main post office for the Springfield business district. So we make decent money. Not nearly as much as her brother and his wife who are financial advisors, but we do okay. This is her car. I have a Ford 150, most popular truck in the world most years."

"I used to have a Chevy 1500. Sold it to one of my brothers. He had just bought a boat and needed a truck to pull it. He also needed a way to get to work. I just drive the Acclaim that my parents bought 12 years ago."

Al looked as Johnny as if about to say something, but his facial muscles relaxed for a few seconds before he asked, "So Carl's boat-truck used to belong to you?"

"Yep. You know Carl?"

"Worked with him years ago at a construction company. We were young and unskilled and mostly used the shovel and carried around pieces of lumber."

Johnny was silent for a while, remembering his disappointment when his brother—the other really high-IQ member of the family—flunked out of the freshman year of engineering school. He'd spent most evenings and some afternoons playing pool and drinking beer at the student union.

Johnny himself had thought of switching to engineering in college when he had so much trouble recovering his energy and enthusiasm after he got to a good research university with the intention of becoming a top-notch physicist. He'd failed to do well in physics—almost entirely, at least in his opinion, because of bad schooling up to 12th grade and his weakened, or

undeveloped?, moral character. After college, he should have gathered up the courage to head off to some more dynamic region of the country to take a chance he could get a job as an applied mathematician or computer programmer, perhaps getting an advanced degree or two in evening school.

For a few minutes, they talked a little about fishing, Al's big hobby; Johnny had once fished, pretty regularly though not with any great effort. It had been more of a way of getting away from the stresses of ordinary life, just the constant feeling you needed to be working at some profitable enterprise or consuming the fruits of Hollywood's orchards or those of a book industry rapidly decaying into some strange state of communal dementia.

They pulled into the parking lot of a postal facility not used at all on the weekend. Johnny thought it was some sort of specialized package-moving facility, but he didn't really care much.

The bus was sitting with open door and the driver was outside having a coffee and a smoke with a couple of men who were probably going on the trip. It had been planned as a postal trip to Fenway but the bus hadn't filled up and Al had offered Tom a chance to go and Father LaFontaine and Johnny had gotten in as well. Tom and Father LaFontaine were taking Johnny as a way of getting away for a day after his mother's recent death.

And there was a good time on the way up. Tom and Al sat on the seat in front of Johnny and Father LaFontaine. They laughed about a misadventure in which Tom and Al took part; Father LaFontaine spoke as if he had known of the event shortly afterwards. Two groups of young men were out for some drinking but mostly simple, non-criminal carousing. They took a short-cut in the nearby town of Wilbraham and the second car, a low-riding Volkswagen got stuck right on the often used tracks of a freight line. As they reached that point, Johnny could almost hear the tooting as two or more engines passed through each night, pulling long lines of cars filled with steel and animal feed and other heavy loads which didn't allow for quick stops. And then he heard Al say, "Lucky we had those two mooses with us, Phil and Mickey. With them we were able to lift that toy car enough to roll it over the tracks."

Johnny laughed along with them, but he was partly somewhere else. At the time of those events, he'd been in the San Francisco stop of his corporate-nomad trip around a few cities of the United States. He would have been sleeping in his apartment near Golden Gate, perhaps after an evening of softball or tennis or low-stakes poker or a simple party. He saw Father LaFontaine look at him in a puzzled way as Johnny remembered

the fellow who would throw parties and give some small prize to the one who brought the cheapest bottle of drinkable wine. In the late 1970s, it hadn't been hard to find good, cheap wine in California. Then did Johnny realize that Al and Tom were also looking at him. He tried to explain, "I was just remembering that year when you guys nearly got run over by that train. I was out in San Francisco having a good time, mostly in sports and some camping and hiking. Work was a bummer and I didn't really drink a lot, though I wasn't a stranger to bars and to pizza places that served big pitchers of beer."

In a surprisingly quiet voice, Tom said, "Al had just asked you if you wanted a beer now. Not 20 years ago."

Johnny laughed first and the others joined in.

A while later, the driver pulled into a circular drive of sorts where passengers could enter Fenway. As they were leaving, he warned everyone about being at the bus within 15 minutes or so of the end of the game.

As they were leaving, Father LaFontaine asked the driver, "Are you going to see the game after you park?"

"No, I'm going to take the subway to the harbor area and get myself a good scaall-ops meal."

Tom laughed and told the driver, "You're going to have to work on that accent. Don't sound much like Jack or Bobby."

Soon enough, the four men were in their seats. Pretty good view from the right field stands not too far past first base. Johnny watched as a tall man of African descent, at least mostly, shagged flies in right field. Al laughed and pointed to him and said, "Maybe he's switching from relief pitcher to outfielder."

It was a nice sunny day, hinting of excessive heat before the game would end. For now, it was simply pleasant and Johnny leaned back in the seat and took in the stands as they were filling up, the Red Sox players leaving the field joking with the Orioles players as they came on to warm up. Most of the Red Sox were gone when Johnny noticed that the relief pitcher was still near the stands, joking with a small crowd of pretty young ladies as he signed autographs. Then he departed.

The game was... a baseball game. A decent way to spend a few hours every so often. "Maybe every 10 years or so."

Without glancing over, Tom said, "10 years? The Sox make it to the World Series twice a century or so."

By the seventh inning, Johnny was beginning to feel hot and also beginning to fear a sunburn. Since his father had had skin cancer preceding his lymphoma, Johnny had been more careful about such things, though he'd never been either a sun-worshiper or a dedicated sun-avoider. In recent years, he'd gotten sufficient sun to keep a light tan during the warm seasons by simply doing gardening and his running in the early morning. Father LaFontaine nudged him and suggested, "Let's go down to watch the end of the game in the shade. There's plenty of television screens near the food-stands and beer-stands."

And they stood for a short while near a beer-stand, pretending to watch the game before Johnny decided to order a beer. He took a sip of the lager and felt his face wrinkle up.

"Something wrong with the beer?"

"I don't know. I had one in the second inning or so and it tasted good. I guess it's the two sausage grinders and the fries and that first beer. . . And the sun. . ."

After a few minutes of silence, Father LaFontaine spoke as if reluctantly so, "It's been a few years or more since we talked much about God and Church. I guess it's been about ten years since you moved down from the neighborhood of that monastery where you received your sacraments for a few years. And you were only a practicing Catholic for a couple of years before you moved up to Rockshire."

Johnny just nodded and took a small sip. This time, his face didn't wrinkle up and he took a larger sip before saying, "I'm a wimp nowadays about drinking. If I finish this, I'll be sleeping on the bus the whole way home." Father LaFontaine just nodded and there was silence for a short while before Johnny said, "Ordinary parish life has been as disappointing as I feared it would be."

"You barely know it."

"When I walk into a parish, even my first one in Stamford, it was little different from walking into any old Protestant church. It didn't even have the God-centered liveliness of that independent Christian church I belonged to down in Atlanta. My last Protestant church."

"I think you need to think things through a bit."

"I know that and I'm doing that. In my own way and on my own schedule."

26 The Legitimacy of Mathematics in Moral Analysis

Johnny was confused. He'd not even liked to read the *Bible* when he was young. His upbringing and education had been weak in most areas, including the religious stuff and mathematics and...

Religious stuff and mathematics...

Mathematics and religious stuff...

Numerology had never appealed to Johnny and certainly not that stuff in Ezekiel or Revelation. Why had he suddenly broken out in lines of thought so Biblical when his education and his all-too dissipated inclinations were towards mathematics or other modern knowledge? And he sighed as he remembered the years of pleasant, soma-soaked years of boredom in his public school... Though he'd coped well when young, had not been too bothered in the middle grades of seventh and eighth, and...

What had happened in high school? He was beating his own insides too often and too long and too hard on this issue...

But understanding why his intellectual life had gone so far astray for a couple decades—and it hadn't fully recovered yet—seemed important for his efforts to recover a mind once boyishly strong and to push forward some sort of healthy development of his moral character.

A strange thought came to Johnny: "I'm an experiment of sorts of the recovery of a civilized mind in the midst of a decay into barbarism."

After a few seconds, he edited the thought: "I'm not a lab rat but rather one of the clearly-defined victims of a decay process, one of the many such victims who has some understanding of what happened..."

"A self-aware canary in the mine?"

"Exactly. And I'm trying to fight my way back to moral and intellectual health and strength."

But the first critic stated quietly and with respect, “If you be a victim, who be the criminals?”

“The ones who can’t walk the straight line or don’t even see it.”

“Consistency would indicate you are one of the canaries who detected a natural disaster of sorts was starting up in the mine.”

“Or an act of sabotage?”

“Maybe.”

Johnny felt a bit of vertigo as he could no longer separate his streams of thought, no longer determine which were the conscious parts of his mind and which the unconscious regions generating thoughts and pushing them into his conscious awareness.

And it came to him that tradition might be right: there might be some who are . . . created to be destroyed? Was that what St Paul said? And how many times had he already seen respected scholars translate and interpret quite differently the writings of that complex man?

“Well, I haven’t read that many scholars, or even pop-authors, about St Paul and his writings, but I’ve read some and I think I now know how to find both the highly honored mainstream thinkers and also interesting outlier thinkers.”

In despair, he asked, “What do I know to justify even my thoughts that I don’t know enough to . . . know. Or at least, to know with certainty?”

“But, who can know with certainty?”

“What can we know with certainty?”

“When can we know with certainty?”

“How can we know with certainty?”

“If all this is uncertain, can I be sure I am?”

At this point, Johnny more greatly lost track of who was saying what inside of him and he no longer knew whose turn it was to respond. He grew quiet and recalled growing up in a morally conservative Congregationalist church, of the gentle American variety of moral conservatism. The teachers and some of the pastors at that congregation had treated the *Bible* as a source of short and somber statements for worship services and of stories suitable for children—whitewash was applied liberally and clarification was often brutal to the senses of a story-teller—as that story-teller remembered those long-ago days in Fellowship Hall at the Union Church of Christ. On the whole, it was a gathering of Christians who seemed a little embarrassed by a lot of the superstitious and primitive stuff in the Bible. Genesis was a dangerous minefield. Revelation was best kept in the closet. The Gospels

were best read with a smile and fuzzy memories of that stuff you learned in English class about allegories and symbols. In fact, Johnny found it hard to bring up any memories of his formal education which were not fuzzy.

Then again, they weren't philosophers nor were they theologians nor even particularly energetic sorts of everyday skeptics.

"Who are 'they'? The teachers at Sunday School? The teachers at my elementary school and high school? The adults around me in general?"

"If you, or I, can't identify 'them', how can you prophesy? How can you see the greater, more global crimes and sins and mistaken ways of acting and thinking? How can you give the world the vague hints of a prophet if you don't even know who it is that has to change his ways, who it is that is mistaken and who it is that is consciously criminal?"

And he found his own prophetic efforts to be oddly incomplete, inconclusive... It just wasn't enough. And Johnny wasn't sure he was even headed in the right direction.

27 Re-remembering That Last Chance at a Respectable Job

The dreamer remembered and re-remembered, not sure if his present self was re-stating past events to construct a narrative more coherent and more comfortable than the truth would be.

“What is truth?”

“Is it a crystal of sorts or a living narrative which rewrites the past?”

That seemed not right, seemed at least to not be inclusive of all possibilities.

“Maybe we learn the truth by way of developing abstractions which allow us to successfully navigate life in this messy world?”

So it was that Johnny had found himself back in the last months of his time in Stamford, Rockshire only a place with a monastery he liked to visit once a month or so. He was out of a job, having messed up badly by going on auto-pilot in a competitive field. He was still being paid, two months to go, when he applied for a job near Boston through a placement firm. A few days later, he agreed with the agent of his placement firm on a day (5 hours or more) which he would spend being interviewed and tested by a psychologist—PhD no less—at a specialized placement and consulting firm just east of Worcester.

The day came.

He set out.

He arrived and sat in a comfie waiting room for only two minutes before a pleasant and well-dressed man came in from an inner door and smiled before sticking out his hand in a friendly way and saying, “Hi, I’m Dr Philbrick. You’re John Waters?”

“Yes. Mostly, I go by Johnny.”

“OK. ‘Johnny’ it is. And you can call me ‘Rick’.”

Rick turned to open the door he'd come through and then waved Johnny through before saying, "Go to the third door on the right and just go in while I grab my pad and pen from the testing room."

As Johnny was walking into Rick's office, he could see the psychologist stepping into the prior door. While still looking around at the casual arrangement of table desk and four upholstered chairs, a door behind the desk opened and Rick walked in, leather portfolio and pen in hand.

Rick sat in one of the upholstered chairs and motioned to Johnny to sit in a facing chair. After a few minutes of general talk about IQ tests and personality tests, Rick rose and said, "If you've been tested by your cousin when you were young, the routine will be pretty familiar to you. Not that it matters. We're trained to present the test in a way that helps the person to feel comfortable enough to perform in a natural way. It's much more effective, and much more expensive to be sure, than the multiple-choice tests that hundreds of us at a time took in school."

Five minutes later or so, Johnny had answered a number of questions when Rick pulled back the cards and piling them up neatly. "We can stop now. I'm not being paid to provide an accurate measurement of your IQ and I can already testify that you are smart enough for any job I know of in the American economy."

A new set of cards came out and, card by card, Johnny answered a number of questions about his preferences for work activities, for a variety of social activities, for entertainment, and so forth. Rick smiled slightly as he collected the last card and began to pile them up neatly. "Without further analysis, I can tell you are—by far—the most people-oriented high-IQ person I've ever tested."

They returned to Rick's office where Johnny accepted the offer of a coffee. Rick told the receptionist he wished some "tea with a single packet of sugar and a small dash of milk." The two men sat while Rick guided Johnny through a summarized biography. After 15 minutes or so, Rick rose and said, "This is fascinating for reasons I hope to discuss with you or at least hope to let you see in my analysis." After a few seconds of hesitation, Rick added, "There are changes going on in this country I can't talk about right now. And I won't be able to talk about it with you, ever, without the permission of the client."

A few days later, Johnny got two envelopes in the mail. One was a short letter from *Boston Fire & Casualty* telling him they weren't offering him a job. The second was a notice of a fine for speeding on Route 84.

A Connecticut state trooper plane had measured his speed at 70 in a 55 mph zone. He knew it was likely true and he had no grounds for contesting it. "No contest," he'd admitted to himself as he sent off the check drawing upon the funds he'd need for surviving.

28 What Means Some of It?

The dreamer woke, sitting in his recliner, to find his head leaning painfully on his left shoulder. After a minute of stretching and massaging his sore muscles, Johnny rose and went to fetch a glass of water. After drinking a good half of the 16-ounce glass of water, he went to lie down upon his bed and returned to his line of thought, trying to stay awake though wishing to fall into that strange sort of meditative state which allowed his mind to relax enough for a more narrative flow of thought.

And he began to re-member...

29 The Aftermath of a Last-ditch Attempt to Rescue a Terribly Wrong Career

A couple of days later, Johnny had decided to take the entire mess as a sign he should just take the risk of writing full-time.

Yet...

He retrieved Rick's card from the desk in his den, *Richard L. Philbrick, Ph.D., Consulting Psychologist, Specializing in Testing of Mental Abilities and Personalities Traits.* After dialing the number on the card, he waited only a few seconds before hearing a pleasant voice announce, "*Quiqley, Dulles, & Delano*, management consulting and executive placement services. How can I help you?"

Rick came on only a minute later and apologized for that delay, "I was on the phone on some personal business, confirming reservations for a cruise I'm giving my wife as a birthday present." He then hemmed and hawed for just a moment before going on to say, "I'm sorry about your disappointing news but it might well be for the best. In all honesty, I had to tell them you would be a big risk for them, with a high probability it wouldn't work and a small probability of very good things happening. But I'm not sure a regional insurance company would be the right place for someone like you, with your very high intelligence and your... potential. You admitted to me you'd been an underachiever and a highly successful executive you admired had told you that."

"Yeah. I know all of that and I want to write full-time but that's awfully risky and..."

"I'll warn you, Johnny. It's not just that you are extremely intelligent, though that frightens a lot of potential employers in the modern United

States. But not all. Your problem and maybe the reason for you being such an underachiever—you really should have pursued a career in the sciences or engineering. . . You're almost unemployable because you have a very strong and probably creative mind along with a disinclination to follow rules. That makes for a good thinker and we need them in this country but our companies and government agencies and even many of our academic institutions are run by bureaucrats whose intelligence is less than their achievements and maybe less than their measured IQs."

"Good students rather than good thinkers."

"Something like that, but—as you told me yourself, you walked away from a chance to enter research levels of science or mathematics or engineering." There was silence for a few seconds and then a barely audible sigh. "To a large extent, you're unemployable in this world of ours. Most employers would detect your active mind and figure you'd be jumping to a new opportunity before long—as you've done so far in your career, probably hoping that the next job would be one suitable for someone like you. Some employers figure that someone with an active mind is dangerous unless restrained by family responsibilities." There was another short period of silence before Rick added, "If you were to stay in the corporate world, you'd be best in some sort of blue-sky thinking group, an internal or external consulting operation which is in the business of producing truly new ideas and not just ways of implementing the control-freak teachings of Harvard Business School."

"I worked at a big company that had that sort of a group but they were operations research guys, probably doing efficiency analyses assuming that the insurance industry was already running itself right in general terms."

"I wrote up an analysis of my interviews with you and of the tests I gave you. Against my usual policies, I asked my client if they were willing to let me send you a copy. They said, 'No.'"

"So, do you have any advice for me?"

"You're basically unemployable in the US mainstream economy right now. I'd advise you to seek out some creative alternative. Try writing. Maybe make an entrepreneurial effort. We're seeing both hardware and software growth indications, possibly tremendous growth."

And, so did the call end. Johnny had a richer understanding of his situation but no way he could see to get out of his mess.

"Without turning away from God?"

That seemed altogether too extreme, even pretentious.

“But that could be said in nearly all cases in which a mortal man hears a call—few of which are as clear and brutal as was that of St Paul on the road to Damascus.”

If God were truly calling?

“I have no good option but to go with my thoughts and follow that calling, knowing I’m not likely to live well by our current material standards.”

Johnny’s mind was working fast and suggested, “I should shape those thoughts as my mind works with my heart. I should nurture my longing to be in union with God in all that I think and feel and do.”

It was then that Johnny consciously remembered the trio of mind-heart-hands discussed in a book by a Rabbi and scholar.

“Sages of blessed memory? Was that the phrase used by Jacob Neusner to denote those who had written coherently of both Jewish tradition and human nature—even as they updated much to reflect the new knowledge of 100AD or so?”

And Johnny was thrown a bit aback at the realization that his years of hard and sometimes painful efforts to strengthen and fill his mind had led to interior thought which seemed to correspond more to those of serious historians and theologians and philosophers more than those of the child-like people some of his Christian friends aimed to be.

“And, yet, I know so little and have developed so few skills in mathematics and science.”

A voice asked him, “Why do you want such skills if you are primarily seeking to be in union with God?”

30 A Theory of How Johnny Became an Exotic Creature

A spirit came upon Johnny but didn't even say, "Hello," before stepping back to listen as a lesser entity lectured dryly, "The implicit purpose of the American educational system is to teach students that learning isn't worthwhile. To read serious literature, you have to struggle for a while, just as you have to struggle to acquire skills in tennis or baseball or playing the guitar or making furniture. The cast of characters in *War and Peace* blows a poorly-formed mind out of the water. Before you can actually read that complex novel as such rather than one soon-to-vanish page after another, before you can understand it as a whole, before reading any difficult book can be an enjoyable experience, you must have spent some time practicing on simpler books and then perhaps making multiple tries to read a complex novel—*War and Peace* or *Moby Dick* or *Middlemarch*. Worthwhile books of history are no different and books of mathematics or real science are different only in being still more alien to the young or inexperienced mind and, thus, far more difficult. Americans prefer to just form opinions about history or the climate or the meaning of life without the bother of learning anything."

Johnny wasn't sure that the argument was coherent, though it was true that many avoided any activity which required learning and practice and intense concentration: tennis or reading serious literature or making a good-quality rocking-chair. Watching television and strolling through the shopping-malls were much to be preferred.

In a voice like unto that of a TV wise-guy from Mapleton, the first spirit stepped forward to say, "Why not just stay home and watch TeeVee or go out and play golf like my Dad as soon as he can get out of work? Why should teachers or students be doin' stuff they don't like and won't do

when they leave the school building at the end of the school-day or leave it forever. But yuh gotta admit that school could be fun if we could just have recess and dances and football games every day and skip all that stuff about algebra and American history.”

The gentle voice of one of Johnny’s neighbors said in measured tones, “Once everyone was in school, the system moved naturally towards socializing and sports and dumbed-down textbooks and lectures. It was a bad idea to have one uniform school system as if future physicists and theologians could be educated in the same way as future civil engineers and in the same way as future machinists and in the same was as future homemakers and in the same was as future retail clerks and. . .”

Johnny remembered some intelligent conversations with that neighbor, a man fully aware of the decay of American culture and education, fully aware from his position as an elementary school teacher.

After a moment of pleasant memories of walking and talking with Mr Baxter, Johnny decided to end the conversation by saying, “We. . . I mean: I don’t know enough to really understand this stuff in a reliable way. Not from any angle but my own. I went to a school that didn’t meet my needs. The head of the mathematics department, Mr Kolmogorov, told me as I was about to graduate that I should have gone directly from eighth grade to college.”

Johnny sat and thought for a few minutes and then noticed that Rebel was watching him intently—but with an air of curiosity and not wariness. For another few minutes, Johnny sat quietly, noticing he felt as calm inside as he did during those rare times of prayer when he seemed to be in synch with God.

“Rare, too rare. But the point is that my enthusiasm was killed during my years of high school and I lost my natural work habits, becoming lazy as I sat, lost in daydreams, through nearly all class sessions—for four years. I got a score of 91 out of 100 on the final for the advanced biology course before taking the course and a 96 after taking the course. Why was I left in that classroom? To make sure I learned to hate school—a hatred I never got over and which kept me from recovering my enthusiasm in college even as I started getting pretty good grades?”

31 The Girl Who Never Lived Next Door

Johnny's walks were increasingly frequent though topping off at about 30 minutes; they were sometimes only 15 or 20 minutes even when his schedule was open and flexible.

Johnny's walks were increasingly through regions dreamlike though paved with concrete and asphalt, filled with grass and dandelions and maples and oaks, punctuated by houses and early 20th century commercial buildings made of bricks and plates of glass—though only on the ground floor; the upper floors contained apartments or perhaps old-fashioned offices for old-fashioned dentists.

"Dreamlike this walk be," spoke softly a questing author one day as he walked down East St, the main business corridor of Jenkesville. More than that: "Dreamlike this walk might be," he clarified and extrapolated, "but it be through a region so concrete, so particular, as to entrap me into responses too tightly constrained for modern men."

Was the world what it was and was a modestly pretty brunette what she was and not what an author would have her be?

Foot moved forward and then the other foot before the first foot reached ahead upon a sidewalk not on the main corridor—which was oddly enough not named "Main St" but rather "East St" perhaps because it headed east. Or west, to one turned the other way. And vague the memories of a young man's failures in dealing with the first level of sophisticated mathematical thought—abstract algebra with all its symmetries including those which turned a westerly street into an easterly street and then back into what it first was.

Mary came back to him, though she came in a way that indicated greater richness and greater depths.

Johnny could imagine such a woman living in the quiet neighborhood through which he was passing on his way towards the park where he'd spent so much time as a boy, playing on swings when very young and then on basketball or tennis courts when he was a teenager. In between young boyhood and early manhood? He couldn't remember and couldn't even remember having a sense of the onset of manhood.

"Did the suppression of my talents and my consequent entry into a coma-like state prevent me from passing through the normal rites of maturing? Was that a still greater personal disaster than the non-development of my intellectual talents?"

Mary came back to him, with her lovely though not spectacular brown hair.

"Auburn tints when she made the mistake of getting too much of the summer sun?"

Johnny smiled at the two summers when he'd made that mistake. So far as he knew, his skin had not been damaged as his Uncle Jack's had from his summers at the orchard and asparagus farm run by Johnny's great-grandparents. Poor Uncle Jack had suffered a multitude of the lesser sort of skin cancer spots which had to be removed in office visits to a skin surgeon. . . Then the bad kind which had eaten into the flesh of his shoulder and then lymphoma and then the grave.

A smile returned as he thought about Mary. Smart but not brilliant as some women had been that he met in the corporate world. He'd known many such women and some had even been interested in him and he in them, but something had always held him back. He'd rationalized his passiveness. . .

No, he was often active in expressing or returning interest but he would feel himself grow cold as he. . .

His rationalization: he'd felt out of place as a youngster in a town where he knew of no one, adult or child, who shared his interests in physics and mathematics and the history of the American Revolution. And he had not yet developed the ability to form deeper friendships.

"Tom and Father Charlie?"

No answer came.

But. . . There was a lot more than that and he'd found out soon enough in college that he'd been fooled by the ease of getting by with mostly A's in a high school which was very weak for those who really wished to. . . For those who. . .

A black mood came upon Johnny as he remembered again he'd not been able to take advantage of that feeling of freedom when he'd escaped Jenkesville and gotten away to a good research university where he could have developed his mind. "If only I'd had enough moral character."

But the brunette?

She was slender, not much buxom at all but not flat-chested. Her cheekbones were prominent but not so much as some of the French-Canadian women of Jenkesville who looked to have had a bit of American Indian blood. Her eyes were dark, intelligent and not overly enticing. Her mouth was small, her lips more slender than those on a centerfold girl.

Had she been a tomboy? Not really, though she'd gone out to play wiffle ball with the boys and girls in the neighborhood. She'd played a little basketball with the boys though none of the other girls had dared. She'd been quite competent in team-sports in gym class and graceful enough in acrobatics. She did move like a tomboy rather than like a girlie-girl.

Mary.

Quietly and gently stubborn. A good student but not brilliant and not overly interested in matters of the intellect, but she did read good-quality novels, some poetry, an occasional history book. She shied away from violence and descriptions of violence and that placed much of history outside of her interest.

"Where'd she come from?" And Johnny found himself perceiving her as descended from families of northwestern Europe. France. England. Scotland. Ireland. Maybe some of the Nordic peoples of the British Isles.

She was close to her grandfather though not at all distant from her father. Her mother and grandmother?

"Be careful, boy. Author you might wish to be, but the land lying between mother and daughter can be an alien and dangerous region for the likes of you men."

What was to be done with this Mary? If she were real, Johnny would have married her. It wasn't that he'd brought some sort of idealized literary being to this woman. Quite the contrary. She was a good woman, one of those who tempted the description: "Too good to live with the rest of us," but that was a distortion of the being of such women.

"Human beings are odd creatures, coming from apes and moving towards God."

Johnny winced as he remembered the words of warning given by Augustine of Hippo more than 15 centuries ago: if it turns out that man arose

as a part of God's 'natural' Creation and was not a Special Creation, then Christian moral theology and the basic understanding of man—studied by anthropology philosophical or theological or scientific—would need to be revised.

“From the ground up.”

“And where are all the Christian thinkers who are doing this? It's been 150 years since Darwin gave us the news Augustine feared and shouldn't have feared.”

More quietly, Johnny thought about Stanley Jaki's claim that Augustine's choice of what Johnny thought to be a Neoplatonic understanding of the story of Adam and Eve—a special Creation of man in a state of grace followed by a fall—over the possibility that man was a transmutation of a lower species was the . . .

“Did he say: ‘most important and most damaging act of intellectual cowardice in history’?”

Johnny knew his mind was racing. . .

“There's too much to think. Too many errors or too much passivity in the face of discoveries that our world is different from what is assumed in the Christian theologies. The errors built into Christian mis-understandings of man and Creation drag into error even the greatest and most absolute truths. How much will have to change of our understanding of our Lord Jesus Christ once we admit He was born as a member of a species rising from ape towards God rather than a member of a species falling from a state of Special Creation, a state of grace. A descendant of the likes of Conan the Barbarian and not a of some incarnate angel.”

Johnny knew he had to make some quick notes, which he would probably put to the side and never again read. He had to get back to Mary. She was coming to life in his mind. Could a novel be far behind? A novel? Sounded a bit grandiose when all Johnny had yet imagined was a woman. Perhaps a very good woman. Only time would tell. In any case, she wasn't a woman aspiring to win a Nobel Prize or to climb Mt Everest. She was attractive for sure, but in the way of a mildly pretty, girl-next-door. Not Natalie Wood or Suzanne Pleshette or . . .

“Actually, there was something about Linda Ronstadt that really appealed to me. Even more than those others. Connie Francis as well. And Elinor Donahue and Shelley Fabares and all the other pretty brunettes that I saw on TV or on album covers.”

An author being formed tried to discipline his mind and heart to the task not yet ready for his typing hands. He told himself, “Mary Pride...”

And so it was that Johnny went to his writer’s desk which sat between his computer desk on the right and a stuffed bookcase on the left.

He edited his own thoughts: “author’s desk.”

Johnny turned on the radio and set the dial to an oldies station. Music from the 60s mostly but some from the 50s and even the 70s.

“Variety is the spice of an imaginative feast.”

And he laughed even as he pulled a spiral-bound notebook from a pile that he’d bought at a local drugstore having a sale for the upcoming school year.

The author pulled out a pen from a box of ten he’d bought at the same sale.

Johnny Waters opened the notepad.

And he started writing.

31.1 A Short Narrative Relating the Abominable Behavior of an Ape-Man in a Designer Suit

Sharp of features with his dark hair slicked back upon his head, Jake Preskile moved in a graceful, languid way, giving the lie to the theory that he always moved faster than his competitors, always reached the pay-off before anyone else knew where it was. Not that there was necessarily a contradiction between the easy-going appearance and the grasping behavior. Jake could move at you slowly, eyes that hypnotized as he advanced and tongue which seemed to flicker in the most unmammalian way. If it suited his purpose, he’d slither by, leaving you paralyzed as he reached the prize he had seen.

Some said he was cold-blooded. Others said he was a mammal, more vicious than a Golden Retriever perhaps, but that was not enough to label him a reptile. Yet, no one spoke, at least publicly, of having seen him lose control in a fit of passion, despite the high probability that his brain contained an amygdala.

In fact, he had seemed almost an attractive person in those nine or so months when he and his wife were waiting for the baby to be born. It is hard to imagine a slithering creature being attractive under any circumstances as

it is also hard to imagine such being happy when he has not yet swallowed all Creation into his infinitely expandable gut. Yet, what was true, most of all, was.

Then came the blessed day Jake had waited for. Having dropped his wife at the birthing center, having left a beeper number that he could be called over as soon as she started to give birth, he went to his office and set to work on the GenMal stock offering. His fortune would be made, and his child's future secured if he carried out his tasks with due diligence and got just a little bit lucky. More than that, being a business associate of the geneticists and biochemists at GenMal had given him strong reason to believe his child would be healthy and strong. There was, of course, no guarantee of talent of any sort, but as part of GenMal's tests of its new equipment, Jake and his wife had submitted to genetic testing and had been pronounced free of all human diseases for which there was an identifiable error in the genetic code and a verifiable test for finding that error. Not a trace of Huntington's Disease—they had well below the number of repeats in the key gene that would have led to even a small chance of the disease. No signs of that mutation which gave a small but substantial chance of developing Alzheimer's Disease at an early age. No genes correlated with schizophrenia or bipolar disease. Not a hint of genetically induced Lou Gehrig's Disease in either parent. Jake's wife did carry an autosomal recessive gene for cystic fibrosis, but he didn't so that the child would be only a carrier at worst, completely free if he inherited a clean set of genes from his mother. Jake was as genetically healthy as a mixed-breed dog or even a wild-type wolves and his wife nearly so. The child, if not necessarily perfect, was unlikely to be grossly defective.

The call came. The hour had arrived, and, soon enough, the minute itself. But it arrived not before Jake was at his wife's side, coaching her in breathing rhythms. The baby emerged after a mere hour and a half, not much prolonged suffering for the first-time mother and not much wasted time for the busy father.

A boy!

It was a boy – Jake, Jr.

The baby was cleaned, and, then, after the custom of certain lines of nurse-midwives, the woman licked the baby's forehead and looked up, her features set in a manner more somber than joyous. "The baby's skin is too salty."

Such sad words, indicating acts ignominious, even a sin of passion.

The nurse-midwife was innocent of purposefully bearing such sad news. How was she to know that the father's genes had been tested and found free of Cystic Fibrosis? True enough it was that the baby could have been the victim of a mutation, but any well-educated man or woman of the modern world knew it was far more likely that his father was other than Jake. Perhaps his mother other than Jake's wife? Jake had seen the baby emerge from his wife's birth canal, but maybe she had had another woman's fertilized egg implanted, in secret, at some illegal fertility clinic?

So unlikely was this possibility that Jake did not even dwell on it for more than a fraction of a second before he turned and, without a word, walked away.

Behind, he heard the nurse-midwife, still innocent of the mischief she had caused, call out, "But it's a treatable disease nowadays. The baby has a good chance of a long, healthy life."

Jake wondered why she was telling him this. It was information of interest, perhaps, to the baby's father, though he was likely the type to not take responsibility for his own actions. As he headed back to his office, the young and wealthy investment banker suppressed a feeling of disgust for such an irresponsible fellow. There was work to do on the GenMal project, and he had no energy to waste on useless emotions and he had to call his lawyer to begin the process of denying his paternity of his wife's child.

31.2 Jake and Mary

Did Mary work at the same place as Jake? Was she to be his next. . .

Whatever. . .

Did men like Jake really exist? Most of the fast-rising or already-risen men Johnny had known in his failed corporate life, some of those men divorced more than once—or twice or. . . Most such men hadn't been so reptilian as Jake. They'd been more in the way of obsessed men. Fanatics of a sort, though money wasn't always the dominant driver, it was an important driver. . .

"C'mon Johnny. Form a complete thought. Come to a point if not a conclusion."

"I can't. Human character can't be described by a conclusion. Mostly, though there are some men who are good in a simple way and some who are evil in a simple way."

“How can that be if we have free-will and can always turn on a dime? If free-will can be inhibited by habits or by genes or by feelings such as fear, it isn’t truly and absolutely free as simpleminded philosophers claim.”

“We live in specific contexts and we are particular creatures, each and every one of us.”

“So?”

Johnny thought that it might be easier to first write a narrative for a Jake, for most human beings?, and then to try to understand from. . .

“From what I’ve written? Sounds circular?”

More immediately. . .

Was “Jake” a proper name for a snake of a man, an opportunist, a man red of ambition and greed?

“Jake the Snake is too obvious. Maybe the entire story is too obvious, too. . . vulgar?”

32 Bumps on the Road into the Future

A trusted and literate friend had told Johnny he used too many commas and put too much into his writing, too many subordinate clauses in sentences and too many ideas in each book or story or essay. It seemed to Johnny that the density of ideas in his writings was exactly why he used, and needed so many commas. Which merely concentrated the issue into the one question: should he simplify his narratives and his essays?

“My works of fiction don’t seem to be at issue, so far as simple and superficial forms of complexity are concerned. I ran Flesch tests on a couple of novels back when I was living in Rockshire and those tests indicated 10th grade reading level. Perhaps 10th grade reading level as it was back in the 1950’s or early 1960’s before literacy took a nose-dive?”

Johnny felt his conscious mind go into a pause of sorts. He stood up and faced away from his computer, feeling a bit of pleasure in the calm, knowing it to be no more than a short pause before some thought began to take shape. . . He looked over at his bookcase to see an “instant classic” which had been published in 2000 and smiled sadly as he remembered going to the information desk at a nearby *Barnes & Noble*. “Has *From Dawn to Decadence* been published yet?” Responding to the young clerk’s look of confusion, he tried to help her: “The book by Jacques Barzun that’s been anticipated by people on the Internet and people writing for magazines.” Her deepening confusion led him to further explain: “It was supposed to be published right on New Year’s Day for the new millennium and it was delayed for some reason.” And on he went, trying to deal with her silence: “Barzun, the famous Columbia professor, the expert in literature and history and even a lay expert in science—or at least its role in human cultures.” She didn’t know what Johnny was talking about and he walked away and left the

store, checking on the Internet to discover that the book's publication had been delayed a few months because of Professor Barzun's unhappiness with some of the formatting of explanatory notes. The aspiring and frustrated author smiled at the thought that a distinguished thinker could exercise power over a publisher in a way beyond even the power of a best-selling hack.

"Barzun. Jacques Barzun. He said the literacy of the French peasants peaked around 1500..."

After a moment of contemplation in which silence reigned over mind as well as lips, Johnny looked at his attentive Golden Retriever and told him, "But Barzun also said there was a burst of creativity around 1900. Mostly in Europe but maybe in the United States as well. He said we're still living off the creative achievements of Einstein and Planck, Hilbert and Poincaré, Conrad and Tolstoy, Brahms and Dvorak, Stolypin and Bismarck..."

And he realized that Western man had learned nothing from either the mistakes or accomplishments of these men. Perhaps. Especially Tolstoy and Stolypin and Bismarck?

"How am I to change this? How can I waken the minds and souls of others in the West? My attempts at exploring philosophical and theological issues seem to only confuse people. They don't like my heavy use of commas and don't like my complex sentences and don't like my use of words, though I don't really much use big words. Occasionally, I might borrow a technical word from math or physics or biology."

Johnny went into a outwardly quiet state while his mind first considered the possibility that modern Westerners truly had become dumber than their ancestors. Was a revival of the West even possible?

He heard a voice ask, "Is it possible until something happens to kill off the dumber citizens in the West?"

The frightened author shook himself out of that contemplative state and rose to fetch his running clothes. A few minutes later, he was out on a quiet walk with poor Rebel of the arthritic hip joints. A half hour after that, he was running as fast a pace as he could, hoping to cleanse his mind of thoughts which wouldn't go away: Recalling a quote from Darwin that he'd seen on the Internet, he wondered if the Industrial Revolution had allowed too many to survive who...

"Who am I to judge who is fit to live and to continue the human race?"

And that was enough to break Johnny's pace and force him to walk for a few blocks.

33 Murdering Righteously, Philandering Without Sin

Johnny was beginning to fear his imagination was far too honest in perceiving and building upon reality? The symptoms were present in his life. He'd even endured brutal dreams, awake and asleep, that came after a short period of reading some thriller novels, mostly about espionage, and also some biographies and histories about the founders of the modern intelligence services in Great Britain and the United States.

His head was filled with silly stories of Johnny saving the United States, and a few beautiful women along the way, by killing the bad guys. Sometimes the bad guys included several regiments of troops of mostly blood-thirsty but surprisingly young men.

And then one day, he listened to a theme song from an old television series on the radio and laughed. Fifteen minutes later, he had come to terms with:

33.1 Secret Psycho Man

There's a man who's always in danger
As he travels the world to kill a stranger.
No matter where he goes another chance he'll take
That he might meet his well-earned fate.

Secret psycho man, secret psycho man,
They've given you lots of toys and taken away your moral character.

Beware of buxom babes that you might meet.
A generous pair might be padding and more in seat
And you'll not know to ask until the Bahamas,
"Where's the meat, you flat-chested Mama?"

Secret psycho man, secret psycho man,
They've given you lots of toys and taken away your moral character.

Oscar Othello Severn, known to many as O O Severn, wasn't quite sure if that had been his real name. He'd had a few that he could still remember. Ronald Dowel. John Fenning. Patrick McGowan. He couldn't remember any of the names of the babes, though he was pretty sure that one of them had been Sharon. Or Debbie. Or Natasha. Or something like that. He was pretty sure she was the one he'd met at breakfast in Cologne and they'd had a late supper in their suite in Tel Aviv. There had been a quick stop in Istanbul where he had to pick up a package for a friend in the XIA and, having noticed an international terrorist in the airport bar, O O Severn had interrupted the murderous scum as he did his filthy business in a stall in the men's room and had kicked him with the poisonous dagger in his left shoe. Actually, he'd forgotten which shoe and had to kick him twice, getting a bloodied nose from the violent piece of moral trash before delivering the kick that counted.

O O Severn looked over at the 20 year-old redhead lying alongside him, the expression of ecstasy remained in the upturn of her luscious lips, in the smile-crinkles around her closed eyes, and—most of all—in the way her hand yet stroked her own hair in her golden triangle. She touched not the flesh below, only caressing the tips of the hairs. The golden hairs around the entrance to the favorite paradise of O O Severn. And that triangle was golden, reddish gold. He lay back, satisfied that he could do so much good in the world. Taking out bad guys. Getting hold of plans for advanced weapons systems in the evil countries of the world. And pleasing so many women not much more than half his age. She could be his daughter but he was awfully glad she was another man's daughter. He served the cause of law and order, peace and goodness, and perversion wasn't his style.

This was the reason for the high opinions which prevailed among those few who knew about him and his good work over the years. One of his good friends, Ian Festus Dolté, had confessed to bending the rules a little. He'd

told his young brother, Alain, about O O Severn and that young fellow, still in law school, had decided that he was going into intelligence work and he'd train all the American agents to be just like that "groovy British guy."

Nothing evil for O O Severn. He had to keep himself pure for the sake of his admirers and for the sake of his most difficult mission yet. He was going into Iran to kill a lot of bearded physicists and engineers who were trying to build an atomic bomb so they could destroy some place as part of their plot to crush the United States and Israel.

34 A Call to a Vocation?

“Groovy?”

With such an act of self-criticism did Johnny stir himself from his comfortable blue recliner. A migration began, Johnny and all those coming to life in his head and heart. Time it was for hand to pick up pen, or perhaps old faithful Number 2.

It seemed to Johnny that the only way to get these creatures out of his head was to put them on paper.

“Paper?”

Johnny looked at the screen of his computer. A screensaver was running, showing dancing penguins with a token little demon, fork and all, moving about between them. He hit the return key, bringing up his Debian Gnu-Linux system to get some work done. He looked at the Emacs on *Window 1* which he used for administrative work. The Emacs...

“Old-fashioned software for literate programmers...”

Johnny couldn't remember the name of the original software, but he remembered James Gosling had written an early version before he'd gone off to become a big-shot at Sun Microsystems.

“He also was the lead guy on the team which invented Java... A language, complete with all sorts of development stuff, that was supposed to be part of the foundation of the Internet, the Web, the whatever.” Johnny laughed as he remembered that someone had described Java as a language written by Lisp-programmers for use by people not smart enough to program in Lisp.

“And that is weird, says I. Why would you want to dumb down technology for the use of people not smart enough to truly understand it? Why not simply make a better effort to educate those who are smart enough to use advanced technology and innovate so that it becomes more advanced?”

And Johnny returned his attention to the computer screen just after

his fingers had moved focus to *Window 2* which had an Emacs displaying his draft of the novel about Parnell and his wife Marie and the ephemeral character which was a two-pound small-mouth bass.

Johnny froze as he remembered a major change he'd made. That supporting character was no longer a small-mouth bass. He had become a bullhead or maybe a she-bullhead which are easier to catch during nesting season.

"In any case, computers allow me to make changes so much easier than with pen and paper. With a good system, like Debian Gnu-Linux, I have all sorts of tools for easy search and replace and other tasks. A powerful language allows very complex changes to be done easily. And... LaTeX. A real typesetting system. Not a word-processor. A real typesetting system."

What meant that? Was it important to an author? Certainly most writers and probably even most authors use word-processing software, like Microsoft Word, in preference to typesetting systems.

"Actually, most probably don't know what a 'true typesetting system' is. For one thing, it keeps content separate from the explicit definition of formatting commands by using commands defined outside of, say, the chapters and introductory stuff and backmatter of a book."

Johnny sat back, thinking of his desire to have some control over his life—if only that minimum control possible when using a computer system which was configurable and subject to modification by some programming. Lightweight to be sure...

For some reason, Johnny remembered at this time that some Jesuit educator from, maybe, a couple of centuries ago had said, "Give me a child until the age of seven and you can have him after that. I will have shaped his basic character to what it will be for the rest of his life."

"Am I condemned to always have a weak character, one shaped by a culture convinced that all human children are essentially the same. Thus it is that Jewish cultures will nurture their children's intellects and their musical talents while so many non-Jewish Americans turn their children into passive viewers of the entertainment products of profiteers who wish to capture the time and attention of those children to sell them products."

A few seconds of thought were all that were necessary for Johnny to add, "And to push dangerous and despicable ideas into their heads."

Once again, a would-be author worried that he'd been too weak, too complacent and compliant, to stick up for himself.

“When I was but seven and learning to adjust to a strange world where I had to spend hours each day pretending to learn things I’d already learned from reading library books and my father’s history books and a set of somewhat oldish encyclopedias and some books we inherited at our house from various places. . .”

“A collection of some of the books of Aristotle?”

Johnny could only answer, “Yes,” to such a question. But, being an author, he found something to add: “It came from a box of unsold stuff at an estate sale one of my great-aunts had run.”

And he heard a deep sigh, as did Rebel—from the way the Golden’s ears perked up. Johnny hadn’t understood much, though he was convinced that a smart young lad could benefit from an occasional day of reading material beyond his capability at that time—but within the range of his potential. He could benefit from a wise and competent teacher guiding him in attempts to do thinking beyond his immediate capabilities, solving math or physics problems or exploring historical and political issues of a serious and deeper type.

“We know that an athlete develops to his fullest potential only if he’s aiming high. That means all young athletes should be aiming to perform better than they currently can.

“We don’t seem to know the same is true also of potential scientists and engineers and novelists and. . . And experts in Russia and China.”

“Commas, commas, commas. And a few multiple exclamation points followed by lots of ellipses and hash marks and a few odd swear-words from comic strips back in a more decent world.”

And he remembered his old friend Yuri giving honest critiques of Johnny’s writing attempts. Johnny had a feeling, perhaps justified, that his early writings had been pretty good for narratives and not so good for nonfiction writings in philosophy and theology and general criticism. Mostly talking about nonfiction writings—so far as Johnny could remember, Yuri had complained about Johnny’s complex sentences and commas. . . and then he had borrowed Johnny’s copies of two of Adam Smith’s works: *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*. He’d looked a little sheepish when he returned the first of those books and admitted, “Adam Smith wrote in complex sentences and used a lot of commas and other punctuation.”

Johnny didn’t know where Yuri even was. He didn’t know if he’d changed his reading plans after finishing those two books by Adam Smith

and some history books he'd borrowed. The books had been returned; it was Yuri who then went missing. Or Johnny went missing.

"I know I'm not good at keeping in touch with friends I don't see regularly. I guess others are also."

Johnny rose and went to look at a stack of boxes containing books he had no room for on his limited shelving. In those boxes were two books which it would have been nice to pick his way through in order to focus his current thoughts. He went back to his computer and called up his catalog of books. A moment later, he was at the bottom of the outline: *Box 23* *Box 25*. And he expanded the outline...

"Ah, this is a pretty good piece of software Org-mode inside of Emacs. It gives good power, visual at that, to set up a catalog of books with the top-level of the outline being location and the book record containing all other relevant information. All of it being ordinary text. The same power for to-do lists and for collections of short writings..."

Johnny was reluctant to switch over his book-length works, preferring each book to be in its own directory of LaTeX files and any other supplemental files needed, such as notes on stuff which might or might not go into the books.

"I wish I'd made the decision to go on in math and physics. I might have done some good work in my own fields and then contributed in some way as did the mathematician and computer scientist Donald Knuth who wrote the basic TeX system and also the computer scientist Leslie Lamport who put together a language of macro-commands on top of Knuth's TeX, making it easier for reasonably technical people, or highly technical people, to typeset articles and books and recipes without having to do a lot of programming in a strange looking language.

"As all computer languages are? At least the good ones which can do much more than move a robotic turtle around."

Johnny fidgeted as he realized he was making a general judgment when he knew so little about computer languages.

"Well, I grew up in an environment where people were overwhelmed by all the knowledge of the strange rituals of tribesmen in Africa as well as by the knowledge of scientific oddities and technological wonders. Not knowing how to find good information and how to make sense of it if it fell into their laps, they just came to conclusions, strongly held conclusions, about empirical facts as well as higher-level understandings."

A would-be author moaned, "And I'm one of them."

Rebel looked to see what was up as Johnny added, “I’m a coward, a weakling, and closed-minded as well.”

Having explained his sad state in life, Johnny returned to the specific task at hand. Opening a box of books, he took some out and put them on the floor, having examined and rejected the titles—however interesting had been Washington’s life and the thoughts of the Anti-Federalists and the ancient Mediterranean and the life of Genghis Khan and. . .

He held in hand the first of two books he was looking for: *Lincoln: Speeches, Miscellaneous Writings: The Lincoln-Douglas Debates* [1]. After a few minutes browsing and reading but small parts of several paragraphs, Johnny had surprised himself with a loud ejaculation, “Wow.” He closed the book and set it on top of the pile of books on the floor before adding to only his own edification, “People complain about my complex sentences and my heavy use of commas and semicolons, but Lincoln and Douglas talked in far more complex sentences and the written version of their speeches have far more punctuation than my writings.”

A moment later, he held in hand *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* [9] by Garry Wills, an author he often disagreed with but also an author of intelligence and insight at times. In this case, he found the analysis to be potentially insightful and the conclusion to be reprehensible. Wills had presented seemingly solid evidence that Lincoln, so complex and probing in his earlier writings and speeches, had deliberately dumbed-down his language in the *Gettysburg Address*. In the interests of propagandizing a “founded on propositions” view of the United States and its *Constitution*, Lincoln had turned his prior efforts to find truth and perhaps forge agreement into propaganda for the “City on the Hill.” If the United States had not been a missionary country before Lincoln, it certainly was after his time in power. If the United States had elements of sanctimony in its self-view before, that sanctimony was presented in a hard, almost blinding, light in that speech.

“Even for those of us who see the great damage it has done to a country once striving to be moral. . .”

“Try this, Author: the American people turned from a sinful people trying to realize a true Christian order in their personal and communal lives into a self-righteous people convinced they had to but enforce upon the world the goodness already embodied in us and our ways of doing things.”

35 Returning to Old Haunts

Mass had ended, the Novus Ordo in English, the New Mass in English; the Benedictine monks of St Mary's and their Benedictine sisters from St Scholastica celebrated and assisted and attended the authoritative Latin version on Tuesday and the English translation on the other days.

Mass had ended and there was some straightening up and the celebrating fathers, along with Brother Jacob who had served at the altar, had recessed into the sacristy to quickly return with their black habits exposed for all the world to see.

Once all were settled in their choir stalls, nuns to the left when facing the altar and monks to the right, they began to chant Terce, the third hour of the liturgy of the hours, offered to God at about 10:00AM, directly after Mass which was a little later on Sundays. Some very traditionalist monasteries, maybe most Trappist monasteries, offered up prayers close to every three hours around the clock with Matins offered at Midnight, Lauds or Dawn Prayer offered at 3:00AM, Prime or Early Morning Prayer at 6:00AM. . . Johnny's eyes caught the parenthetical comment in the guide to the Rule of St Benedict; Prime was the first hour. . . So, yes, Terce was the Third Hour and that implied 9:00AM. There was some flexibility. The monks and nuns at St Mary's and St Scholastica's actually prayed Terce at perhaps 10:15AM on weekdays, after 9:30 Mass had finished.

And then he saw he was in a section of the book which described the "previous structure." He put that book down and picked up the special book of *The Liturgy of the Hours* printed by these two communities for their own use. They still prayed the Office of Hours in Latin, but for Compline celebrated in English in the evening before quiet time and sleep—8:00PM and then some community members would soon be asleep. Their traditional books of these prayers had passed beyond repair even by the most patient of monks or the most careful of nuns. And Latin Psalters were probably hard

to come by, or expensive enough to justify self-publication, especially since these monks and nuns prayed the Hours as recommended by St Benedict himself in his Rule—the Psalms were to all be prayed in one week rather than the four weeks of active orders and the parish priests. And most of the texts might well have been questionable by the standards of these care-taking monks and nuns.

The first psalm had been recited while Johnny had been lost in his thoughts and the monks and nuns were standing to chant the *Gloria* and to repeat the antiphon for that first psalm before moving on to the antiphon for the second psalm. . .

During his years in Rockshire, Johnny had attended the monastic celebrations of prayer on a regular basis; the Latin words had become somewhat familiar.

No longer! That knowledge had been too shallow, too fresh, and not yet properly reinforced when he'd left Rockshire.

He could no longer wrap his tongue around the many-syllabled words in the book he held; it was not quite alien to him but was quite unfamiliar, just as strange as Scots English now was. He'd never spoken that dialect of English (language on its own?) but had understood it in his youth; he'd heard it so often when Granny and her fellow-immigrants from Scotland were together. For a short while, when he lived in Rockshire, the chanting in Latin had gained a familiarity of sound and he had started to understand many words. Had he started to pick up some of the structure of the language? Was he learning the grammar if not quite at a conscious level? Probably—to some extent. But that was now all gone.

And then. . .

A trembling passed through his lower arms, elbow to hands, and then returned all the way to his shoulders. A slight tingling feeling remained after the last shudder had passed. And Johnny thought, "How annoying this can be. And I can't even figure out if this has to do with the damaged tendons in my arms or to some sort of. . ."

"Nah," though said quietly caused a few heads to turn. And Johnny noticed that the monastic superior's head had also turned. Father Augustine. When Johnny had lived in Rockshire, that quiet and small man had first arrived and, when Johnny moved back to Jenkesville, was yet a monk in formation and not yet even studying for the priesthood.

Father Augustine had clearly found his path through this mortal realm, this realm of tears. And Johnny looked again and all the monks and nuns

had left, though a couple of nuns had returned and started to straighten up. One looked over at Johnny and smiled. He recognized her as one of the sweet-souled women who had stayed through the turmoil when more than half of a formerly large community had left, some to other convents and some had left religious life—including one claustral oblate he'd been close to. . .

“Sister Agnes. . .”

She didn't notice or pretended not to notice the questioning in his voice and he knew he'd remembered her name right. At the last second. Better than he usually did.

The 30-inch high wooden fence which separated the congregants from the altar area stood between Johnny and Sister Agnes. But they were close and she reached over to give him a hug. It was only a fraction of a second before he reciprocated. They hugged for but a second before she stood back and looked him over, “You look good, Johnny. Has life been treating you well.”

“Not really, but I can't complain. I'm physically comfortable and I'm often happy. In a way.”

“Things haven't worked out well for your writing or for. . .”

Johnny suspected she knew that he would have preferred to have gotten married rather than be alone, but she may or may not have known it would have had to have been a woman who could have understood his way of life as an author on the margins of what used to be Western Civilization. When confused, he'd not quite digested all the signals but he'd been told later that Sister Clare who left before Solemn Vows had wondered why he'd not pursued a relationship with her. And she'd married a man with a more conventional life; had Johnny been told they'd had four children though starting relatively late in life—she in her late 20s and he in his late 30s.

Johnny realized his thoughts had flown by and there had been no awkward break in the conversation. He took her hand in a friendly way and told her, “No. . . Well, actually the writing went well. It's the selling which didn't work out. I feel I am doing what God wants me to do but. . .”

“But,” with a twinkle her eye, “Others aren't doing their parts?”

He felt his face flush but he didn't really retreat. “I'm called to study and think and write, novels as well as. . . Well, my skills for writing nonfiction are in development.”

Sister Agnes smiled. “Welcome back. I hope you'll be visiting us more often. After all, this was once a second home for you and we were all

brothers and sisters to you.” Her smile softened with a little sadness before she added, “Though the two founding monks have died and half our sisters have left. But, that is the way in this vale of tears.” Her smile brightened up again and she told him, “I’ve got to go help set up for the later prayers and for tomorrow’s Mass.”

36 A Spiritual Self-Evaluation

Johnny walked into his small apartment at his sister's house and set his canvas luggage bag down. Four days up at the monastery and he was glad to be . . .

No. He had been happy to be there but not deeply. He hadn't really been unhappy to leave St Mary's. He wasn't really happy to be back here in . . .

"As much of a home as I've had since I was too young to be so terribly bored and frustrated in school, heading towards failure of a strangely gentle sort."

Little had been accomplished but to show Johnny how he seemed to have regressed so much. He was determined to return to the regular practice of his Catholic faith but . . .

"How can I be happy? How could I even be happy in Heaven if I'm so unhappy with my life. . . No, I'm unhappy with myself."

Someone was knocking on the door on the far side of the kitchen, the entrance from the main part of his sister's house. He walked over, calling out, "Come on in," as he walked. But the door didn't open, as he had anticipated—they were excessively respectful of his privacy.

"Alice, you can come in if I . . ." He felt uncomfortable saying, "give you permission," in his sister's house. ". . . if I give you the OK."

She smiled and walked in as he stood to the side. She was followed by Jack and their middle child, Emma Jean, 12 years old.

Johnny could feel some lessening of tightness in his stomach, though he hadn't realized he was beginning to feel so much stress as soon as he'd returned to to Jenkesville. Were the effects of a 4-day retreat so shallow as to be shed so rapidly?

"Mind if I make some coffee, Johnny? Or do you want to come downstairs? I'll make some coffee or tea and we can sit in the living-room." She

smiled and shook her head to the side as if telling a blonde-joke. “You’ve managed to make a small home for yourself up here but you don’t have much comfortable seating capacity.”

Emma Jean piped in enthusiastically, “I want to hear about Brother Andrew and Sister Mary Thomas and Mother Mary John.”

There were seated in the living-room, Jack and Johnny drinking coffee and Alice sipping on tea with honey and Emma Jean sipping a hot chocolate with whipped cream on top, before Johnny told Emma Jean the bad news: “Brother Andrew left the monastery and Sister Mary Thomas left the priory. And Mother Mary John died a few months ago. I knew about Brother Andrew and Sister Mary Thomas a while ago but only found out about Mother Mary John this past weekend. It’s been a while since I’ve been in contact with the monks and the nuns.”

“But Kirsten said Sister Mary Thomas was so nice. And Brother Andrew was so much fun. Especially when he took her swimming with the dogs.”

As he remembered fondly the weekends that Kirsten, Emma Jean’s older sister, had spent in Rockshire with him and his landlords, Johnny felt bad in informing her, “The dogs are gone as well.”

“What?”

“Big Ruben bred a lot of puppies with hip dysplasia and the customers weren’t happy. And then Brother Andrew left and the other monks didn’t really want to run a breeding kennel. Out of all that, they decided to close up the kennels.”

“Where’d all the dogs go? Molly and Muffin and Gidget? I was really wanting to meet all those nice dogs. Kirsten told me all about them. And I’ve heard Brother Andrew was so much fun. And Kirsten liked picking vegetables with Sister Mary Thomas up in the garden.”

As if on cue, Rebel came into the room along with Misfit, Emma Jean’s one year-old mixed retriever, part Golden Retriever and part Yellow Labrador Retriever. Rebel moved right in front of the teenaged girl and sat quietly, waiting for her to start socializing. Misfit jumped up beside her on the couch, leading Jack to sternly call out, “Get down from there.” The young retriever jumped down and tried to push the older and much bigger Rebel out of the spot in front of the young lady.

“Was Rebel’s father as big as Kirsten says?”

“He was the size of a Newfoundlander, which is bigger than a big retriever is supposed to be but a bit smaller than a St Bernard.” When Emma Jean looked unconvinced about something, he added, “I browsed through a book

about mixed-breed dogs once. With his very reddish hair, Big Red was probably a mix of Golden and St Bernard. Brother Andrew had papers claiming Big Red was pure Golden but I don't think he was. So Rebel probably is a mutt as well." Hearing his name, the dog moved over and sat in front of Johnny waiting for attention, which he got in the form of the rubbing around his shoulders he so enjoyed.

37 Returning to the Faith He'd Sworn to Always and Forever Practice

Johnny found himself choosing running and walking paths that brought him past the three Catholic churches in town, though it turned out that there were actually four. A small church near the Portuguese church turned out to be Ukrainian Catholic and not Ukrainian Orthodox as he had thought since he was young—not that he'd thought too much about any of the churches in town.

“Well, maybe my own church. But... Nine years. Nine damned years, and ‘damned’ might be the right term for me. Nine years since I’ve practiced the faith I swore to practice from here to eternity. So to speak. I’ve only been to a Catholic Mass for a funeral of a neighbor we were close to when I was growing up. And to the funeral of a brother-in-law of a close friend who grew up in the same neighborhood as me and Father LaFontaine and Tom.”

It was time. . .

The next day, Johnny was registering for parish membership at St John Vianney, the shorter name though the official, “French”, name was St Jean-Baptiste-Marie Vianney. He was chatting with the secretary, Sally, and finding out he had graduated from high school with her—it had been a large class, divided in location for a couple of years by double-sessions as the high school was being enlarged. Father LeMieux walked in. A couple more minutes of chatting led to an invitation into the pastor’s office. He was the only priest at the parish, though another lived there while ministering to a low-security prison and a veterans’ hospital.

For a half-hour, or maybe a bit more, the two men vented about the

moral decay of American society. They talked of the days when men and women gathered on one or more front-porches in a neighborhood while children played the complicated tag-game: Capture the Flag. Or sometimes the children gathered on another porch to play a board-game or a card-game. They talked of houses left unlocked when the families went out of town for an afternoon to a church picnic or a gathering at a country farm of an aunt or someone titled “Uncle” though not of obvious blood-relationship. They talked of days when children could be sent home early on the day President Kennedy was shot, and the teachers and principals and superintendents knew that most had a mother or grandmother or aunt at home and those who didn’t could go to a neighbor’s house—the neighbor being perhaps related to those children and perhaps not. Johnny wondered to himself if there were a few of his classmates who got special attention because of unstable parents or an isolated home.

While they were talking, Johnny began to wonder which was cause and which was effect: the breakup of extended families and even informal tribes or the glorification of immorality in the entertainment industry and the seeming growth in corruption of those running public institutions—churches as well as governments and businesses.

While Johnny was pondering the question, while still talking about all these entangled problems, Father LeMieux suddenly raised his hand as if about to bless him. The priest asked, “Would you like to give your confession so that you can start receiving communion again this Sunday?”

“It’s been so long. . .”

Father LeMieux smiled and rose to fetch a piece of paper from a table behind Johnny. Then he picked up a stole lying on another small table. He handed the paper to Johnny and smiled as he said, “It’s a cheat sheet, but remember you can insert your own penitential statements. For this, it matters more that you are sincere. It doesn’t matter so much that you follow some particular wording. There are some hints for that on the sheet.”

The priest dropped his smile, though he took on an expression of gentle and not harsh solemnity. He paused as Johnny scanned the cheat sheet and then asked, “Are you ready?”

When Johnny nodded, Father LeMieux raised his hand over Johnny to invoke the Holy Spirit and said, “May God grant you the grace to make a good confession.” And then he made the sign of the cross while Johnny crossed himself and both men said, “In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

The moment of truth was approaching as Fr LeMieux said, “May God, who has enlightened every heart, help you to know your sins and trust in His mercy.”

Feeling something tingle throughout his limbs, Johnny bowed his head and heard himself saying, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.” After the shortest of pauses, he added, “Bless me, Father. It has been nine years since I last confessed and nine years since I practiced the faith I adopted and, and. . .”

“Go on, my Son. Speak of those sins which most bother you and then confess the other sins in a general statement.”

“I am angry at those who failed me when I was young. Giving me a terrible education and also weakening me in various ways. They put me in a situation where I had to socialize by pretending interest in things of no deep interest to me. Such as pro sports. And though I was a great admirer of Einstein and other scientists, I did little to develop my talents on my own, sometimes getting hold of a popular level book on probability theory or physics but reading it as if it were as shallow and as easy to read as the books we used in the Jenkesville school system. My eyes rode over the marks on the paper without my brain really making sense of things or realizing it needed to slow down and struggle a little more. I grew lazy and intellectually weak and didn’t even know how obvious it was until the head of the math department took me aside in my senior year and told me how terrible it was to watch me deteriorate so badly during my four years at Jenkesville High.”

Johnny gasped for a breath and lifted his head to see Fr LeMieux raise his hand. “Hold on, my son, I can barely keep up with you and I’m not sure if you’re confessing your own sins or the sins of those who you believe to have failed you.”

That had given Johnny a handle on one of his problems: “I’m not sure if you’re confessing your own sins or the sins of those who you believe to have failed you.”

“That’s what Fr LeMieux said and it hurt a little, but it’s true. Of course, others did fail me. In a strong sense, American culture failed me and all of the talented students in the public school systems. . . But New York City seems to do well by such students and maybe others like that high school run by the University of Chicago. Still, the American school system as a whole fails all of its students in various ways. They fail the students talented in math and science by giving us a lousy education, we

covered less than one semester's worth of material in four semesters of high school algebra while the East Asian students I saw in college seemed to have gone into college math and science while they were in high school. So did a couple of students I knew who'd attended New York City magnet schools and then sometimes were sent to City College of New York for some specific classes. Then, the self-serving fools who run this country make up for our absence among serious scientists and engineers by bringing in students from countries where the parents and the politicians are morally responsible adults."

Then came the thought, "Still, I could have pulled out of it by a good effort. Maybe I could have gone into the military to serve the country and learn some discipline. I almost did that..."

Johnny remembered of a sudden that he'd been amused, sadly amused by a small story in a book by the libertarian thinker, Albert Nock. It seems a friend from France had finished a long visit to the United States and was returning to Europe. They met with some other common friends in New York City for a farewell dinner. When asked what he thought about the United States and its citizens, the Frenchman had some serious compliments, but he added that he thought the United States was the first country in history to pass directly from barbarism to decadence without ever passing through a state of civilization.

Johnny sighed and told himself, "We retained our barbarism... We are becoming ever more decadent..."

Thinking that to be one of the stories he'd told himself too often, Johnny found himself at the front-door to his sister's house rather than the entrance to his own apartment and, as he was walking in, he knocked and called out, "Alice? Jack? Are you here?"

Knowing someone was here since the door had been unlocked, he looked around and saw Emma Jean sitting in the living-room, lost in a book and whatever was coming over the earphones. He smiled just as Alice called up through the open cellar door, "I'm down here doing laundry. I'll be up as soon as I finish putting on another load." After a short delay, as if she'd walked away and then come back to the foot of the stairs, she added, "Go into the kitchen and grab a cup of coffee if you wish. The pot is just finished brewing."

38 From Dawn to a Decadence Which Was a Death-sentence to an Author With a Living Mind?

Johnny nursed a double-shot of a barely decent Bourbon whiskey as he asked, “Am I an old foggy?” He recalled the look of confusion on the face of the clerk at *Barnes & Noble* when he’d checked if *From Dawn to Decadence* at been published. Targeted for the first day of the (wrong) first year of the third millennium of Christianity, that book had been published a few months latter because the author, Jacques Barzun, had decided on a formatting change—going to a sort of side-bar instead of using a more conventional system such as footnotes. He took a sip of whiskey as he realized he was following his bad habit of digressing along a line of thought that took him away from the mental path he’d been following.

And he asked again, “Am I an old foggy?”

Not sure at first what he’d meant by those words, Johnny sat and thought for a few minutes before suggesting, “Do I see too much good in the past?” And then, “Do I miss much in the present which is good?”

And an idea for a book came to Johnny. Or, rather, a title which implied something of a theme: *Swimming Up the Waterfall*.

“OK.”

“Does that provide the theme for the pessimistic, backward-looking viewpoint?”

“Maybe.”

“How about: *At Home in the Universe*, for the optimistic, forward-looking viewpoint?”

“That sounds too naturalistic for my tastes.”

Johnny looked over to see Rebel staring at his master, muzzle resting on his forepaws, and a studious look in his eyes.

“Do you also wonder whose tastes those might be?”

Feeling his body slumping, Johnny suddenly felt flat in mood and then found it hard to form the next thought. After a few minutes, he suggested a possibility either horrible or wonderful, but nowhere in between.

Have my efforts to recover from a frustrating and painful childhood and youth been—really—an effort to separate myself from my own communities? My neighborhoods and towns or cities? My civilization?

The Body of Christ?

Have I tried to heal and purify myself by separating myself from all my human communities which are so anti-human in some ways?

“Is this the sense in which we are strangers in a strange land? We have created a world for ourselves, a world for humanity, which isn’t natural. It doesn’t even move beyond the natural in the direction pointed out by our Lord Jesus? Rather is it an unnatural world constructed by exploiters and profiteers.”

In despair did the author respond, “Does this mean the world isn’t God’s world any longer? No longer the birthplace but rather the place of torment for the Body of Christ?”

And, yet, Johnny knew that couldn’t be true and knew his mission of personal salvation and perhaps of helping to heal the Body of Christ. . .

The idea had gotten away from him, but Johnny knew he needed to re-energize and to re-turn to his mission in life, to his vocation as an author. He knew his conversion, his re-turn to God, was wrapped around a smaller conversion, a re-turn to a healthy mind in an age and a decayed civilization which didn’t value healthy minds.

“Or healthy moral natures.”

But, “I’ve got to keep my sense of humor through this spiritual melodrama, else I’ll end up more ego-centric than Christ-centric.”

Part IV
Appendix

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Colophon

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