

Night

1

She's sitting on the couch across the room from me reading a thick book with a colorful cover. The lobby is vacant, the elevator makes sounds going up. The desk clerk watches a TV turned low.

An old downtown hotel. The rug worn. The wood desk worn. The brass fixtures worn.

An air conditioner creaks in the background. The room is humid, smoke filled. A half dozen people sit in the lobby. News is on the radio. No one speaks. A fly buzzes at the window, between the blinds and the glass. I look at her. A street door opens, an old man peeks in. The door shuts. No one looks up. No one moves. It's early evening.

I look and wonder.

She looks up, scans the room, not at anyone in particular, and lowers her head. She rubs the back of her neck with her left hand, shifts slightly in her seat. A subtle movement. A siren in the distance comes near, flutters blocks away, fades again. A bus speeds by blowing the lobby door softly in. The room works in slow motion. No one moves.

A newspaper lies unfolded on my lap. I stare at the headline photo. A man holds another man in restraint while a third glares at both. Black and white and gray.

Hungry.

The street door swings open. A woman in fur walks in, passing me as she walks to the desk. The fur is coarse and glistens, even in the dim light. At the counter she coughs. The clerk gets up. They exchange words, she's handed keys and starts toward the elevator but turns back toward the

clerk. She motions him to come with her. The elevator door opens and they enter. The door closes and the sound diminishes as they rise.

Fur is unusual here. It's deep black and long. Now that she's gone I can see her. The woman is in her thirties. Dark brown eyes glare as she moves to the desk. She reaches in her purse and gives the clerk a card. She speaks softly, whispering to him. He nods in agreement and hands her a key. Move. Stop. Turn. Motion.

I turn the page. Body found. A leg is partially seen in the brush, toes pointing up. A half dozen police are standing at the roadside.

The elevator door opens. The clerk is alone.

She closes her book and sits up. Her hands slight, fingers long, graceful. She shifts, stretches, settles. A yawn. She raises her head slowly. Asian? The hair settles farther from her eyes, which roll focused, pulsing, from side to side. Her head lowers to one side, stops and turns toward the opposite side of the room. I close my eyes and can't envision her features. She leaves no impression. I've never seen her before. The lobby door rushes open.

I watch as the cabby moves toward the desk. A slow deliberate walk. Tense. The end of his shift. His head bobs above the gray chair backs to the left. He lifts his cap and rubs back the perspiration. An old highway patrol cap, sweatband moist, top no longer white, rim cracked black and worn from being taken in hand to wipe his head.

Eyes glare. Sitting more stiffly, her book lowers, she stares. Blank, stiff, flat-out unforgiving stare. Eyes still. Cold. Suddenly cold, uncovered. I'm not sure how. Moist eyes blink. Black and white. Singled out, found out, I'm given away. I feel guilty at every move. Guilty. Her left hand forms a fist, releases. Guilty. She blinks. Guilty.

A rush of hot air. The street. The cars. A cab. I can't move. It all pulls away from me. Receding. I gather myself; enter the cab, nod to the driver. My newspaper is in hand. Let me sit a minute. Let me unravel the pieces. I need to eat.

She sits and stares. No one ever just sits and stares.

The street is the same as before. Nobody thinks of change. No one thinks.

The cabby lets me off. Up my steps. Four flights. Three locks. Two bedroom. One bath. In bed, sleep overtakes my hunger. Why do I feel so righteous?

No dreams tonight.

Describe the land

Between the mountains

Describe the rumors

About the other side

The mountains sit in the distance

On the horizon, no haze in between
Still a storm coming

Walking by I am caught, slowed and stopped. He sits alone at a bench, in a crowd but off to one side. A plain man. I sit across the walkway. A young couple approaches, eyes on him as they pass. Thirty feet away they stop and turn. Turn and proceed. A child stands and stares. Those already there sit, mouths open.

The man leaves no impression, yet the crowd reflects awe. Brown coat. Frayed Khaki pants. Not dirty. I shutter. The man re-crosses his legs. His right arm hooks over the bench and thirty people sway to the left. I'm caught in mid-breath, seeing his chest shrink preparing to inhale. Nothing and no reason and I can't move. He gets up, stands motionless for a moment, then as he walks away he places his hand on my forehead, lowers it across my face, my eyes. I blink.

A fan spins, curtains part and close. The fan shakes, vibrates. Shifting over and over wearing the gears, the racket is so distracting the vision falls apart. A room appears. I awaken.

At the window, chill radiates against my face. The room creaks. At the table my books lie closed. Eyes bleary and slow I cross the room to set up my coffee. Silver ring on either hand. At the table the book stays closed. It's only the room now. Entertain me. A coffee maker finishes. Creak. This is my wooden room. The wood of my third grade desk. Light maple, heavily scarred. The chair, table, desk, counters and walls all the same. Relaxing, quiet but for the creaks.

My view is limited. I know the city but can't see it from my window. In the flatlands you only see to the closest wall or building. My world isn't only flat it's usually only a street wide.

A shadow at the window. No footsteps. Mornings go this way.

The book opens. I begin to plan my day. Tighten the loose ends and leave less chance for error. That's the theory. Lately I've begun to wonder. All this organization, planning and control aren't making me sleep any better. Creak. No shadow. I hear the morning bell and close my books. I've ten minutes to be at the office. I dress. At the mirror I rush to straighten my face, give up, pack up, leave the room. The door swings shut. The locks secure with simultaneous clicks. I walk down the hall as other doors close and click.

The stairwell is cold, metal steps and walls. Others follow me down as I follow others out. The building sways, complaining, the stairway moaning with our load. At street level I feel like I'm being launched down a cattle chute. I don't mind the push and shove behind me as much as the morning waiting ahead.

Years ago I begged my father to take me to work with him. He wouldn't. I'd no idea what he did. I asked my mother but she either didn't know or wouldn't say. I knew it was some kind of construction, everyone was in construction then, but I didn't understand. Months went by before I broke him down with my pleading.

Early one day he shakes me awake. "You said you wanna go to work with me. Did you mean it? You wanna go with me today? Hey, wake up. You wanna go to work." I stir under the shaking.

"Jason. Wake up. Do you want to go to work with me? Jason." He spreads out the words to get the message across without shouting. At the time I remember thinking he must think I'm brain damaged.

"Yeah, sure." I whine.

We dress and leave the room. Outside the stairwell a cold wave strikes me. We walk. I begin to sneeze and sniffle. Dad stares down at me, rushing forward. By the time we reach the bus stop I'm losing feeling in my extremities. We're going to work. At the stop no one speaks. There's a lot of nodding, posture shifting, scratching ears, that sort of thing. But, no talk.

A bus takes us to the perimeter. My dad is an architect. He and the other architects are building new shelters at the edge of the flats. The same as we live in. Four stories tall, windows on the front only, one door in the center of the ground floor and three steps down to the street. They gather at the farthest structure, my father and the others, lifting their tools off the ground, beginning to build. They all begin at the left, move their way toward the right, out toward the border side. Each holds a piece of metal, in turn, welding it to the last. Good progress is made all day.

I can only watch, no one speaks to me. At lunch I get plenty of stares. My dad brings me a sandwich from the wagon but eats with the others. They've finished a whole room when the bell sounds. Tools are laid down and we all go to the waiting bus. I tell my mom about the buildings and welding. She nods in recognition.

We go out together twice more until the one house is completed. On that day, when we're getting ready to leave, my dad takes me to the front door, reaches in his pocket, and pulls out a set of keys. He hands me the keys, turns and walks away with the other men. I see him the next day building onto my new house. Months later the architects are still working their way down the street. Eventually I stop looking. They turn the corner.

I awake.

My office is three blocks in after the turn off at my grandfather's corner on 25th street. I control a security section of HiSec. We're under scrutiny for allowing holes in our screen. No evidence is ever shown that the holes are in use. Nevertheless, a hole is a hole and is considered a serious threat. Bigger Holes, Bigger Nets. That's my philosophy. Attention to detail is my method.

The board at my hand glows green but for an occasional red flicker. Usually a cat or squirrel lodged in the net, triggering an alarm. I'll need to rescue the creature. Leaving a live animal too long in the net ruins the restrainer tension. All the wiggling stretches the cord. Released animals bolt toward the flats, never looking back.

False alarms are common. The lights, siren and alarm still snap us to attention, a tribute to training, but we've no vision of an attack. No vision of Insurgents cutting through the net, entering the channel. In truth the city sits comfortably secure. Lonely at the edge, perhaps, but stable.

I sit in a room that's the termination point for all the cities' sensors. A regulation room, all four walls filled with light and movement. My desk, Martin's console and The Observer's lounge chair the only furniture.

The Observer is coming. Observers are feared, not respected. They haven't the ability to direct. No sense of security. They lack all the first hand knowledge that comes from participation. Still, through the council, they wield sufficient power to complicate life. A single black mark means weeks of redoing system checks. And in the style of all great bureaucracies setting a coffee cup on the console is a significant breach of procedure, while shutting down a gateway might go unnoticed.

"This indicates a torn net?" The Observer observes, pointing at a blinking red light.

I try to explain that nets rip and are repaired daily. We have crews that do nothing but repair or replace them. Martin sits at the console, pushing buttons in response to dial readings. I stare at The Observer. We each hold system records open in our laps, line-item reviewing last week's incidents.

A red light blinks behind The Observer, an incident happening now. Martin's hand slides over to cancel the audio alert and as quickly queues a clean up. The Observer, oblivious, completes her page. I verify the report, sign off on it, giving a slight nod to Martin. The Observer turns the next page, closes her book, finished with us and leaves on her rounds. Routines designed to provide safety inevitably amplify any emergency by inducing complacency. We're practicing disaster.

The center stairs lead to ground level. I leave to check the net.

2

It's late afternoon. The sun streams through the cracks in the blinds. The office is more cramped than usual. My partner left his wife. Suitcases, cardboard boxes and numerous shopping bags line one wall. My secretary left early so I sit alone staring at the week's cases.

Not one problem was resolved this week. No cases closed. No cases opened. I collected no money. I paid no bills.

It's mid day, mid month and mid season. I need someone to kick me in the head. Nothing to look forward to. Nothing worth looking back on. A glint catches my eye, drawing me back to the room. Over my cluttered desk, beyond the limp Wandering Jew, a sparkle in the corner. Movement. Great.

As if staring at my partner's collection of shoes doesn't make me feel the evening is devoid enough of promise. Now this. What to do? Options? A door rattles. Through the opaque glass a black form waits. Rattles again. The form stands motionless. I hear keys.

The dark form bends forward, inserts a key, shakes the knob, twists. No clicks. The key withdraws.

I get up and go to the door. I can hear mumbled words. Through a scratch I see light. A woman. She bends forward with another key. Jiggles. Nothing.

I back along the wall, around Gil's bags, feeling my way backward to the storage door. Out of sight. She's after something he took. The latch clicks, there's a long pause.

I'm about to look out but wait. She wants papers, or jewelry, most likely. I'll let her get them, stay out of it. Sara is the type to sneak around. She's in the room. My desk light goes on. My desk drawer is pulled open, papers shuffle, silence and the drawer closes. Files ruffle; open, pause, close.

I glance through the crack in the door. Sara lifts her head, looking in my direction. Her lips part slightly as if in mid-word, glistening. Her eyes, in this light, show black. I catch my breath. She looks down at an opened file. No telling which one it is. Something out of the current casebook, by its looks. She brushes her hand back and forth caressing the dark fur covering her shoulder. Back and forth, again.

I shift weight to my right foot, exhaling. I'm losing control of my breathing. Sweat beads at my neckline. She sits, fingers the paper and reads. She hums. One page. Second page turns. A hallway sound. She looks up, her expression changes. Softens. Whatever she's reading pleases her. Black hair covers her shoulder. A streak of gray at her temple. She closes the file, stands up, switches off the light and walks toward the door. She's given me no reason to be so fearful. I shift to my left foot. I hear a crack, she stops, freezing in front of the storage door.

I'm a child in the wrong place, about to be discovered. A soldier stranded in the enemy's camp. For a long second there's stillness then she continues out the office door.

At 2:30 p.m. I arrive to meet Anna at the Bunker Building. It's an unusually damp Fall Saturday. The sky closed with darkening clouds. Chill wind blows. I wait, leaning against the corner of the building. She is due at 3:30.

I've stopped questioning motives. The face is all I can see. No depth. Nothing between the lines anymore.

It's 4:15 p.m. I won't ask for an excuse and won't listen to one given. Let 'em talk and anything is liable to come out.

My hands are numb in my coat pockets, rolling around balls of lint and gum wrappers. I stand my collar up. Clouds, gather behind the brick building across the street, no stranger to this town.

4:30 p.m. Dusk. The sky drops away. One of those motion picture zoom shots. Streetlights come up, foot traffic increases. Not types yet, still people. Anna brings me information and I pay her. It's worked the same for years. My only talent lies in convincing her I'm better than she deserves. An easy task. Anna gives everything and takes little in return. Her way to Heaven no doubt.

5:05 p.m. She turns the corner, walks halfway up the street and jaywalks to my side. She speeds up to jump the curb, stopping next to me. Leaning against the wall she looks rushed. She rests. Weary.

"Sorry I'm late. Things piled up again. Well you know how it is, sneaking out of the building. Some day I'll be shot in the head. I couldn't get the file; he keeps it in a locked drawer. I don't want to go back, okay? Okay Dave?"

"Yeah, sure. Was he sleeping?"

"No, on the phone, getting real tense, angry at some jerk-off up north."

"About?"

"I don't know. I left."

"So, you got nothing?" I stare at my feet.

"Sorry. Look maybe someone else could get it. I just can't get enough time alone in there."

I don't tell her about my encounter with Sara or the empty feeling it leaves in my gut. Anna has distrusted Sara for months. I think she's taking Gil's side, but she insists she isn't. I'll mention it later. Or not.

There are times when Anna works for competitors. We appropriated files occasionally to assist us with difficult cases. Actually, we appropriated often. Competitors return the favor. That's it – a friendly exchange of data.

Anna wants me to tell her again that she's alright. Actually, I think she's fine. But she won't accept being told she's fine. I have to go round and round in apparently deep and meaningful analyses of all the new data of her mental health. The less I understand about what I'm saying the more positive I am she'll believe me. When I get lost she's found. A psychic scale achieves balance.

A cold gust and thunder. Deep rumblings in my gut. "Can I treat you to dinner? Let's go to Quong's."

During the years that I've known Anna, I never saw her move without being pushed. She changed, something switched on, or maybe, off in her. We turn, walking toward the corner and Quong's. She takes the street side. Wet sidewalk concrete reflects the lights. The background hiss of traffic rising and falling, in and out of the side streets anonymous cars turn, speed to the red light, stop and wait.

Once seated a short guy with "Rudy R." on the red tag pinned to his white shirt takes our order. We sit in a corner booth. I'm ready to work out alternate schemes to get our files back. The files are evidence in a custody case. Accumulating evidence in this case has fed me well for six months.

Anna sits across from me, her back to most of the restaurant. I see the whole narrow room, sitting relaxed. She slips out of her wet coat, draping it across the booth back. I order for us both. #32, soft noodles, extra rice for me, shrimp in lobster sauce for her. With elbows on the placemat, cradling her head on the knuckles of her closed hands, she stares at me.

"When I left Ethan he cried and followed me around for weeks. One night I saw him here. I was with some guy. Ethan walked up, stood like he was waiting for us to stop talking. We weren't talking. I felt like he'd do something desperate. You know pills or something. So, I asked my friend to excuse us. He left and Ethan sat down, his eyes didn't look directly at me, like he was ashamed. I figured, '*great*, I'm being nice, he's getting worse.' I felt so bad."

Our dishes arrive. Anna tastes and continues. I eat and listen. Balance again. "Can I tell you something between us? Don't repeat it?"

I nod. My mouth too full to reply. She tells me about her time with him.

"In three years we switched personalities. He got weak and I became strong. We pulled each other apart, keeping the good parts, tossing the rest. In his case there was nothing much left. We fought all the time. Righteous and yelling. We hit each other a couple times."

She pauses to swallow, sips her water and continues. "You ever have someone completely wrapped around your little finger? He cried for me to come back. Right in the restaurant."

Priorities notwithstanding.

Landing in the middle of town

I'm given my choice

By who I'm not sure,

I dodge to the left, as if to resist

I swerve to the right, as if to disagree

At times there's quiet sitting

Where I don't notice so much traffic

And then watching the street at rush hour appeals to a rolling sensation in me

Where the cars flow and the traffic isn't threatening

I land, in any case, here for no real reason.

The knock goes unanswered. I push and the door swings open. Entering, I close the door silently behind me.

"Anna."

I don't like this. My radio is switched off. I pull my pistol out leaving it pointed toward the floor, no use in creating accidents. I approach the center of the room.

"Anna," softly.

The room is large and square, with a smaller room at its center. Windows at the perimeter. It's quiet. A soft electronic hum the only sound. In the past I'd come across the bodies of crime victims without warning. Now, I'm cautious. I have the opportunity to brace myself for the shock of being close.

My footsteps make no sound in the plush carpet. I catch myself holding my breath as I approach the corner of the center room wall. I turn the corner. Nothing. This side of the room is sparsely furnished. A black leather sofa sets five steps from me, beyond to the right, a matching chair. Stopping. I think I see a quick flicker of light to the extreme left of my field of vision. Eye level. Nothing. Just nerves.

Where is Anna?

Beyond the couch a computer monitor glows a light sky blue. Nothing on the screen. A phone rings, I hear a fax machine pull its paper in, beginning a transmission. I see the edge of the transmission report appear to the right of the monitor. A three-inch sheet appears. The machine beeps three times. Wrong number? Subscription service on a rotary sequence?

A blinking of windows, the computer screen comes alive. I approach the monitor. Windows opening, moving, minimizing and closing.

A dialog box asks for confirmation.

"OK"

"Resend last file. Decompression error."

I wait for a response. A fly buzzes against the window to my right, stops, buzzes, stops, buzzes again. I lean toward the screen, my hand touches warm, wet and red. A movement.

I move to the chair. I sit. A breath caresses my neck. Turning, there's nothing.

"Repeat, resend Sensor.exe. File decompression error."

When a sharp knife enters the body there's no immediate pain. A stinging begins, escalating to recognition. Recognition produces pain. There's another swift motion. The computer waits for an answer, recognition sets in.

"Please resend file. Decompression error. Are you there?"

I reach for my cell, feeling a warm fluid stream down my arm. Pain sets in. The room is blue then white. The fly's collisions stop.

To the far side of the room there's the double entrance door. Beyond that a stairwell. No decorations, no frills. This leads down three levels to the street and one more level to the garage. My powder blue '63 Plymouth Valiant takes up two spaces not fifteen feet from the stairwell entrance. I park like that out of habit to protect one of my few possessions from the scars of fat women parking fat cars. A Ford Crown Vic hits the first speed bump at the garage entrance. Wheels squeak slightly as it maneuvers into the half space next to the Valiant.

I'm dragged through the double doors unconscious, reaching the top of the stairs as the Ford driver's side door gouges my right passenger door in the garage below.

"Let me handle him. Make sure it's clear."

"Yeah, yeah, all right."

My Nikes make a thump thump, thump thump, thump thump, going down the steps as I feel increased pressure on my chest.

I'm bloody. My chest is in spasms. Hands grasp my shoulders, pulling me down multiple flights of a semi-lit stairwell. When I realize all this what are my first words? What do I say to my assailants?

"Elevator out?"

"Quiet, shithead"

We stop at the landing between the lobby and garage level. Resting or waiting? I can't tell. I hear a car leave the garage and a whispered, "OK." We proceed. I'm shifted, held like a drunk between two friends. They drag me through the last door, pull me to the Crown Vic, and dump me on the floorboard behind the front seat.

The car starts and, with a quick left turn, we roar out of the garage toward Western. I wince as the sunlight hits. My wounds must be worse than I think. They leave me unbound.

I've no clue of what might happen or who these guys are.

I fade out.

Of the many images that should rush my memory, none of the logical ones do. I only see an old black and white photo of my dad after he's taken ill. He's in the backyard sitting in a redwood chair holding Kahotek, the Doberman puppy we got for him. He wears a light sweater, no t-shirt. He's looking up, smiling for the camera. The stucco wall behind him needs paint. The dog's tongue hangs out in its own pose. He looks thin, sits stiffly erect. The sun spreads across him and casts a late afternoon shadow.

"Take care of business, I'll be here later, we can talk. Go. Go ahead. Don't let these assholes get to you."

The Crown Vic rattles on. We're far up Western, by the smell, near Santa Monica Boulevard. Hmmm, The Tropicana. Mud Wrestling. Street sounds increase then diminish slightly. We stop. We move to a slow roll then accelerate in a sharp right. Downhill. We're on the Hollywood heading north.

I can see the back of the driver's head. Big head, short cropped grayish hair, tanned large neck spilling out of a dirty white collar. The other guy must be shorter or leaning forward. There's no conversation. An oldies station plays '70 disco through blown speakers. Who would've thought, criminals with no taste? The front windows are half down. I hear cars speeding past at regular intervals. There's cigarette smoke. The seat smells of oil and stale French fries.

Best I can tell, the bleeding stopped. Being wedged in a backseat has its advantages. I'm pretty sure my left arm is fucked. My chest is tight and burning. The blade skated across my rib cage, missed anything vital. My head is throbbing. I don't remember being hit in the head.

I've no idea how far we've gone. We're at least half way through the Valley. Another cigarette is being lit. I smell the match, see the smoke blast pass. The driver glances around and sees me staring up at him. I probably look like a drooling idiot. He indicates no concern, relaxing his right arm along the seat back.

Sensor.exe?

The .exe is an extension; an archaic method used in early computers to provide operating system definition to a PC execution file. Remote access is fairly common, has been, at least since the late '90s. But old style windows terminology like .exe, .doc or .mpg hasn't been seen in years. "Sensor" is the name we gave to an early data acquisition program we developed at Random. Whoever was there left shortly before I arrived, in a hurry. They left the screen blank but online. I've no idea if I'm the target. Maybe they think I'm a witness. Have they got Anna?

Anna left before I got there. They won't risk coming back. No, she's safe, or at least safe from these guys.

An overpass. Must be the 118.

—

Anna was, in the previous incarnation of our relationship, a friend of a friend. She's Korean. When I first meet her, she was a student at UCLA and recently separated from her Caucasian husband, her first and only true love, Ethan.

Ethan is a tall man, a real estate broker. He deals high-end residential or commercial properties only. I've the impression Anna was extremely shy during their marriage. She has a slight build and classic facial features; with hair to her waist, long, black and straight. She went through a period of being fashionably fucked-up. She also, somehow, became one of the three or four main coke suppliers I knew. These are the good old days when coke is powder snorted through \$100 bills. Anna was known for entering a party, dropping a baggy of powder on the coffee table, pulling out her special mirror and blade and laying out a dozen lines for anyone's consumption. She was one scary bitch for a couple years. Then, she straightened out and we lost touch.

Ethan is dead. Car accident. Head-on collision. Drunk out on Highway 14. The car spun out over the edge near Vasquez Canyon Road. Anna seldom mentions Ethan, but the only photos she keeps are of them together; Sea World, Disneyland, Carlos & Charlie's. A couple. Always photographed by a passing stranger. Some blurry, others off angle, but always contented smiles. I've never seen her smile like that in real life. Never.

We both grew up. We've been close and not so close the past couple years. She keeps most of my data files and business records in her system. I have backups, of course, but she has access to everything instantly so I go to her first.

Anna's business now, is information. No, not the bullshit information of the "Information Age". Real information. This is the kind of information that can make you rich or get someone killed: personal histories, family skeletons, criminal backgrounds and psychological weaknesses.

She's possibly the coldest person I know.

3

I reach ground level as the Insurgent pulls onto the dirt road leading to the flats. I look quickly up and down both perimeters. No apparent damage. Flipping the sensor on, I walk west along the asphalt. I reach to my right, holding the pole across the ditch close to the wire fencing. A perimeter walk can take a full shift. Once you start you have to finish.

The amazing thing about Insurgents is their precision. They're the lowest of the low, living in mobile camps that more closely resemble dumpster parking lots than livable housing. If you get close enough to them, the smell will make you ill. But their splices are sheer art. The *reason to be* for an Insurgent is to tap the net, pull as much data loose as possible and skip out. They leave their taps set, like street kids mark walls. Always a signature. So proud.

I walk, studying my sensor, waiting for a needle move.

Insurgents can be shot, legally. No questions asked. No repercussions. They're hard to catch though, so I've never caught one. I surprised two a while back, wounding one in the neck. They got away out on the flats, leaving a small trail of blood. Despite their appearance, they never fight back.

Needle jump. I cross the ditch, climbing up to the wire, keying my mic.

"Operations. Operations."

"Operations here. What's up Jason?"

"Gotta splice. Can you pull section R38717 down, on my mark?"

"Yes, ready? On your mark."

I pull my tool pouch out, kneel down, rest it across my knee. To keep both hands free, I leave the mic open.

"Ready. On three... One. Two. Three."

I twist my wrists back and forth holding one hand steady, pulling at the wire with a quick snap.

"Got it. Give me one more..."

Back at Operations they hear shouts, wrestling, jarring cracks, then heavy breathing and the rustling of weeds.

I lie unconscious and bleeding at the edge of the road. My mic keyed open. There's no chance Operations will come out for me. They switch off my monitor and continue checking the net. Procedure.

Later.

The inescapable truth is the unity of the Universe. Every edge, every point, every side is related, dependent on every other. There's no question. Most religions give lip service to this concept. Some ritualize the unity. Some even depend on this unity as a core precept. Few religions allow you to look at a forest and see part of a sentient structure. Fewer still acknowledge nature as an intimate part of their soul. Few see humanity standing, rooted in the soil, moving in unison. The wave. The ebb and flow. To feel that energy and not acknowledge it in some form, to ignore it, is the sin. The only sin. Many of us will wait our entire lives for a sign, and will die, abandoned. Some find replacements. Replacements born of fear, paranoia, hate or pride. Some of us refuse to allow the visions to enter us. Never letting down our guard. Others can't decipher or distinguish visions from fantasy.

There was a time as a child, on nights our parents were away, when we played by walking through the house, holding small mirrors up to our noses, looking at the reflection of the ceiling. Thing of it was that our minds worked with our vision. When we came to an obstruction visible on the ceiling we instinctively tried stepping over it, in some cases, tripping. Cheap fun.

I see everything upside down. I inhale deeply. My sunglasses inches from my reach. Morning sun reflects off them across my opened eye. Chill of the darkness is receding. Hard to believe I feel at peace. The world has a certain clarity when you're crumpled and tossed out by the side of the road.

The radio is long dead. Rules say I'm on my own. You get trapped outside, no one risks retrieving you. What's the point? There're ten bodies waiting for your job, twenty in line for your wife and your most valued material possessions are knick-knacks of no worth.

As I do my wound inventory the pain in my legs surges and fades again.

My father stands before a building, an old brick building, a small sign on it. ABRI. It's a circular sign, an arrow pointing to the right. He's dressed in army fatigues, jacket and old style cap. The smile and mustache familiar. An old image, taken during the war.

"I'm dressed. I'm proud. Here's a brick wall. Let's give the wife and kids an update," he seems to say.

My father is infantry, part of the demolition squad. Their responsibility is to precede the troops, sweep for mines and booby traps. There are four soldiers, usually, in a sweeping detail. On one particular day in the late spring of his second tour, the squad is called out. They're to run a routine sweep to break in a new guy. On they go through the forest. I can see this as if it's a film; I've heard the tale so often. Through the forest the four of them hike. Rookie and corporal lead the way. My father is fifteen feet behind, the private is bringing up the rear. Everything is light and casual. Scene slows down. My father looks to the left toward a close stand of bushes. A rabbit dashes away. An explosion. The concussion drives him off his feet. The corporal screams. There's blood at my father's temples. His friend and the rookie gone. Their blood mixes with shrapnel. Shrapnel, flesh, blood and bone strike him in the face. He scrambles for cover, not knowing what's happening. When he's secure behind a small berm, he realizes the extent of the damage. Exhausted, he spends several hours passed out, in the brush.

Rolling over in the bottom of the ditch, I start my climb. After some effort I reach the edge of the road. I look around. It's not my edge of the road. No entrance. No lower level. Actually no road.

"Shit." I've been moved. Flats are here but there's no net. No asphalt road. Just dirt and desert. Scrub brush, dirt and endless desert. I crawl toward what I think is home.