

The Beginning of the End

A short excerpt from Gypsies!

By J. Reyome

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***Note:** This is rather a short section of the eventual massive missive which is Gypsies! (yes, the exclamation point belongs, it is an homage of sorts to Clive Cussler.) This one really did begin in the deserts of southern California, and while it's nowhere near finished, I'll leave it at this for now: a lot of this story actually happened. A lot more is a complete lie, and an equal portion probably could come true...but I sincerely hope it doesn't. Which witch is which, is entirely up to you...*

This is where we go from here.

And this is where it all starts: in a secured room beneath a hospital in Loma Linda, California. Here, a young man fights desperately for his life, in what is at least an irony and at worst a bad joke: a week previous he wanted to die.

Not so now. Now, there is something driving him to care, to fight, to cling to the slender thread. A thread that frays with each passing second.

He knows what is wrong with him.

No one else does.

And if he were to tell them, they would think him mad. He almost believes it himself, for it is a voice in his head that tells him that elusive why, why what is happening to him, is. And if the voice is correct, its knowledge accurate, then the hospital is the absolute worse place for him to be.

He has begged the doctors to let him go. They will not, fearing some kind of bizarre contagion has been loosed, perhaps by a terrorist organization, and he is the first victim. He must be isolated, studied. Healed, if possible. But contained, contained.

He is given every comfort. Nothing helps.

The symptoms?

Almost too many to list. The most obvious is a fever: constant, slowly rising, unstoppable. Pain, everywhere, wracking pain that once had him curled in such a tight ball on his bed that nothing and no one (or two, or three) could pull him straight. Vomit—if one could call it that—and copious amounts of it,

blood-red, viscous corruption. It comes in agonizing waves, seemingly at a whim.

Spittle, mixed with blood, trickles down his chin. A pretty nurse in a protective suit wipes it away.

So. What is happening to him? It depends who you ask, and when.

He is a medical conundrum; the victim of all possible maladies, it seems, and at the same time, none. No sooner is one diagnosis made, it proves faulty, is discarded, and another takes its place. Tests seem to indicate at once that he has cancer; MRIs given when it was still possible to do so show tumors in virtually every part of his body, including his brain. Then, astoundingly, images taken of the same areas a few hours later show nothing. Pneumonia? For a few hours. Heart attack? Stroke? Yes, yes. And then again, no. AIDS? Yes, the final stages, no less.

They are all right, and then they are all wrong. Sometimes the test results will show illness appearing in tandem, or even groups of four or five. He is a virtual petri dish of sickness, it seems. Sickness that comes and goes...and with each succeeding attack, that one little bit of fight, that will to live, is extracted from him.

It never occurs to anyone that maybe, just maybe...

When he is lucid—which is not terribly often—he calls for his brother. "A.J.," he screams. "A.J.! You've got to get me out of here! For God's sake, get me out!"

But his brother is not there.

"I will die here!" Devin Surrat screams in agony to anyone who will listen. "I will die here! It's killing me! Being here is what is killing me!"

Doctors nearby listen, shake their heads. He is raving again, speaking to a brother who isn't there. And what would be in a hospital, their hospital, that would kill a patient?

So he is sedated, and heavily. He stays that way much of the time. Sometimes it even works and he relaxes to some degree; during one of these times, he is bound in heavy, padded restraints. For his own protection of course, and that of those working to help him. But when he regains consciousness, again he begs anyone around him—doctors, nurses, orderlies, anyone within earshot—to set him free, to let him out.

They don't listen. Of course, he's lost his mind. Who wouldn't, going through what he was?

No one in their right mind would listen to a crazy person.

But a few do anyway. Two are near, waiting for the opportunity to act, Not on Devin's behalf, but another's. They want desperately to do what they feel they must, but they know that when they do, Devin will almost certainly die...

...and then there is the voice, a familiar and soothing voice yet menacing to Devin, piercing the emptiness.

"Hang on, Devin," it says. "A few more hours. Please"

But Devin knows there will be no hanging on. Not for a few hours. He's not sure if he can last a few more *minutes*.

There is only one thing that will save him.

And again, irony of ironies, it is that thing that he is most afraid of, that voice calling to him. The voice that has already identified itself as Death.

The events leading to this point actually began at a bus stop on a busy street in San Bernardino, California several weeks previous. It was early in the morning, a nice day even by California standards, warm and dry and clear. The skies were azure, and, for the first time in days, smog free. It was too nice a day to be inside, and being a Sunday, no one was except those who absolutely had to be.

Devin Surrat wasn't, but not by choice. He was on his way back home from the grocery store. He'd awakened this fine morning to find his older brother had gone up to Palm Desert for the day, probably in search of a random sexual dalliance. That would not be so crucial to the story had Alan (A.J.) Surrat not also absconded with most of the food in the house—not that there was much, of course. They never kept much on hand, lest either leave on the quick, as they had been prone to do in the past, regardless of leases. So the food was mostly gone, but Devin thought this more than fair, as Alan had bought the groceries this month. Still, it left Devin without breakfast, so he'd walked to the Safeway where he'd picked up a dozen eggs, a loaf of bread, some hamburger, and some milk. Nothing elaborate. It was only for today, after all.

Today. Then tomorrow, and then...

Well, let us leave that be, for a little while at least.

He might've cried out for help, in the way that people like him are wont to do, but it seemed rather pointless. Surely he was invisible. The people in the Safeway had virtually ignored him; one woman had even pushed her shopping cart into him while walking down the aisle, staring straight at him. She hadn't even offered an apology, Devin nursing a skinned ankle while she stalked away glaring, not so much at him as some unperceived inconvenience that had blocked her way. The cashier at least saw him, but had barely given him a notice and gave him his change without so much as a "Thank you" or a "Have a nice day" or even a "Get bent, you loser."

Even the latter would've almost been welcomed. Acknowledge me, he thought without much emotion.

A few minutes' time found him sitting at the bus stop. The store wasn't too far from home to walk, but it was too far to walk carrying milk and eggs on a warm day. A bus approached, but it wasn't his route. Two people got off: a slight, bony man with stringy black hair and a scraggly beard, and a short, deceptively weathered-looking woman with braids piled up beneath an Anaheim Angels ball cap. The man didn't seem to notice Devin. No great surprise there. The woman, however, did. Surprise.

He looked up at her and they locked eyes for a moment. She was prettier than she appeared at first glance, or was it just the nearness? Or something else? She did have beautiful eyes, something of a bluish-violet, not unlike his mother's.

Something—he wasn't sure exactly what, and wouldn't be till much, much later—passed between them. A sensory thing, but almost physical, even solid. Startling, but pleasant. Better though, and distracting: she made his day at least by smiling prettily at him before following her friend down the street.

He watched her go. The only person who acknowledged him all day, and now she was gone. He sighed. I should've said hello or something, he thought. But that would be wildly out of character for Devin Surrat.

He checked his watch. His bus would be a few minutes arriving. He rather absently looked forward at...nothing in particular. This was almost a metaphor for his life. Looking forward to nothing.

But looking back...

...eyes closed, he sees images of his childhood, happy times when he lived with his father and mother, Jordan and Emma Surrat, up on a place called "Top of the Rock", sees the faces of his adopted Aunt Lacy and Uncle George Worthington...his father's craggy—burned on one side—but kindly face, his mother's, so beautiful and happy and loving, almost radiant...those were blissful times. And why not? He was a privileged child, with a wealthy family. He never wanted for anything, but then he never wanted much. Toys were almost passé when you have a vast forest honeycombed with caves behind your house to explore, which he did often together with his older brother Alan or his younger sister Lydia. Their father had made meticulous maps of the myriad cave passages but somehow there were always more, and Devin at least had never really needed the maps, almost having a sense of where he was underground, where he could go and where he shouldn't, and always how to get out.

His father had never approved of him going off himself, but Jordan Surrat could hardly complain too much about that, as he'd done the same

thing when he was young, and when Devin would disappear for hours at a time his father would just smile as to say, "Let the boy be a boy. He'd do it anyway even if we told him no."

His father knew him well.

He'd taught his children well too. Wealthy though the family was, he had come into it in such a manner that humility was his nature, and from an early age he tried to pass it on to his children. It sunk in to Devin particularly well, but even so, Devin was mercilessly teased in school ("poor little rich boy") and tended to keep to himself while Alan fought back with his fists and gained some measure of respect. Alan also was the more sociable of the three children and more than once his father had to come and pick him up from either school or from the Sheriff's office. Fortunately the Sheriff was an old family friend and charges were never pressed. Alan's grades in school suffered somewhat as a result, as did Lydia's, whose life rather paralleled Alan's, much to the dismay of her parents.

Not so Devin, quiet, shy Devin, who had always a separation if not complete isolation from his peers; Devin, who cruised through school effortlessly with a high B average; Devin, who, when Alan and Lydia began dating, instead took up serious caving with his father, visiting caves all over Tennessee with his friends from Kentucky, Chris Hobbs and Tyler Maddox, particularly the latter; Devin, who before long had over two hundred caves in his logbook, something few his age could boast...

...then, tragedy. Abrupt, as it always seems to be. A sudden flood in a relatively insignificant Kentucky cave had trapped their friend Tyler during a quick touristy-kind of trip into a small cave Devin had been in half a dozen times.

Tyler was leading a party of novice cavers from an alternative school in Louisville. They had followed all the rules: they had left word of where they were going and when they would be back. Tyler knew the cave well. The weather was favorable, with only an ever-so-slight chance of rain. They all carried multiple sources of light, and all were properly dressed for caving. They carried food and snacks for lunch underground. Tyler even carried a first aid kit in his pack. They certainly had an excellent leader. Nothing, it seemed, could or even should go wrong.

The storm had blown in literally from nowhere, a fast moving front descending from Canada, over the Great Lakes, passing over a humid Indiana before crossing the Ohio River. It would've been stupendous, a storm Tyler would've appreciated...had he been anywhere but a half mile deep in a cave.

The prime rescue team arrived on the scene not thirty minutes after a worried Sarah Maddox had placed the call to the local Cave Rescue

coordinator. She knew Tyler, knew he would've called her the moment he exited the cave and into such conditions. She also called Jordan Surrat, knowing that he knew the cave and besides, he would want to be there to help.

The cave entrance was at least a dozen feet underwater. The rescuers—including Jordan Surrat, exhausted but determined after the seven hour plus drive from Lennoxton—could do nothing but wait. Nearly an entire day they waited. Knowing what they would likely find when the deluge ended and the flood waters finally receded, they waited, Sarah praying fervently for a miracle.

There would be no miracle. Instead, there was tragedy on a horrific scale. The prime team returned from their push-or-perish attempt grim faced and with red-rimmed eyes.

Twelve children and three adults had entered the cave the previous morning. None came out alive. The body recovery was heartbreaking, and it was Jordan who insisted on carrying his dearest friend's lifeless body out of the cave. He had been crying. Sarah Maddox was stoic, waiting till she got back home to unleash her own flood. But then she had to tell Tandy, their son...

...it was almost more the Devin could bear, seeing Tandy, just a few years younger than himself, sobbing at his father's wake. A celebration of life, they called it. No body, no casket, no viewing; Tyler had decreed thus in his will. Pictures everywhere of his eventful life. It was meant to be a comfort to all concerned, that his life had been well-spent...

...bullshit, Devin thought then, and now. Tyler Maddox should've lived to a grand old age, to see to enjoy his life with his beloved Sarah, to see Tandy have children of his own...

...Tandy, who was inconsolable. Sarah, holding him like a child. Devin couldn't watch and eventually walked outside, where he was not surprised to find his father, also sobbing like a heartbroken lover, which he might as well have been. He and Tyler had been that close, had shared each others' greatest adventures, had saved each others' life one more than one occasion.

But not this time.

It was crushing. Jordan Surrat could hardly bear even the thought of caving after that. When he did—on a limited basis, to be sure—it was only that Emma had begged him to, if for no other reason than to give a distraught Devin something to do. Get him out of the house, back on the horse, she'd said. It'll do you both good. She was the doctor, after all, she would certainly know best.

So they went, Jordan and Devin, and surprisingly, it did help them through the grieving process. In time they became a stunningly effective two

man team, bent on mapping all of the caves in Lennox County. They came awfully close to achieving that goal, and became even more close as father and son in the process.

There was one cave, though...

It was virtually in their front yard, below the cabin on the cliff face of top of the Rock that had for years been the Surrat family's home. It could be seen from the highway coming into Lennoxton, but Jordan had never been able to contrive a way to get to it. He had tried rappelling to it from above, but the cliff face was so undercut he was unable to pendulum himself over to the inviting black opening. Attempts to reach it the back way from known caves on Top of the Rock were no more successful.

It was from below, using a telescope, that Devin had spotted the ledge. It didn't look terribly inviting, perhaps two to three feet wide at best and gently sloping downward. It was, however, leading right towards a low, broad alcove of the cave's entrance. It looked like it would be a fairly easy rappel onto the ledge from a portion of the cliff face that wasn't undercut; in fact, the rappel would be against the wall.

They weren't sure. No one could be. The local caving club looked, shook their heads, and proclaimed that it would be near suicidal to attempt. Couldn't be done, they insisted.

That was enough. Jordan would do it. He would rappel to the ledge, traverse across it, and crawl into the alcove and thus into the cave. From there he'd rig a rope, pad the ledge well, and rappel down to the talus pile at the base of the cliff, leaving the rope fixed in place for a future trip with Devin that he knew would lead into the underground heart of Top of the Rock.

He would not allow Devin to accompany him on the traverse across the ledge. Naturally. It was too dangerous, his father had said. Wait till I fix the rope, then later you can climb up. Devin protested, but his father was firm. You spot for me from below, he suggested. Take the telescope and a radio and watch, make sure I'm not doing anything stupid.

They would not tell Emma Surrat. Now that would be stupid.

And thus, alone, Devin watched—and heard—his father die.

Jordan was inching his way along the ledge, Devin watching anxiously below, calling out the distance to the opening over the handheld radio. Jordan's own radio was voice activated; he certainly didn't have a free hand to key the mike.

Every ten or fifteen feet he would pound a piton into a crack in the rock, an anchor, to which he secured a carabiner. He would run the rope through this snaplink, a measure of safety should the unthinkable happen...which, almost inevitably, it did. A mere fifteen feet from the key alcove the ledge began to crumble. Devin saw it, immediately called a warning up to his father,

who barely had time for an expletive before the ledge gave way and then he was falling, three "ping" sounds announcing that as many of his crucial pitons had failed. When he finally was stopped by the rope he gasped, collected himself, and muttered, "Never did trust those damned things anyway. Should've bolted."

Devin heard the words all too clearly. Now he saw his father dangling about forty feet below the ledge, nothing but three hundred additional feet of emptiness between him and the boulder pile at the bottom of the face. Devin swung the telescope up to the point where the rope swung dangerously from the ledge. His eyes grew wide as he saw that the outer sheath of the rope had been severed by the razor-sharp edge of what was left of the ledge. "Dad," he cried, "Dad, the rope..."

His father saw it too. The core would go too, if he moved with anything less than the greatest of care. He clipped his waiting ascenders onto the rope and slowly, deliberately, began to climb.

Devin turned the telescope to his father's face, so calm under the strain of impending doom...

...a slow, careful step, another...

...and then, audible to Devin even from so far away, the awful "twang" of the nylon core of the rope separating, oh so slowly...

...the telescope capturing the smile on his father's face. The final crackly words over the radio: "Goodbye, my love."

...and he was gone.

Now: sitting on the bench, still waiting for the bus, Devin Surrat's eyes squeezed tightly shut.

But then, more...

...his younger sister Lydia, with whom he'd always had a tenuous, occasionally brittle friendship, turning to him at the foot of the closed casket: "It's all your fault, Devin!" she screamed, right there during the wake. "Your fault! Your fault!" over and over until she was finally led out of the room in hysterics. His mother hugging him, crying, "No sweetie, no, no..." before she too was overcome...

He could just stand, silently. No tears. They wouldn't come, and he couldn't make them...

Now: there is no stopping the tears, nor the memories...

...his Mother now, wasting away now from the cancer which she'd developed from years of smoking, the disease eating her away from the

inside, never fully forgetting her husband's death, never remarrying, never really happy but putting on a brave front for the benefit of her children.

Or, rather, two of her children. The relationship between Devin and his Mother had changed. It didn't come as a surprise to him, but it was devastating.

Emma Surrat was in and out of the hospital, miles from home. The nearest cancer center was hours away in Nashville, a serious commute from Lennoxton. Devin could hardly bear to go, to see his mother worn away so. And then there was Lydia's accusing stare. Unspoken, but undeniable were the words: it's your fault, Devin. If Daddy was still alive, Momma wouldn't be here. It's your fault. All your fault.

He lived alone in the cabin out close to the cliff while his sister and brother lived in the "big" house with Aunt Lacy and Uncle George Worthington. Every day one or the other would visit him, and either ask him to go fishing (Uncle George) or tell him to "stop this foolishness and come back home" (Aunt Lacy).

And every day he considered walking off the edge of the Rock.

But that wouldn't do, of course. He would never despoil his home thus. Instead he took up trying to kill himself in other, less overt ways; entering the caves again beneath Top of the Rock and exploring for hours, days, by himself, no one knowing—caring—where he'd gone or when he'd be back, taking every possible risk along the way. He even recreated his father's final, fatal trip...successfully, and fittingly, connecting its excruciatingly tight canyons to Heart of the Rock, his father's greatest discovery. Somehow he managed to escaped unscathed from each succeeding outrageous stunt. Unfair, this so-called life.

Then in turn, Uncle George and Aunt Lacy died. Two more funerals. Again, he felt he bore the responsibility. They had loved Jordan like a son after all, had adopted him, in fact. So much so that they'd left everything to him and his family. Emma would be well taken care of. Each of the children got monthly allowances, with the promise of a substantial trust fund once they graduated from college, followed by further inheritance once they reached the age of thirty. Though George had never been keen on it, education was and always had been a big deal to Aunt Lacy, thus the unusual codicil.

Devin figured he would never use it. Though his mother pleaded with him, he was simply too overwhelmed with feelings of loneliness and loss...and guilt. There was no point to studying anything when he had little rational mind with which to study.

Alan left Lennoxton not long after Aunt Lacy's funeral. Emma was doing better, and he'd been accepted as a student at the University of California at Riverside. Not as prestigious school as UCLA or

UC Berkeley perhaps, but far enough away from the big city—and a whole country away from Tennessee—that he could at least feel comfortable. He did okay too; as expected, not a great scholar but enough to graduate with a degree in music. Lydia stayed closer to home, attending the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. Her grades were remarkably good, and she got her degree in Education and her teaching certificate not long thereafter. With the subsequent deposit of her trust fund she instantly became the richest teacher in the Lennox County school system, moving to Lennoxton proper to avoid the daily drive up and down from Top of the Rock, away from the Dirt Farm and its many, mostly bitter memories, but not so far as to take care of her mother if need be.

And then there was one.

Now: Devin hangs his head, the tears flowing freely now, feeling sorry for himself, not hearing the shuffle-click of shoes on the sidewalk next to him, nor the child's happy voice counting as he played hopscotch on a chalked out play area...

...Emma Surrat did her best. Knowing Devin was miserable, desperately so, she recommended he do what his father had always done when he had some sort of problem with which he could speak to no one else, not even to her. "Go talk to Denise," she told him. "If you won't listen to me, maybe she'll be able to get through to you like she always did with your father."

So he went to the cafe in Lennoxton and talked it out with Denise, Denise Wilkerson, owner of the cafe, Denise Wilkerson who had always carried something of a torch for his father. "You look just like him," she remarked with an endearing smile as they sat down over a cup of coffee. But then she always said that.

He was, typically, at a loss for words. She knew it. She took his hands. "It isn't, you know."

He knew what she meant. It wasn't his fault. She'd been telling him that for years too.

"I...I just don't know what to do," he said softly.

"You have savings, don't you? You get an allowance but you never buy anything."

"Cave gear. Gas. Food."

"Big deal," she snorted. "You get your lunches for free here, just like your Dad did. You've got money, Devin. So why don't you leave home and roam a while like Alan did?"

"I couldn't just leave Mom behind," he answered.

"Why not?" she urged him. "Last time I saw her she was doing pretty well. She's even put some meat back on her bones." She squeezed his hands. "Get away and get some of this garbage out of your head, maybe go to school somewhere once you figure out what it is you want to study. Then come back and start all over again. Your Dad came here for a fresh start. You could do the same thing. Like 'The Grapes of Wrath', only in reverse."

"But Lydia..."

*"Lydia is a spoiled brat who can kiss my ass," Denise spat derisively. "Don't get me started on her. Listen, she'll grow up and get over it eventually and see how silly she's been. By then you'll be out of school and she'll be so glad to see you come home she'll kiss **your** ass."*

Denise was right, naturally, and so in due course Devin said goodbye to his Mother, who really did look better, and more, she looked proud. "You'll make it," Emma Surrat said confidently. "I know you will. Then you can come back home, if that's what you want, and you can start all over again. Just like your father."

She had finally stopped crying at every mention of her beloved Jordan, but this was especially difficult, the leaving of her last son, the one who had seemingly never fit in, the one with the star-crossed life that had seen so much tragedy.

At that, she elicited a promise: Come home to me. Or call me, and I will come to you.

She had never seemed so beautiful to him than at that moment...

Now: tears streaming down his cheeks, he sees his mother's smile, wonders what she would think of what he was contemplating now. No, not contemplating, surely he's gone beyond that stage. Would it be the last blow to her, or...

...not wanting to squander his savings on a car till he got to wherever he was going, he took the bus, or at least as far as he could stand being on a bus, which was somewhere around Amarillo, Texas and from there he either walked or hitched the occasional ride. It took him two weeks to cross the country. After the first week he wished he'd stayed on the bus...

In Tucumcari, New Mexico he began to have second thoughts about it all and called Alan, who'd found work in a laminate plant in Ontario. It wasn't a high paying job, but there weren't a lot of jobs around for music majors, and besides, it was enough to afford rent on a decent apartment until the legal proceedings on his trust fund were complete. There would be even more from the substantial inheritance the children would all share with their mother once

they turned 30, but Alan had wanted to see if he could make it on his own in the meantime. Devin just needed a place to crash. Alan said come on out.

Devin got a job in a convenience store at the minimum wage. His allowance was just enough to cover expenses at his brother's alma mater, the University of California at Riverside, during the day while he worked the Circle K at night. He was robbed twice, being beaten the latter time. Then Alan started working for Jim Wade and Starry Night Security as a second job and suggested Devin join him there. It would probably be safer, and the pay was better. Not much, but it was better, and better still, people pretty much left him alone...

...and that, when you got down to it, was that. Devin Surrat lived with his brother, and yet he was alone. Lost, alone, friendless. Running out of money. It couldn't much worse, could it?

It could. Devin flunked out of UCR.

Well, not exactly. He was studying philosophy, of all things. He had decided that if there was one thing he wanted to learn, it was, simply, what is life? Does it always have to hurt so? Relentlessly negative, he had gotten along well enough with most of his teachers, but for some reason he just couldn't grasp the things they taught, or tried to teach. Or perhaps he just wasn't prepared to accept their often lofty concepts, when he knew all too well the transient nature of life and how inane and pointless existence could be. Thus he struggled, and when one instructor was too over the top one day in chiding Devin over his "negative attitude", Devin had stalked out of class, never to return. It wasn't pride, it was just a sense of inevitability. He never really dropped out per se, he just never went back, knew his grade in that class had been marginal at best. At least this way he was spared the final F...

..but then it went beyond that. Far beyond. Emma Surrat had always believed that Devin would be the artist among her children, the one most preoccupied with imagination. It was why she named him what she did, after all. It had been her choice. Alan was actually Alan James—A. J.—for Jordan Surrat's father, and Lydia was Lydia Lucille, after their adoptive Aunt Lacy. Devin's middle name was George, for their adoptive Uncle.

"Devin?" Jordan Surrat had asked at the time.

"Devin," Emma replied matter-of-factly. "It means poet. It's Gaelic."

"Gaelic. What's that?"

Emma smiled. "The language of my ancestors. Scottish."

Jordan shrugged. "Son-of-a-gun. All these years we've been married and I've never known."

"And you, my love, are French-Canadian."

"Something else I didn't know."

So. He was Devin the poet. It didn't exactly turn out that way. He did read and appreciate poetry, but he'd never been inclined to write his own. He was inclined to sit under trees and just contemplate the sky and the earth and everything beyond it. That was why he had decided to study philosophy. True, it wasn't much of a course of study when one was trying to prepare for a career of any sort, but then he didn't need a career, did he? He would be wealthy beyond avarice within ten years.

But of course that didn't exactly turn out as he'd expected either, had it? He had failed at UCR, but he had gained insight and a lot of it at that. Perhaps too much. For as inaccurate as Emma Surrat had been in naming her younger son, she was spot-on with one of her expectations: that Devin would be the sensitive one.

And that he most certainly was. More every day, in fact. Some much so that he couldn't bear to read newspaper or watch the TV news, for fear of experiencing more and more tragedy and pain. Not his own pain, but the pain of others. That man could be so cruel and unfeeling, even a country—especially a country that was supposed to be as enlightened as the United States—could inflict such suffering on so many...to him, this was unbelievable. It was almost a physical pain he carried with him, and it showed in his posture and carriage: slumped, stoop-shoulder. Bearing, as it seemed, the weight of the world. Often he wondered if this was what his existence was all about: to shoulder the world's pain, or at least a portion of it.

That considered, he knew he was failing that too, just as he had failed his father, failed his mother, and even failed his Aunt and Uncle by—that's right—failing, at UCR.

Well, he thought miserably, if rationally, at least I'm good at something. And the ultimate failure?

Now: as he cries, the thought crossed his mind...tomorrow? The next day? What? When?

Devin considered what he could do. At times he had seriously considered following a disturbing local trend by taking a nose dive off a freeway viaduct, suicide by traffic. But of course, that would at least be an inconvenience to others, and Devin Surrat didn't want to inconvenience others or put them through needless trauma, which something like that would certainly bring about. The same applied to various and sundry common means of self-destruction. If there were only a way to simply walk off the face of the earth...

He didn't know from whence the thought came. Instinct? Inspiration, perhaps?

It occurred to him that if he could locate an abandoned mine shaft somewhere in the High Desert—surely such things still existed—perhaps he could hurl himself into one of those. A second or two of darkness, an instant of pain, and it would be over. Nobody would ever find the body. It really would be as if he'd simply walked off the face of the earth.

He had but a few doubts, chief of which was: have I really come to this?

The answer, when it came, was definitive: yes. It was an epiphany of sorts, that life really should involve more than mere existence, and such a painful one at that.

He visited a local map shop, purchased topographic maps of the area and points west, into the High Desert. He pored over them, looking for any place that looked likely or which caught his eye.

Much to his surprise, one did, on an oddly named map, apparently dubbed for a curiously named mountain, Kokowand. It wasn't a terribly impressive peak in terms of height, barely deserving of the designation, but it did have two things going for it: a cave at its base, still inviting to him after all he'd been through over the years, and two mine shafts, both clearly marked.

His conclusion: it would do.

Now: an awareness of someone sitting next to him.

He looks. It is a child, apparently the one who'd been playing hopscotch. He looks up at Devin, eyes inquisitive. "What's wrong, Mister?" he asks.

Devin was never one to be rude, especially to a child. "Oh, I'm all right," he says with a gentle, if forced smile. He feels a little nauseous.

"But you're crying." The boy has buck teeth, a lisp, and there was something about him that Devin perceives—correctly—to be some sort of learning disability. But the boy's look is of innocent concern.

"What's your name?" Devin asks.

"Jimmy," the boy says with a wide, toothy smile. "What's yours?"

"Devin."

"Why are you so sad, Devin?"

Devin wipes his eyes. "It's a long story, Jimmy." The nausea, wherever it comes from, grows.

"My Papaw always said that if you see somebody without a smile, give em one of yours."

Devin's smile widens, despite the growing sickness in his gut. "He would be proud of you."

"I'm playin hoppity-hop. You wanna play?"

Devin is tempted, and probably would've but for the voice that suddenly came from behind them that shrilly cries, "What's going on here?"

"Hi Momma," Jimmy said, kneeling on the bench and turning to face her. "I was just gonna play hoppity-hop with my new friend Devin."

"Well," she says, "you can just hoppity-hop back into the store, young man. Didn't I teach you about talking to strangers?"

"But he's not a stranger," Jimmy insists. "He's my friend."

"Jimmy, go! Now!"

Reluctantly, the boy does, but not without first hugging Devin. Fiercely.

"You'll be all right, Devin," he says earnestly.

"So will you," Devin manages, trying to resist the rising gorge, returning the hug. "So will you. Goodbye, Jimmy."

The boy runs off into the store. His mother comes around the bench and confronts Devin, her face livid. "And you," she hisses. "I don't know who or what you are, and I don't care. But I think you'd better be leaving. Now, before I call the cops."

Devin stands and walked away. Then he stops, turned back to her, calling, "Miss?"

"It's Mrs.," she barks.

"Mrs.," he says apologetically. "Please don't be mad at Jimmy. He was just being friendly. He's a good boy, and..."

...a sudden, brief vision of a grown-up Jimmy passes through his mind. A Jimmy with straight teeth and a wide smile, graduating high school...with honors...

"...and he will be okay," Devin concludes.

"I know he will be," the woman says, her voice, strangely, softer now, calm. Reassured, somehow. "Just...please, leave."

Devin does. He'd missed the bus anyway.

He makes it a few hundred feet down the street before leaning over a trash can and vomiting. Repeatedly.

Nobody stops.

Nobody cares.

He walks a few blocks down and sits on another bench, waiting for the next bus, hoping the milk hadn't gone bad already. He loved milk too much for it to spoil. He was staring unconsciously at the car lot just across the street. He'd often thought of going there, in fact, to see about trading in his newer model for something cheaper, used but reliable. He could use the money he'd get in return. But then there hardly seemed much point in it now...

...then, an odd flash. Philosophically speaking, a detached bit of the great cosmic data stream.

Devin Surrat smiles unconsciously. Pretty deep for a UCR dropout, he thinks.

Whatever it is, it makes him look up.

And then he sees them.

Two people, a man and a woman, crouching next to a car in the lot across the street. He'd seen them before. They were the pair he'd seen getting off the bus just a little while ago. Judging from what they appeared to be doing, they weren't anybody he'd have ever cared to see again.

They are stealing the car.

Not very elegantly either. They certainly aren't exactly trying to be inconspicuous. Rather, it looks like they are trying to figure out why their lock pick isn't working properly, and they are oblivious to everyone around them.

That's strange enough. Stranger still was that people walking by on the sidewalk, within a few feet of the pair, appeared to be just as oblivious to them and what they are doing.

Everyone, that is, except for Devin Surrat. He can hear the man cursing colorfully at the recalcitrant lockpick.

"Relax," the woman says. "Take your time. It's cool."

Not exactly. "That guy's watching us," the man says, cocking a thumb over his shoulder at Devin Surrat. It's almost a casual gesture, as if a witness were less a concern than the fact that he can't get the car open.

The woman looks across the street at Devin, her head cocked just slightly from vertical, eyes narrowed, mouth open just slightly, as if in disbelief that he is seeing her.

As if he *shouldn't* be able to see her.

Devin stares unashamedly. She *is* rather pretty at that. Physically—optically—he can't see all that well across the street—there seems to be something of a shimmer between them—but oddly, he *feels* he can see her, picture her, if you will, much more clearly than he'd been able to be able to even when she had stood right in front of him. Short in stature, with broad hips. Lots of hair too, most of it beneath her cap, with the exception of two long braids which hang down on either side of her head, dark but silvery gray in places. Her face was weathered—sun? wind?—but her eyes are wide and bright, if a bit slanted in suspicion at the moment. She wears overalls with a long sleeve shirt underneath, and boots.

Kinda cute, Devin thinks in conclusion. But obviously already spoken for.

Then something rather astonishing happens.

Their eyes meet.

He looks down, self-consciously. But when he looks back up, she is still looking at him. Her look, though, has changed. The wary hostility is gone; now

it's more like curiosity. Perhaps even surprise. Pleasant surprise, as if she has recognized a long-lost friend.

A smile slowly spreads across her face.

Devin blinks to clear his still teary eyes, so he can see her more clearly.

And then she winks.

Now it's Devin's mouth that gapes.

Understand, now, that for all his self-esteem issues, Devin Surrat considered himself a fairly bright (if perhaps uninspired) person, and not at all bad looking; not exceptional, but his face didn't stop trains. He wasn't a bodybuilder but he was well constructed. That considered, however, women just didn't flirt with him, for god's sake. Barely a second glance, let alone a *wink*. It just didn't happen. Ever.

But it had, just now.

Or had it? He looks at her questioningly, pointing at himself. *Who, me?*

She nods, just slightly: *Yes, you.*

Another smile, another wink. And an aside to her partner: "No, it's cool."

And it is. Devin Surrat smiles back at the woman and suddenly found himself completely unconcerned that she is in the act of committing a crime. Though by now that would actually be past tense, as the man had finally managed to jimmy the driver's side door open and she climbs in. He slides in next to her, ducks under the dash, and in a moment the car is running. He shifts it into gear and carefully drives it off the lot as casually as if he were just taking it for a test drive.

As the car turned onto Waterman, heading west, the woman looks his way one last time. Through the glass Devin can see her smiling mouth form the words, "See you," before they accelerate away.

He finds himself wondering: will I?

The bus comes by a minute or so later. He gets on.

"Turn around," the woman said abruptly.

"What?" the man asked, startled at the firmness of her voice.

It was even more so the second time around. "Turn the goddamn car around, Snake, *now.*"

Snake did, a careful three pointer into a nearby fast food joint so not as to attract attention from any passing police by copping an illegal U turn. "So what's up?" he asked as they headed back east.

"That guy on the bench," she said.

"Thought he was cute, huh?"

She glared at him. "If you were one-tenth as tuned in as you claim to be, you'd know. He saw us, Snake."

A dawning look of comprehension spread across Snake's gaunt features, and he pressed hard on the accelerator.

The woman nodded assent. "Just mind you're careful," she said.

They passed the bus on the way. Neither noticed Devin sitting on the window side closest to them, and of course once they got back to the bench, he was gone.

"Fuck," the woman sighed.

"Another Lost One," Snake offered soothingly. "We can't save them all, you know."

The woman nodded. "I know," she murmured. They were silent for a few moments, then she added, even more softly, "There's something about this one though..."

"What's that?" Snake hadn't quite heard her.

Which was the idea. "Nothing," the woman replied. But a seed was germinating.

Devin Surrat sat in the only piece of furniture in the living room of the "quad" he shared with Alan. The room appeared more spacious than it actually was because like the rest of the apartment it was rather sparsely furnished. It was uncomplicated, though, and Devin found that appealing. Alan was rarely around long enough to sit, so chairs were pretty much irrelevant for him. Devin found it useful to have just this one. He'd found it at a Goodwill store, sat in its tacky, overstuffed plushness, and had instantly fallen in love with it, and while he really couldn't afford it, he bought it anyway, borrowing Alan's little Toyota pickup to bring it home. That in itself was comical, such a big chair in such a little truck.

Alan didn't understand. Twenty bucks for a chair, he'd said, and it's not even a recliner. But to Devin it was a fine investment. He read in it, ate in it, and it was big enough that he could easily curl up in it and sleep, and almost felt hugged. That had been the selling point, really. The *comforting*, not the comfort.

It was more comfortable than the floor at any rate, and because he didn't own a bed, it was either the floor—on a foam sleeping pad, also bought at Goodwill—or the chair. Alan *did* own a bed, but preferred Devin not sleep in it. That was okay with Devin, especially considering some of the women who had shared it.

Chairs they may have lacked, but not electronics. The stereo, for instance. Alan was a devoted music lover and record collector, so tunes were never a problem. There were racks and racks of CDs and tapes and old vinyl albums everywhere. But for the financial outlay on records alone Alan would

probably have a small fortune banked, but that was okay. Some things were just that important.

Devin didn't have any such passion. Oh, he liked music well enough, being particularly fond of the oddities that came out of England like Cocteau Twins or Dead Can Dance or Talk Talk, but with the notable exception of the latter, Alan had turned him on to all the music Devin had ever really cared for. Devin did like movies, particularly grade-B cheapies; Alan already had a nice television and a VCR; Devin had sprung for the DVD player when they became cheap enough. The kind of movies he liked were the sort one might see at a drive-in, and he remembered the one in Lennoxton fondly, even if he'd only ever been there by himself. Those movies were usually easy to find in cutout bins at the local department stores.

Now, then. That woman.

She'd been on his mind since he'd first laid eyes on her. No, be honest, since she'd winked at him. *Winked at him*. When was that last time anyone had winked at him? He went back as far as he still had discernible memories and couldn't locate even one single event, at least not since childhood. Maybe I'm just not the sort of person that inspires a wink, he mused. A depressing thought, that.

So. How to explain what had happened? Or need he? Was it just a diversion, something to distract him from what she was doing? That was at least possible. But why would she call more attention to herself? That was the part that didn't make sense.

He sighed and slumped in the chair. Complications he didn't need. It was bad enough that he'd been sick in the bus on the way home. Unless it involved somehow climbing out of the spiritual and/or emotional hole he'd dug for himself, he didn't want to deal with it. Kristin Hersh was by pure coincidence just then was growling the line, "Nice limbo you have here," from the Akai speakers. Appropriate. What was his life if not a limbo?

So maybe the woman was the way out, somehow introduced by fate at the moment he needed it most. Maybe I should have walked across the street and introduced myself, he wondered. Maybe I should've asked her out.

Maybe I could've shit the money to do it with. Maybe she would have bought.

Ah well. Fuck all.

And when you came right down to it, that was the problem, right?

A negative attitude, to be sure, but it was certainly understandable considering his past, and his perceived lack of a future. The present...well, that was another matter entirely.

What mattered right now was the persistent headache. A migraine coming on, he supposed, though he'd never had one before. But migraines

were supposed to feel like this, like he was beginning to feel...nauseous—again—sensitive to light, pain pretty much everywhere...there was even the beginning of a burning sensation on his skin, like a bad sunburn.

Strange. Except for a bout with pneumonia as a teen—not particularly surprising considering he'd been submerged in icy cold cave water much of the time leading up to it—he'd been healthy as the proverbial horse. Now it felt like he was starting to come apart at the seams. And so suddenly.

He turned off the reading lamp, then got up just long enough to shut off the stereo, which had begun to hurt his ears.

Music hurt his ears.

He curled back up in the chair. It comforted him, but not enough.

What is happening to me? he wonders.

Not very far away (at least in terms of distance) two women sat on the similarly sparsely decorated living room of their flat. One is short with long dark hair thoroughly shot through with gray arranged in several braids which were bundled awkwardly on top of her head. She appeared to be in her early forties but would slap anyone who would have the temerity to declare thus; she was actually 32. Her eyes were dark blue, bordering on purple, and they almost shimmered with radiance. She wasn't pretty by any classic definition, but she was certainly striking, even dressed in work clothes as she was at the moment. Her birth name was Elizabeth Darnell; her 'given' name (more on the distinction later) was Bitsy, aka Brighteyes, aka Li'l Bit.

The other was very pretty indeed; tall, slim—willowy would be an excellent description in her case—and 19 years old. Unlike her counterpart, she looked much younger than her age. Her eyes were huge; blue, as pale a blue as Bitsy's were dark, wide set and almost constantly looked sleepy, even when she wasn't. Her hair was blonde to the point of appearing bleached, but it wasn't. A spray of freckles bridged her nose. Her only marring feature was a single slightly bucked upper incisor. Her birth name was Emily Richardson; her given name was Corazonita, or Little Heart.

Devin Surrat would recognize Bitsy as the woman he'd witnessed stealing the car a little earlier, and in fact it was that singular moment that had brought these two women together just now.

"So," Bitsy said, "do you think..."

Corazonita—Cori—nodded, just slightly. "I think," she murmured. "If he is, then yes. But why do you *want* to?"

Bitsy looked at her questioningly. "Why on earth would you ask that?"

Cori shrugged. "Nothing," she said, lying transparently.

"Don't give me that. Why did you ask that?"

Another shrug. "I just wanted to know if you...well, if you thought he was cute or something." Cori grinned. "You could find a mate sure enough."

Bitsy blushed. It had been an awfully long time since she'd been close to a man, and even longer since Hajji, her mate, had died. "No dear," she sighed, "it's not that. He saw us. When we were hidden. How could that happen, unless he was one of us? And until he saw me, he looked so...sad. He needs to be with us."

"And besides," Cori said slyly, "you did think he was cute. You did, you did, and you did."

"In a homely kind of way," Bitsy admitted with a wry smile. "So, can you?"

"I'll try." Cori lay down on the floor. "Where did you see him?"

"San Berdoo. We were at that car lot on Waterman. You've been by there. He was sitting at a bus stop and had a Safeway bag, so I figure he can't live too far away."

"All right." Cori's face took on an absent sort of stare, which refocused as she added, "This may take a while, you know."

"I have all day," Bitsy replied, resting her back against the wall.

Cori closed her eyes with an almost sensual slowness as the vacant look returned.

An instant later it disappeared as her eyes popped open again.

"I have him," she murmured, startled.

"Already?" Bitsy asked, surprised.

Cori nodded, her jaw slack.

"I thought you said this might take a while."

"It usually does." Her eyes were closed again, but her expression is amazed, bordering on ecstatic. "Here." She held out her hands to Bitsy. "Here. Take my hands. Quick."

"What's up?"

"Do it, Bitsy. Now, before I lose him!"

Bitsy took Cori's hands and closed her eyes.