

HECTOR'S JUICE



P E T E R W H I T E

Hector's Juice

by
Peter White

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PART ONE: WILMA'S STORY

CHAPTER 1: THE FIRST ASSIGNMENT

I've made this trip before across the eons of time flowing up and down the evolutionary river that is man's history. Usually my trips have been to help generals and admirals make life-or-death decisions. Or at other times, help lawyers and judges make some piss-poor decisions. It's been my pleasure to help cooks and bakers come up with some of the world's most renowned recipes. While great artists and musicians have formulated with help from little old me some of the works that hang in prominent museums around the world or fill the airwaves of your favorite radio stations.

I was with the dogfaces that fought the Nazis at the Bulge, and really screwed up with Custer and his boys at the Little Big Horn. Admiral Halsey was one of my favorite pupils when he and the marines kicked the Japs off Guadalcanal. I was also the one that helped to make sure the carriers weren't in Pearl that fateful Sunday morning in '41. If I would have had them sound reveille just an hour earlier though, we could have gotten a few more of those slant-eyed little bastards.

Martin Luther started the Reformation under my expert tutelage, while I really should have kept a closer eye on old Jimmy Swaggart when he was making those frequent trips to the corner 7-Eleven. The inspiration for Beethoven's *Third Symphony*, "*The Eroica*", was given to that old deaf dude Ludwig by yours truly. It, however, took a whole lot of persuasion to get Sammy Davis Jr. to do that "Candy Man" song . . . the song sucked, but it turned out to be his biggest hit ever. Boy, that little black fella sure could sing and dance.

I walked to the ocean to make salt, right beside the most Christ-like man since Christ himself. He shuffled his Jesus shoes across the face of this earth, and he wasn't even Christian. His name, Mohandas Gandhi. I also got green with seasickness, when I sailed aboard the HMS *Beagle* and

watched the young Charles Darwin with rapt attention while he slowly unlocked the secrets of my work, the work that I, and my brother, began so long ago. Not bad for a screwed-up, has-been guardian angel, who sometimes can't seem to control his own foul mouth.

As you can see, my lows have been low, and my highs have been bench markers for some of mine and mankind's greatest moments. I was there at the very beginning—yes, the very beginning of time, when all the decisions were being made about how things were going to be done in this mass conglomerate of organized confusion popularly known as the universe. Not that my two cents ever meant much, but I got to hand it to the old boy for coming up with that gem that holds everything together, the ATOM! I've seen them as the building blocks of matter in every corner of the universe.

In my universe though, the spirit universe, there is no need for the atom. For that matter, time and space, or any of the other measuring standards human beings use to give their lives boundaries and meaning, have no relevance here. Einstein would have gone nuts trying to come up with an equation that would have explained it all. Oh, yes, there are ways we measure time and space here, but hell, I don't really understand the concepts involved myself, let alone try to explain them to a world that still thinks Elvis is alive and well and runs a Laundromat in Vegas.

Let's cut through all the bull and let me introduce myself. My name is Spencer. Maybe not the greatest name for the first commissioned guardian angel ever, but who ever gets to pick their own name, right? Now, please, for God's sake, don't get me mixed-up with that *It's a Wonderful Life* story that you, no doubt, are familiar with. Believe me, if George Bailey would have jumped into that cold ass water on my watch, I sure as hell wouldn't have jumped in after his sorry butt. You see, my time for retirement from the guardian service has come and gone many times. Usually, most of us in the service do our twenty million years or so and get out,

but somewhere along the line I came up with a bad habit, a swearing habit, not a good habit for a guardian angel to have, but we're not perfect here, either.

For instance, I should have never called the brave yellow brothers from the Land of the Rising Sun little slant-eyed bastards. I, too, can pick up some of the prejudices, hatreds, and stupid unfounded distortions of human arrogance that you humans possess. Not that it's possible that I can really become warped, or that these displays of verbal stupidity are really representative of the way I truly feel, but if you have been exposed to the human condition for as long as I have, it's hard not to have things rub off on you, even if you're supposed to be above all that crap. OOPS! There I go again. You see, I've seen all the wars, riots, depressions, crusades, assassinations, *crucifixions*, and all the other demonstrations of human brutality over the years. Yes! you heard right, I saw all the *crucifixions* also, and that means I watched Jesus Christ hang there on that cross, while his life slowly ebbed away, that life being the greatest ever lived. But that was just his physical body that died. There's more—much, much more.

As I said, I am making a trip, that trip being to the year 1994, and hopefully, if everything goes right, and I can get a handle on my mouth. Then I'll be able to retire, or better yet, become an escort. Ah, yes, an escort. That special guardian that gets to take the dearly departed to that next level of energy. Not that there has been much of a need for one up to now; there just simply has been no one to escort up to this point.

You see, when energy is spent, it just takes on another form, or is just added to and homogenized with all the other spent energy in the universe, to create a dimension we can't measure with our senses, or any of the other usual ways you down there on earth use to measure things. But there is one there just the same, and it's called the spirit dimension or spirit universe. In other words, when you die, the energy that

is your soul or spirit or whatever you want to call it, leaves the shell that is your body, and is condensed in a spiritual black hole. This is where heaven, or whatever you want to call it, is. One other thing, this spiritual black hole is connected directly to the other black holes that are spread out throughout the universe and are condensing matter from the material universe. The result, everything that ever was, is, or will be, will someday be condensed through one of these black holes of nothingness, and end up in the eternal destination of everything—Heaven. That is, of course, if you're good. If you're bad, you go to some other place; and by all accounts, the company isn't that great in that place.

This spirit universe that I'm talking about, that is where I live. You see, I'm supposed to help this guy named Hector accomplish a couple of miracles in that year that sorely needed some, 1994, and along the way, toward that year, help him correct some long-forgotten wrongs that had been done to folks. If I can pull them off and do it without cussing, I can then go to my next energy awareness level—hopefully—and then I can become an escort.

But before I go any further though, let me first tell you the story about Wilma. No, I didn't name her after the cartoon character that you no doubt are familiar with. Wilma just seems to be a good name for prehistoric chicks, or should I say young ladies? Now, remember I told you I was the first commissioned guardian angel ever? Well, actually, I was the second, behind my brother Hugo. Hey, I told you we don't pick the names up here. Anyway, we had the assignment to get mankind's first ancestors off all fours and walking tall, and in the meantime, we might find the first person to be escorted. I mean, these chimps needed all the help they could get. If they weren't being eaten up by large cats, or other predators of that day, they were beating each other over the heads with rocks or sticks. Sounds more like 1994 all the time, doesn't it?

I used to say to Hugo, “Hugo, you’ve been messing around down there in Africa for two million years. By the time you get that little wench to stand upright, the Buffalo Bills might have won their first Super Bowl.”

Usually, his reply would be, “Spencer, nature takes its own sweet time. You can’t just speed up the natural order of evolution that we helped to set up. You’ve even told me that yourself a million times.”

I turned to him and said with a knowing smile, knowing that if we didn’t get some results within a few millennia, our assignment might be changed.

I said, “Hugo, if we don’t start getting some results down here—and quick—we might find ourselves working with some other developing alien life cultures in a much more remote corner of the ever-expanding universe. And another thing, if we ever vote to use that Big Bang thing again, we best get somebody that knows what the hell they’re doing. We almost blew ourselves to ‘kingdom come’ before the kingdom even got there.”

With this, he started to turn red. He would do that when he got flustered. He then turned to me and said, “Spencer, I’ll get that little bitch to move her tight little, hairy ass, if it’s the last thing I ever do.” Geez! And I thought I was the one with the foul mouth.

Actually, many of the dirty words you humans have picked up over the years have come from very frustrated guardian angels. Some of the words, not all of them. You down there pick up some from us, and we up here might pick up some from you; it’s a give-and-take situation. It’s just that I have a bigger problem than most guardian angels with my mouth, and until I can get a grip on the problem, I’ll be stuck here on earth. Now, when I say I have a problem with my mouth, that doesn’t mean I run around using the “F” word like a sailor on shore leave. But let’s face it, a guardian angel shouldn’t use any cuss words at all-right?

We up here are simply spiritual versions of humans. We have feelings and emotions, but possess some powers you humans don't have. The main difference between us, though, is we don't or won't ever have to die, and that's where we help all you earthlings the most, with the living and dying. After that, it's up to "Big Daddy," or "The Big Man Upstairs," or "The Head Honcho in the Sky," or "God," or whatever else you want to call him. After you check out, it's all in his hands.

Now, just because we guardian angels never have to die is no excuse for one of us to have a foul mouth, right? You see, the way we communicate to all you hip humanoids down there is simply through the subconscious. Now, through the subconscious, a few unsavory words have leaked. You know, though, after his little display of unrestrained confidence, I, too, believed we could get the mother of all humanity's tight little cat-bitten, flea-ridden, hair-moltin' butt in gear and get mankind off to a history-making start.

Many times, I would ask Hugo, "Hugo, if you ever get the chance to be an escort, what do you think it would be like?"

"Well, Spencer, seeing there has never been any use for an escort-type guardian up to now, I haven't the foggiest idea."

After that, when we would often talk about this subject, my habitual reply would be, "You know, Hugo, it's going to be either you or me who gets the privilege of seeing what happens to the first Homo [human-type being] when nature gives you that swift kick in the ass."

"Yes, Spencer, we're the first ones to go through this process of helping the living souls on earth and guiding them to the next energy awareness level, or heaven, or whatever you want to call it. But first, we have to get a real living soul to escort, and I'm not talking about an ape, I'm talking about a Homo, a true human-like creature. And when I say 'Homo,' I don't mean some guy that lives in the Castro District of San Francisco."

Hugo and I have always worked together pretty well. I guess that's why we were chosen for this mission in the first place. You see, guardian angels aren't magicians, and certainly, they don't have the power to snap their fingers and set events in motion that would result to any outcome that they so desired. They must work with their subjects, much like a coach, trainer, or tutor of any number of endeavors, would. Most people don't choose if they can have a guardian angel or not; you all have one assigned to you at the very moment of your birth. But throughout your lives, we have the option to terminate our commitment to that person we were assigned to if that person doesn't develop a conscience. Yes, a conscience. Without it, we can no longer even begin to communicate with our pupils. Yes, indeed, a conscience, that one element along with many others that sets man apart from his apelike ancestors. But in order for man to have a conscience, he would need a much bigger package to put it in. The brain would have to grow; that meant also that the skull would have to get bigger. And both would have to happen before the conscience could move in. In the end, with a bigger brain, man would then be the dominant creature on the planet earth.

Hugo seemed puzzled at the thought of making man the dominant creature on earth.

He would say, "Why do we have to push these hairy, two-legged ape dudes into a bigger brain size? They're only going to end up like our big screw-up sixty-five million years ago, the dinosaur!"

"Now, Hugo," I would say, "you know darn well we had nothing to do with that fiasco. There were no guardians around back then, let alone anyone to put the blame on." Actually, there were guardians around; it's just that none were assigned to earth yet.

I said, "Nobody could stop that meteor from slamming into the earth, and ending the party for those big pea-brained dummies."

Hugo, though, always seemed to make sense with his well-thought-out replies. He said, “Spencer, a bigger brain will mean a quicker exit to extinction for man, a much quicker exit than those pea-brained lizard birds the dinosaur made.”

I knew the point Hugo was trying to make. The point was that, with a bigger brain, so will come more problems for man. *Envy, jealousy, arrogance, greed* are just some of man’s worst attributes. Couple all these with a bigger CC brain, and you could have big problems.

Animals manifested some of these traits, and while theirs and man’s main time occupiers were surviving and procreation, with a bigger brain, man would soon throw a big monster in the pool. That monster came by the name, *identity, or me, or self, or I*. In short—EGO!

Also, with a brain, especially a larger brain, man could develop some of the other attributes that shine the light on man’s brighter side. *Love, caring, generosity . . .* these are the attributes that balance out man’s self-centered attributes. We decided that the one tool Hugo and I should try and put in these first infantile brains, to balance the monster EGO and the brighter side Love, was a conscience! In reality, though, I really didn’t think we could pre-plant a conscience into the brain of a living, breathing soul.

Yes, Hugo agreed with me that a conscience was a good thing to plant in the human mind.

“That can be the barometer we put in man’s brain to help him balance his good side and bad side,” Hugo said with a broad smile.

“I really hate to bust your bubble, Hugo,” his smile began to evaporate, “but I really don’t think a conscience is something we can pre-plant in man’s brain. I really think it is an intangible attribute each and every one of those fuzzy little creatures has to work on themselves.”

At this point, neither Hugo nor I had any idea that we were really talking about the human mind. We thought we were just dealing with the physical brain, and all these good and bad attributes were little separate items we could add or subtract from that brain. We had to realize that these weren't physical components that fit neatly into a predetermined space on a large puzzle, but rather were the functions of that puzzling puzzle known as the human mind.

This was an extreme theory for Hugo or I to fathom. In order for us to really understand and help the little hairy dudes on that watery jewel known as earth, we had to try to understand it. We had to separate the physical from the mental—the brain being the physical, the mind being the intangible results of brain functions.

We knew that in order to get more “Bang!” out of the cannon, we needed a bigger barrel. Right now, these little guys running around down there on all fours with a brain the size of my left nut, wouldn't have a prayer in heaven or hell of ever standing erect, let alone learning to make tools, build fires, travel further distances and eventually develop great cultures and religions. What these monkey's uncles needed were bigger skulls, so we could pack more fodder into the cannon. Hugo and I knew this would take time. There was no shortcut to the creation of a bigger skull. A bigger skull to house a bigger brain. And if everything went as planned, a conscience would flourish within the confines of both.

Evolution took time, agonizingly long periods of time. For instance, take all the bad blind dates every man and woman has been on in the entire history of the world, multiply it by a million, and you still wouldn't have enough accumulated time for the evolutionary process to develop a skull for these chimps big enough to hold my right nut. Not that I have a right or left nut, or a need for sexual organs or outdoor plumbing of any kind. I just felt it was a good way to describe the fact that it was going to take one helluva long time to get these little hairy stooges to the point where they could carry

the exalted title HOMO, instead of *Australopithecus* or *Paranthropus*.

Pretty big names, I should say so myself. I got them out of a *TIME* magazine article chronicling Hugo's and my work. For those of you who want to look it up, it's in the March 14, 1994 issue. So everyone out there, don't fall over each other trying to get to the library for a back issue. I mean, these are the names which the scientists, millions of years from now, will give the little pain-in-the-asses Hugo and I were assigned to tutor and nurture. As you could see, if you had the article, the graph shows the detour to oblivion which some of our clients took. I liked to tease Hugo and say that these guys, *Paranthropus boisei* and *Paranthropus robustus*, were his best students, and the guys that made it for the long haul and survived, *Homo habilis* and *Homo erectus*, were mine.

Hugo would get plain pissed off when I brought up the failures, and he would say, "Spencer, we're working together on this project. We take equal credit for our successes, and equal credit for our failures." And then he would throw in, "And when this is all over, and we truly have a fellow with the capability of becoming a man, you realize what's going to happen?"

"No, Hugo, what's going to happen?" I would always give him a simple reply. I knew exactly what was going to happen.

"Well, when that little hairy male or female dies, one of us will be out of here. We'll have to escort him or her to the great beyond, and I won't ever see you again or vice versa." He had a point. The rule for the assignment was: When the first angel escort was chosen, their job assignment would change forever, and they would exit to a different spirit realm. I'm in the working spirit realm, locked here on earth with Hugo.

The knowledge that when this assignment was over and one of us would be chosen to escort and the other would remain alone really seemed to bother Hugo. It was the price

both of us knew we had to pay for being the first guardian angels ever assigned to the planet earth. I mean, if any of us would have been down here millions of years ago, we might have been able to save the dinosaur. Back then, the organizing forces were really stretched thin. We didn't even know those huge monstrosities had bitten the big wiener until well after that meteor hit. We took them for granted; they were doing so well for so many years. We can only wait and see if man's reign is anywhere near as long as the T-Rex and his chums.

So there we were, Hugo and I, at the threshold of the dawn of mankind. What were we going to do now? I mean, we couldn't just snap our fingers and the process of evolution would take the right direction. This process was just a crap's shoot in the dark. All we can do is act as something like a drill instructor to these little farts. They were like a group of raw recruits who needed to learn the basic skills to man the decks of this celestial ship in the heavens called planet earth. They were going to eventually be handed the guardianship of this water oasis in a thirsty solar system.

So Hugo and I settled in for the long haul, both realizing that after this, we would have to part ways and say good-bye. This made us more reluctant to complete our assignment quickly. And after conferring with one another for a considerable amount of time, we decided on a target date. About Three Million Years B.C. That would be D-Day for those apelike guys down there. We were going to try to liberate them from the same destiny that derailed the dinosaur . . . extinction!

CHAPTER 2: OUT OF THE FOREST

Hugo and I had to wait around for a damn long time, because these guys were stuck in a period of earth's history known as the Miocene. I mean, the Miocene period to these apelike guys was like letting loose a bunch of ten-year-olds in Disneyland. They're going to stay there until either the park closes or you run out of money, or both. That was what the Miocene period was like for apelike men of that time. Except, instead of roller coasters and other thrill rides to make you puke your guts out, those old boys down there had the most dense, lush, impenetrable forest the world had ever known to keep them occupied. The forest wrapped around the equator as tightly as a corset clings to a fat lady's hips. This park, however, was starting to get crowded, the rides were all full, and the lines were getting longer. When the forest started getting thinner around the beginning of the Pliocene period (I just love those big scientific names), the amusement park, known as Miocene, was about ready to sell its last season passes.

You see, the forest held a firm grip on the apes. They mostly lived in the trees, rarely coming to the ground for anything. They ate there, fought there, had sex there, and had their babies there, and maybe, most importantly, started developing their hands there. Then, when the forest started getting crowded and thinning out, it was time for some of the apes to move down from the trees and try out their feet. It is much the same way a teenager eventually finds it impossible to coexist with their parents; they just cramp their style.

Then the period came to an end. Hugo was getting continually more frustrated with the situation. That was until one beautiful morning on the African savanna, on the edge of the deep dark forest, a small group emerged.

"Spencer! Spencer! We got our humans." Actually, they weren't humans yet, but they were the closest thing we had seen in the millions of years of hanging around this East

African Disneyland. “Hugo, these creatures, I don’t believe they are humans just yet,” I told him in a calm voice.

“But they are walking pretty well,” Hugo said with the excitement of a child on Christmas morning. What had happened here? These guys were actually walking all right, and using their hands as well as any knuckle head either one of us had seen up till then. What was going on here, as we would later find out with no help from Hugo and myself, was evolution! All those tens of thousands of years Hugo and I were bitching and complaining, the miracle of evolution was flowing toward its chosen but still undetermined destiny.

So what happened was this, they had gotten to be too big to stay in the trees all the time, so they started spending more time on the ground. There, they started to walk somewhat erect. So the Adams family, as they came to be known to Hugo and I, spent their first night away from the relative safety of the mother forest, huddled and shivering together on a high plain in Eastern Africa, now known as Ethiopia—and all Hugo and I could do is sit back and marvel at the sight.

“One thing I don’t understand,” Hugo said while scratching the bald spot that was where his hairline once began, “is how did these guys stand erect on their own, when we were under the assumption that in order for them to stand upright, they needed bigger brains?” “Understandable question, Hugo. I have no answers, but I have a few theories.” I thought to myself, *Why couldn’t he just be happy and enjoy the moment?* But no-o-o-o-o-o, he had to have some scientific answers, and I was determined to give him some. “Now, stick with me on this one, Hugo, as I’m really making this up as I go along.”

“I don’t want a bunch of bull, Spencer. I just want some answers.”

“And you’ll get some, Hugo babe.” You see, Hugo was worried things were getting out of control down here, and they basically were. But all of this had a logical explanation.

“Now, Hugo, this is no formal explanation for why these guys are already walking around like any average Joe, but here it goes: The apes came down from the trees, and started spending a lot of their time on the ground. They pretty much left the trees to the monkeys; they were much better suited for life in the trees anyway. The apes were already doing things in a pretty good upright posture even in the trees, and they were using and developing their hands. They already had bigger brains than their other neighbors in the trees. So once the big fellows were down on the ground and the more they were moving around in an upright manner, not quite walking, mind you, their pelvis began to change. Just like Elvis the Pelvis used to say, ‘It’s all in the way you swing the pelvis, honey.’ You see the pelvis of the general everyday ape is large and extremely long and prevents the poor fellow from standing upright. So when his pelvis started getting shorter, with a bigger flange projecting to the rear to support his bigger ass, these two qualities made it possible for these chumps to stand erect.”

I continued, “So the pelvis has sufficiently changed for these guys to walk upright. They can see over bushes and high grasses. They can run much faster than they did before. They grab ass like you and me, and they generally are feeling pretty good about themselves. Now, their brains are about the size of both my nuts combined by now, which isn’t saying much, but they have grown. This is when they start their slow migration to the open grasslands, more opportunities . . . the unknown. Mankind is starting to use his imagination. He’s using these other two feet he has a whole lot more, realizing they sure come in handy for carrying groceries, dirty diapers, things like that. One day, his wife yelled, “Joe, can you give me a *hand* with the children?” And ever since then, that’s what we call them—*hands*. Then they started using crude tools. This demanded that they use more brainpower. Their brain was outgrowing its old quarters. They needed a bigger building for the

generator. Hence, the skull starts to grow. And presto! That's what we got sitting on their duffs out there."

Hugo looked at me with the most amazed, blank stare I have ever seen on his, or for that matter, on anyone else's face, ever.

"I have never heard such a bullshit story in all my days as a guardian." I was equally amazed to hear a cuss word come out of old Hugo's mouth. "But it makes sense."

I was pleased to think that Hugo was satisfied with my explanation. But all I did was put the "Big Three" together in a sequence that made sense to me. First, bipedalism (walking upright); second, handiness (using their hands); and after these things are accomplished, you have the result of the first two, brain development. "The Big Three," that's what I like to call them. So Hugo seemed to have a reluctant satisfaction with my explanation. He was going to have to be reluctantly satisfied with it for now, because that's the best I could come up with.

CHAPTER 3: THE SEX THING

Right about now, you might be saying to yourself, “That’s not the way I was taught in Sunday school.” However, if you read real close, it says, “God.” That’s my boss, “molded man from the clay of the earth.” Or some such thing as that. I would have to go back and look to be sure. Well, that’s what the molding process was—evolution. We all thought it would be a much more interesting process to watch man grow from an infant to adulthood, so to speak. Now we all voted on this. The big boss didn’t vote and left it up to us. And the vote ended up being fifty percent for the slow evolutionary process, forty-five percent for snap your finger and “Wham! Bam! Thank you, ma’am, there’s your man!” That’s the Adam and Eve story. Five percent abstained. As the old saying goes, “The Lord works in mysterious ways.”

So there Hugo and I stood, side by side with these noble little fellows that had been fighting the instincts of fear, failure, and the unknown. Instincts they didn’t even understand without the benefit of a brain the size of a major league baseball, but struggle and try, they did. They were beginning to develop the traits that would mark them as the true pioneers of mankind. Most of all, though, they were starting to develop the most humanlike of all emotions—love!

“Now, I don’t want to talk about sex,” Hugo yelled.

And I yelled right back at him, “If you want to understand mankind and what motivates him, you have to talk about sex, or at least what bonds him and his female friends. Now listen to this Hugo, you have all these males beating the hell out of each other to see who gets to take the first dive into the honey. We have to help them develop some kind of pair bonding, a little discretion in their mating practices. You see, the guys would mate with anything that squatted to take a pee. [Sorry if sometimes I get a little over-descriptive.] So with some encouragement, the guys and dolls started pairing

off. Each male had his very own little sex bank to make a regular deposit of genes into.” Hugo would love to hear my scientific explanations for things I didn’t know shit about.

Hugo and I really had our hands tied, dealing with these first somewhat humanlike people. They weren’t really people yet, so they had no conscience, let alone a subconscious. And that’s what I explained earlier, we guardian angels do most of our communicating to the human folk down on earth through the subconscious. Hugo was constantly getting frustrated with his efforts to communicate with our recruits. He would continually mutter the name of one of the top dogs in heaven. Why, I’ll never know. I guess it gave him a sense of release from frustration. I would find that the use of this name in these situations would become very common for men and women of every generation throughout history.

He would yell, “Jesus H Christ! What do I have to do to get through to these creatures, or whatever you want to call them?”

And I would yell back, “Now, Hugo, settle down, getting angry isn’t going to help anyone.” I was always trying to calm him down. He just didn’t realize there wasn’t much we could do for these guys. I tried to reassure him that nature was taking its course, and repeatedly told him, “Hugo, I really think that as soon as we have a real human, or *Homo*-type person down there, he’ll stand out like a redneck at an NAACP meeting.”

I have no idea how much this did to reassure Hugo that things were moving right along. But from that point onward, Hugo and I pretty much resigned ourselves to the fact we were helpless in our efforts to push these guys into advancing. We learned to just sit back in awe-inspired splendor, watching every success and failure that they had, much the same way a modern parent would revel in their son’s first hit in Little League, or their daughter’s first spoken words in the school play, or vice versa (I don’t want to sound like I’m being sexually biased here). We were becoming

proud, protective parents. We just didn't know who would be the first graduate, a male or a female.

By now, there were several types of hominids (humanlike creatures) running around on the East African savanna like a bunch of kids at a summer camp. But none of them were truly capable of becoming the everlasting link that bonded them to all of mankind's future. So, once again, like so many other times in the past, it was up to the female to bear the brunt of responsibility for mankind's destiny, and it all stems back to the sex thing.

So the females in the population decided to call a halt to all this free-for-all mating. And as in all the other situations in life, the female usually gets her way. She started eliminating some of those sexy visual signals, the signals that said, "I'm horny, come on, boys, I'll take you all on." These were the signals that drove all the males crazy. They started making their sexual signals more individualistic. The species that would soon become mankind was starting to develop what later scientists called epigamic differentiation (God, I love that big terminology). In other words, males and females were stimulated by certain individual characteristics. She really likes her guys taller, and the hairier, the better. He really likes his gals shorter and not so hairy on the butt. Get the idea?

Hugo would tell me, "Spencer, you really seem to have a real good handle on what's going on. I mean, you seem to understand it all so clearly."

And with my usual clear and precise reply, I would say, "Hugo, we have been down here so long I can't remember what you look like with a full head of hair. You keep scratching that hairline back further and further." His eyes seemed to say, "What did I do to deserve a remark like that?"

I said, "You see, Hugo, old buddy, what we are down here, are probably the first scientists in the earth's history. The first great attribute of a true scientist is his ability to be

patient and observe. And that's what we have both been doing here for about a million years, just observing."

Stopping suddenly in his rocking chair (yes, we have rocking chairs up here, too), he blurted out, "You mean, that's all there is to it, you just have to be a good observer?"

I said, "That's all I've ever done. Try it. You might find yourself seeing things in a whole new light."

So with both of us witnessing more closely the beginnings of mankind, we could see that these guys were really starting to get their act together. Through the introduction of epigamic differentiation (I just get chills when I say those big words), mankind was able to tone down much of his sexual aggressiveness. With the introduction of pair bonding, mankind was on his way to building a society that lived together more harmoniously. Males were taking part in parental care, and food sharing was becoming possible. So, from then on, Hugo and I were going to have to start watching very closely for that chosen one that would forever set himself or herself apart from the past, and signal the true beginnings of mankind.

CHAPTER 4: THE LEGEND

“And God created man in his image.” Does that mean that God looks like a stand-in for a part in *Planet of the Apes*? I hardly think that’s what the word “image” means here. I never personally had the chance to meet the Old Boy; none of us guardians ever had that privilege. Now, if you took that statement literally, “in his image,” what perfect human image would that be? Tall and blond, with blue eyes? Or dark skin, with big dimples and brown eyes? Who’s to say that it would be a man at all? He may be a woman, or a midget car salesman from Siberia. I mean, what does, “in his image” mean? Or did “image” mean certain intangible characteristics inherent only to man, things that weren’t necessarily physical characteristics. They were starting to show some of the fruits of the Spirit. And anyone that ever opened a Bible would know what I mean by that. These fruits of the Spirit were not a reflection of a physical image. Rather, it was a spiritual image that man was quickly developing.

By now, Hugo and I had resolved to just being idle observers. We now had plenty of action to fill our viewing pleasure hours. We had four separate groups of humanlike dudes to observe now. Hugo and I were positive that out of this group, one would emerge as the forerunner of mankind. Unfortunately, for *A. africanus* and *A. robustus*, a certain modern sport would signal that their endless summer was over . . . and that sport was surfing!

Now, you might be saying to yourself, “For Christ’s sake, what the hell is this guy talking about? These prehistoric creatures are surfing?” Now the popular notion is that surfing was invented by the people that now inhabit the Hawaiian Islands. However, if you could have seen old *robustus* shoot the curl or *africanus* hang ten, let’s just say nobody south of Ventura County had anything on these hairy guys. These guys weren’t a bunch of big graceless, spineless fools. Rather, they were strong, with a considerable amount

of coordination mixed with a never-say-die attitude. They also had an extraordinary need to mimic whatever they saw, and what one group of *africanus* witnessed roaming the countryside, on what was probably a warm spring day all those years ago, would forever change their destiny.

It was warm and humid on the East African savanna that fateful day. With the smell of rain in the air and the clouds gathering quickly, even these big dummies knew it was time to call off the hunt and look for shelter from the approaching storm. All throughout this region of East Africa, which is now called the Great Rift Valley, these fellows were used to flash floods. And boy, when it rained, it came down like a cow pissin' on a flat rock. They also knew by experience that when a flash flood hit, you didn't want to be caught in one of the many small and large canyons that dotted eastern and southern Africa. And when it started coming down this time, these old boys were feelin' the need to get religion. They had taken cover under a ledge, just above a wide ravine. The clouds began to individually burst like overfilled water balloons at a kids' summer camp.

Now, before I go any further, let me describe the different individual features of these two species. I mean, they weren't exactly casting doubles for Frankie and Annette. The *robustus* were bigger and heavier boned. They were barrel-chested, five-footers, and weighed up to two hundred pounds. The females were shorter and thinner, but their frames were still robust. The *africanus* were shorter and weighed less than the bigger *robustus*, they could arguably swim better and probably were a tad more agile.

The sport these two species were about to discover was going to demand all the best from their different attributes, and then some. Now, when the clouds started busting like the first adolescent pimples on a thirteen-year-old's face, they found the *africanus* clan huddled safely, high above the quickly swelling gulch below. Suddenly, they saw coming from some distance what looked to them like a small floating

grove of trees, carried away in the quickly moving currents. Several huge trees had been uprooted and were all clumped together, giving the impression of a floating island. Then, just as quickly as the rains began, the *africanus* realized that the floating island was inhabited by a small group of *robustus* clinging to every branch for their very lives. This sparked their interest instantly, for they had never witnessed a sight such as this before. *Robustus* mothers losing grasp of their babies, unable to hold them while staying attached to the trees at the same time, would dive in after their young in a futile attempt to save their lives. The males were also losing their lives in the quick-moving watery depths.

By the time, the small island was directly under the point where the *africanus* were observing all this action. The huge clump of trees had broken up. Branches, logs, and other kinds of debris were following this ghost of a river, which, in a matter of an hour or two, would be nothing more than a mud puddle. At this point, almost all of the *robustus* had fallen off their floating lifeboats and had drowned. Directly across the mesmerized *africanus*, they observed a big *robustus* male. He was quite possibly the biggest super *robustus* on the continent. This guy was probably well over two hundred pounds, a giant for his time. He was clutching for his life to a huge tree that had split in half.

He was on his stomach holding on for dear life, when suddenly, out of the blue, he propped up to a kneeling position while still holding on with both hands. This, by itself, was an amazing feat of balance. Within a matter of seconds, he surpassed that accomplishment and bounced to his feet. This, up to that time, had to have been the single greatest athletic feat in the annals of pre-human history. This guy was surfing, and you know, he was sitting on top of the world. What motivated this pre-human hominid to even attempt this unbelievable act? One can only speculate. *Man, I'm going to die anyway, why not go out in style*, he may have thought. Or hell! This thought might have shot threw his brain, *If only ESPN could see me now, I know I could get*

a bit part in that surfing movie. Well, whatever thoughts went through his mind to stimulate such a response to this terrifying situation, one thing is for sure, he sure gained some fans in that small group of on-looking *africanus*.

They were hootin' and hollerin', jumpin' up and down; they were literally becoming unglued. I haven't seen such excited sport fans since the Mets won the series in '69, and they were doing all this cheering for their archrival, a *robustus*. Whenever they would meet, usually by accident, an armed conflict would more than likely erupt. Somebody would get rapped upside his head with a stick, or get brained with a big rock. Violence just seemed like the natural response to an unknown stranger. Usually, there was no single incident that sparked the violence. One group would be hunting berries, when suddenly they were surprised by another rival group returning from some meat-scavenging trip. They would often claim the remains of animals not completely eaten by some big carnivore. Then, when they met, they just started beatin' the hell out of one another.

Well, they put all their differences aside when they saw that big *robustus* riding that river to everlasting glory. For the first time in their lives, they saw something truly heroic to try to emulate. By this time, the huge, soon-to-be-a-legend *robustus* was long gone and out of sight. He ended up surviving his catastrophic experience, only to end up three miles downstream, disoriented and totally exhausted, without a clue as to how he accomplished his great feat. With everyone he was once familiar with now dead, the huge living legend roamed the countryside aimlessly, looking for some place to call home. Never finding that place, he did what all great surfers do. He didn't die; he just faded away.

CHAPTER 5: END OF “THE RIDE”

Now, by the time the group that had witnessed the miracle had returned home, this guy had become the biggest thing to hit the planet earth since that meteor did during the dinosaur period. Within days, the group had spread the news to all the other *africanus* in the area, and even some of the *robustus* had heard what one of their own kind had done. Now, I don't know if it was by word of mouth, or grunt of mouth, but the news of this great athletic feat spread like one of the frequent wildfires and flash floods that occurred in the area. The news spread from the southern tip of Africa to the northern end of the Great Rift Valley. But no one was more eager to try out their new found passion for surfing than the six male *africanus* that were a part of the original group that saw “The Ride,” as it came to be known.

So every time the conditions seemed right for rain, they would haul any wood big enough to support their weight down to the place that they knew would become an instant river if it rained hard enough. Usually, they waited in vain, only to be disappointed by a few sprinkles that would hardly do more than settle the dust. On those occasions, however, when the clouds burst open and the ghost-like river appeared like an apparition on a dark night, those were the moments the *africanus* were waiting for. They would throw their wood and themselves into the water and hang on for dear life, trying in every way possible to recreate the miracle they had witnessed not long ago. Some of these brave fellows actually drowned. All they knew is they wanted very much to capture the excitement that the big *robustus* no doubt must have experienced on his legendary ride.

So they continued in vain to try to copy “The Ride.” Although some had limited success, these guys were getting killed much more frequently than their few successes would justify. But you have to remember you're dealing with a species that's still a few cards short of a full deck of playing cards. It was the damnedest sight to see *robustus* and

africanus side by side on the banks of a gulch that would possibly swell into a river if the clouds burst. It was like a test of manhood for these guys, who weren't quite yet part of the family of mankind. I guess you could say it was a test of their "apehood." On those occasions when the clouds exploded with torrents of water, you could see literally hundreds of *africanus* and *robustus* taking their last, somewhat upright steps, into the rushing waters. Their walking manner was basically upright by now, but they were still so stiff and un-erect. They looked like a bunch of blue hairs wading into the surf at Miami Beach.

As you could guess, little was getting done on the home front. Hunting parties were being called off, the children were going hungry at times, new places for shelter were being left unexplored, and the women were being left back at camp to do almost everything for themselves. They wanted nothing to do with the boys' new-found passion: surfing. The sport, however, did bring the *africanus* and *robustus* together like nothing else possibly could, but it was also slowly leading to their self-inflicted extinction. They were committing genocide on themselves at a rate of thousands every time there was a rainstorm. Rarely, after one of these surfing events took place, did a female see her mate drag his sorry butt back into camp ever again. Both of these species were dying out, and there was nothing anyone could do about it.

Hugo would ask me, "Spencer, we have to intervene here or the females are going to start looking pretty good to one another. The males are killing themselves off with this idiotic sport, surfing like nobody's business."

"I know, Hugo, but we can't step in. We have to let nature take its course." And with that, we resigned ourselves to the fact that *africanus* and *robustus* would soon join the dinosaur in the dustbin of history. It was a warm sunny day, with high humidity and a hint of rain in the air, when Hugo and I realized that the *africanus* and *robustus* weren't with

us anymore. By now, they would have been lined up, back to back and side by side, ready to take a ride. But that time was gone, and we would never see the likes of them again. Until, of course, the people of Hawaii decided to officially invent the sport.

Both species soon became extinct. The females did their best to carry on, but soon fell to the ravages that the African continent could inflict upon you. The chapter closed on a very noble group of manlike creatures. They weren't alone when they became extinct though, the first true humanlike creature that could truly be called *Homo* was with them to the very end. She was from the group *Homo habilis* and her name just happened to be Wilma.

CHAPTER 6: THE FIRST SAINT

When Hugo and I realized that we had spotted the first true human being, we were outwardly very happy. Inwardly though, we knew that the time was short for all of us. We knew that when Wilma passed on, either Hugo or I would suddenly disappear, never to see one another in this earthly realm again. She would need an escort to the hereafter life, and someone would have to keep her company until others followed. What was truly fascinating about Wilma was her ability to break away from her species and help her fellowman, so to speak. To the dying species *robustus* and *africanus*, she was Mother Teresa and Florence Nightingale rolled into one. These poor creatures, however, didn't vanish from the face of the earth alone.

We could see that she possessed many of the qualities needed to be considered a true human: kindness, gentleness, generosity, and above all, she had a workable conscience. Hugo and I could actually communicate with her. We let her know in her own language, which at the time wasn't much more than a few grunts and groans, how proud we were of her for helping the *africanus* and *robustus* in their last days, and for her efforts to try to stop the males in their self-inflicted genocide. Above all, we comforted her in the realization that we would always be there for her.

You should have seen her in those sad last days of the *africanus* and *robustus*. She would bring water for those too weak to make the trip to the pond. She would help deliver the last babies born to the two different species. She would help them find shelter, or gather berries, or most of all, just be there for those that knew that all the others they had once known were now gone. For this, Hugo and I elected her as the first saint of the human race.

The saddest thing of all was that, for all her great and noble efforts, she could no longer go back to her species. She was ostracized forever from her group, never to return. They

couldn't understand helping all these other groups, which, to them, were nothing more than menaces. They all competed for the same food, water, and space to live and roam upon. But above all, they vied for dominance over each other.

So, for the rest of her days, Wilma led a solitary life. Finding food and shelter on her own and learning to live with the hardest thing of all—loneliness. It would break her heart to see bands of her former group *Homo habilis* out hunting for food, shelter or just testing the boundaries of their territory. Many in the group were once her friends. She knew to stay clear of them though, for if they had discovered her, they would most certainly have killed her. They had not advanced quite as far as she had. You see, in the course of human development, or evolution, or whatever you want to call it, it's always individuals that set the standard for the group to follow. It's the same today, as it was in the days of Wilma. These people are special, and you humans have a name for them, and that name is, genius.

She had not come into actual physical contact with another group of *Homo habilis* until that time when the days were getting shorter and the sun was much weaker. A group of hunters had stumbled upon her, six in all. They were of her species, but certainly from another group for she didn't recognize any of them. For this, she seemed relieved, for if they didn't know of her being ostracized from the other groups, they might spare her life. She was sadly mistaken though, for this band of *Homo habilis* were outcasts from the other main groups. They had not seen a female for weeks and she looked like a sailor's dream to these old boys. All night they took turns abusing her. In the morning, they awoke and were gone before first light. She was left for dead, but did survive the ordeal. They had broken her left leg and a couple of ribs. She was, however, very grateful to still be alive. Deep down, I really think she knew we would be there when her time to leave the earth came, and that time was not far off.

Her leg did not heal well, and for the rest of her life, she walked with a limp. She could barely take care of herself now, residing as close as possible to water so she wouldn't have far to go when her thirst sprang up. Her days and nights were mostly spent in caves, hiding from huge carnivores or rampaging groups of hyenas that most certainly would have eaten her. The days were now getting short for the three of us. Hugo and I knew that when Wilma passed on, we possibly would never see one another again for a long, long time. Only if Hugo and I were both eventually chosen to be escorts would we ever have the hope of seeing one another in the future.

Not much different from the wistful mornings, when the throngs of *robustus* and *africanus* would gather to catch that first wave, if it had rained hard enough. I was out scanning the countryside in search of Wilma. I looked everywhere for the little gal. I searched in all her old hiding places. Places where she would feel secure, at least as secure as she could possibly have felt. During the process of my searching, I realized that I hadn't seen Hugo sulking and pouting around all morning. This didn't send up red flags for there were many times days would go by that I wouldn't see Hugo at all. Today was different though, I could feel change in the air. Never were Hugo and Wilma both far off at the same time, if I wanted to get hold of one or the other. I couldn't remember a time when either Hugo or Wilma wasn't there for me to carry on a simple conversation with. Oh, it did rain that day, not on the earth, but in my heart.

When I came upon that little body of the Mother of Humanity, even I, a great, big guardian angel, broke down and cried. I also realized that Hugo was the chosen one, the one chosen to be the first escort angel. I had to bury the body soon so hyenas and other scavengers wouldn't devour her remains. My decision to bury her on a hill overlooking the Great Rift Valley was a joint decision of Hugo and mine, for we had discussed it many times before. We had decided that whoever was left to take care of the arrangements would

bury her there. After all, the Great Rift Valley is where humankind first sprang to life. So it only would be appropriate that that would be the place to lay to rest the Mother of Humanity.

After saying a few words and a final good-bye to both, I sat down and cried for three straight days. So that was it, my first assignment. In all my years here on earth, I have nothing to compare it to. It still brings tears to my eyes nearly two million years later.

I've yet to become an escort. I suppose I'm destined to stay here on earth forever, as a guardian angel. Never to be able to retire and help those dearly departed in life's greatest change: death. So that was the story of Wilma, destined to always have a warm spot in my heart. I suppose your first assignment is usually your most memorable.

Many eons have passed since that day when I buried Wilma in that place overlooking the Great Rift Valley. And although a few anthropologists have come close to digging her up, she still lies peacefully in about the same spot I laid her to rest.

PART TWO: HECTOR'S STORY

CHAPTER 7: 1945: THE WATERSHED OF TIME

Never before, or since, has there been a year like 1945. If there has been, I haven't seen it, and I've seen them all. From New York to Berlin, the world was at war. From El Centro, California, Hector's birthplace, to Hiroshima, a city soon to be leveled by a magical new weapon, the world was in the grip of a war the likes of which no one had ever seen.

Hector was conceived in December of another momentous year: 1944. By the time he was three months old inside the womb, his dad was on the threshold of death just off a faraway island in the Pacific. The island's name, Iwo Jima. He was a coxswain in the navy. He was landing marines on the shores of the volcanic island when the landing craft he was in charge of took a direct hit from a Jap heavy gun entrenched high above the landing site. There was nothing left of Hector's dad or the other sailors and marines from the craft. The only thing from that craft that made it to the shores and sands of Iwo Jima that day were a few old photos of loved ones, carried by the sailors and marines for good luck. There were many more who died before the year 1945 ran its course.

Hector's parents, at least his father, Samson, and his grandparents came west in 1937. They were probably the only Mexicans to migrate with the Okies after Oklahoma turned to dust in the early '30s. You see, Hector's grandparents, Juan and Gloria, came over the border years earlier from Juarez, Mexico, just over the border from El Paso, Texas.

They worked in the cotton fields of Texas for years before he and his wife decided to give it a go in the corn and wheat fields of Oklahoma. He used to write home to his hometown Juarez and brag that he knew old Will Rogers. I don't think anyone believed him. For that matter, I don't think any of them knew who Will Rogers was anyhow. When they came to

California from Salisaw, Oklahoma, with a family named Joad, people wondered out loud, “I never saw Okies with such a deep dark tan as that bunch, but they talk like Okies just the same.” You see, these Mexican folks had been around Okies for so long even their Spanish accent had faded away, and was replaced with the familiar Okie twang. This sometimes fooled some of the folks they came in contact with during their odyssey west.

Hector’s last name was Ortega, and believe me, they were the only Ortegas in that mass migration of Smiths, Joneses, Williamses and Joads that came west. They even met a young fellow who was writing a book, I think he called it *The Grapes of Wrath*. Anyway, they came across the border of California at Yuma and pretty much settled for a time with the other Okies in the Great Imperial Valley of California. They picked fruit and vegetables from the orange groves around El Centro to as far north as the vineyards of Fresno. A common joke that sprang up in the small farm towns that dotted the California countryside was, “What do you get when you cross an Okie with a Mexican?” The usual reply would be, “I don’t know. What do you get?”

The joke teller says, “I don’t know, but it sure can pick lettuce.” Then everyone would laugh until the laughter faded like the dissipating steam escaping from a boiler safety valve.

They worked hard and they stayed in their own community. The Ortegas did not blend with the other small Mexican communities of the region. Rather, they chose to stay attached to their Okie brothers whom they migrated west with. With the mass migration of Anglos from the Midwest in the ’30s, many of the Mexican workers that had been there already decided to pack it in and head south, back to Mexico. Many years later, that trend would change, and the Mexican would again become the despised by their fellow Mexican brothers. For they came out west with the Okies, and with the Okies they were going to stay. It was like seeing

a cat run with a pack of dogs, a strange sight to behold, especially during that era.

When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in '41, Hector's dad, Samson, and his two uncles Victor and Silas were some of the first boys in line to join the military. They wanted to kill the Japs and the Germans, like every other red-blooded, all-American boy back then. Hector's dad wanted to join the navy. He figured he had spent enough time in the dirt as a kid in the fields. Besides, he remembered the trips he and his family would take to San Diego as a child to see relatives and go to the zoo. Many of his relatives had, years earlier, come north from the Baja California Peninsula, seeking a better life in the fields of California, finally settling in the small town east of San Diego, El Cajon.

He would spend summer days on Silver Strand Beach watching some of the big navy ships cruise in and out of San Diego Bay. He dreamed of far-off exotic islands, or other lands he couldn't pronounce the names of. More than anything, though, he remembered his dad telling him, "If you have to die for your country, son, at least, in the navy, your chances of dyin' clean and with a full stomach are pretty good." You see, Hector's granddad was one of those desperados that ran with Poncho Villa and played hide-and-seek with General Pershing down in Mexico. He knew what it felt like to be hungry, dirty, and hunted like a dog. He would tell Samson stories of how he and his fellow banditos would lead the great gringo army from the north on wild goose chases.

All three brothers went to war. Hector's dad paid the ultimate price—he died. Victor joined the marines and was wounded at Guadalcanal. Silas served in the army, fought for "Old Blood and Guts" General Patton, and damned near lost both his feet to frostbite at the Bulge in '44. By the end of '45, all three were home again. Two earned the Purple Heart, and although the remains of Hector's dad were never recovered,

he, too, returned home to find a permanent spot in the hearts and memories of all his countrymen.

Hector was born in August of '45—August 6 to be exact—the same day that the magical new weapon, the atomic bomb, leveled the Japanese city of Hiroshima. I had nothing to do with that momentous event. By now, there were many guardian angels working the world over. I was definitely not alone but I still missed Hugo greatly. I was surely hoping Hector would be my last assignment. I was getting very tired of the human condition at this late date. Still, I longed to be an escort and possibly see Hugo and Wilma again.

Anyway, as I was saying, Hector was born in August of '45. All the relatives, Okie and Mexican alike, came to the hospital to see the baby Hector's dad would never see, at least here on this earth. Everyone "ohhhh-ed" and "ahhhh-ed," all the while making their silliest expressions, reserved only for the maternity ward of a hospital. Everyone said he looked just like his dad Samson. I didn't come up with that name, either. He had plenty of dark brown hair and a set of lungs that would have put Frank Sinatra to shame. Both of Hector's uncles, Silas and Victor, visited the hospital—Silas on crutches and Victor in a wheel chair. Silas' feet were healing fine, but he still needed many more months of recuperation. Victor's injuries were the kind that may prevent him from ever walking normally again. He had half his ass blown away by a Jap grenade. They still were both so proud to be there.

Hector's mother's name was Victoria, and she was devastated by her husband's death. With the birth of her new son, and with all the support from family and the community, her depression soon started to subside. She was a tall, beautiful woman who, many felt as she got older, resembled Sophia Loren. In no time at all, she began to have male callers. Victor had always had an eye for Victoria, even before Samson had ever married her. But even with Samson gone now, he knew he would never have a chance with her,

for when half his ass was blown away, both his below-the-belt jewels went with it. This was still a young woman that needed a man with all the equipment still attached to make a proper hook-up.

The core of the Ortega clan were Hector's two uncles, Silas and Victor; his aunt Stella; his grandparents from his dad's side; Juan, his granddad; and Gloria, his grandma. The other side of the family, his mother's side, were the ones that settled outside San Diego. In fact, most of them didn't even work in the fields anymore. Nearly all of them were either employed in the shipyards or worked on fishing boats in and around San Diego Harbor. This side of his family he would never grow close to. For his mother had run away from home at the age of thirteen with his dad, and had not kept in touch. The shame they felt toward her was sometimes overwhelming, for they were devout Catholics. Time did heal much of the pain, and when Hector's parents migrated to California, they occasionally would see Victoria's side of the family in San Diego.

By the end of '45, the world could blame the exit of seventy- one million human souls from this life on the Axis Powers, particularly, Hitler. Needless to say, there was one hell of a need for guardian escorts during that war; even then, I never got the call to be an escort. After the war, life got back to normal in the fields, in and around the Imperial Valley. For many who were getting restless, it was time to move on and out of the extremely warm Imperial Valley area, and look for greener pastures in the north. So the Ortegas and two other Okie families moved north, for they were still agricultural workers. Juan and Gloria decided to stay behind. The ones that went north settled in a small town just north of Stockton, California—Lodi was one of them to be exact—to pick beans and peas, work in the canneries or do any number of other physical jobs they were well suited for. Hector was two by then, and up to that point, hadn't said one single everyday word. He was different. People could see right off that he was a little different. By the time he was three, he still

hadn't said one single, recognizably normal, everyday word. He could read though, not storybooks or nursery rhymes, but anything with chemical names attached to it. It was the damnedest thing you would ever want to see.

CHAPTER 8: THE CHEMICAL MOZART

Victoria would sit outside her modest little home that was provided by the landowners and watch the people gather to hear her son read something that had chemical references attached to it. She would say, “My son is not a freak, but for five dollars each, he’ll read anything you got there for him to look at, as long as it has those long chemical names in it.”

A voice in the crowd yelled, “Five bucks! We’re not rich out here.”

Victoria replied, “I said five bucks or move on down the nroad.”

The same voice asked, “How do we know he just didn’t memorize those big fancy words—or that you just aren’t coaching him in the pronunciation?”

Victoria laughed and said, “How the hell am I going to coach him in the pronunciation of words I can’t even pronounce?” This usually shut the crowd up. After all, how can you argue with that? Then they would sheepishly hand over their money and get a sample of something they wanted the boy to read. She realized she had a possible gold mine in her loving little son, Hector. People brought the backs of cereal boxes, old containers that fertilizers came in, laundry detergent packages, pesticide buckets, anything that had those huge scientific names on them, or Latin words that most college professors had a hard time pronouncing. Yet, they still handed over their money, knowing that they were seeing a once-in-a-lifetime miracle taking place. A boy who didn’t talk, but could read and seemingly understand anything related to chemicals . . . and he was barely just three years old. People in the area also called Hector “The Shit Mozart” because, along with knowing chemicals, he could also tell you, by taking one good sniff of a pile of crap, what animal made that pile of shit (I know it sounds gross,

but I'm not kidding). And that, of course, was without seeing the animal first. Anything—bird, man, dog, cat, mouse or bat, it didn't matter. With one good sniff, he could tell you the family, species, genus . . . everything. This, however, was always just a sideline for Hector compared to his chemical reading. It didn't matter. Everyone still got a big kick out of it.

Victoria realized, by having this multitalented son, that, at this rate, she soon would be able to move out of the seasonal farm worker's housing, and get something on her own, for her and her son. There were television offers, offers to go to universities and be studied by the so-called experts. Last but not least, there were offers to buy his life story for the purpose of making lots of money. Now, that one I didn't get. How do you make a life story about a three-year-old kid? Anyway, he was what they called in the scientific community an idiot savant, which is a person that is so stupid, they don't realize how smart they really are. There is no learning process that takes place; it's as if they were born with the knowledge.

I wondered what my purpose was going to be in his life. Nineteen ninety-four was the target year for the miracles he would be associated with, and that was still about forty years off. How was I going to communicate with him? After all, like Wilma, Hector was different, and to communicate with him would require a different angle. It couldn't just be through his subconscious.

By the time Hector was four years old, much of the novelty of his specialness had worn off; people were just tired of this so-called miracle. Hector did, however, still visit the College of the Pacific in Stockton and took a trip to nearby Berkeley to be studied by the expert staffs. These jaunts soon evaporated, which meant that Hector would once again take his place in the fields with all the other Okie and Mexican migrants. He was on the verge of turning five

years old but, already, he was in those fields with everyone else, scratching out a living.

Victoria would say, "I may not have gotten rich off little Hector, but my dream of having a brand-new car came true." And how! With all the money she made on the oddity that was her son, she went down and bought a brand-spanking-new '49 Buick Roadmaster! She was the envy of the entire tiny farm community in which they lived. They didn't make enough money to drive it much, though, so they kept it parked most of the time in an old barn that the landlord farmer hadn't used in years. On Sundays, after church, they would go for drives in the countryside, sometimes into Stockton to watch a matinee, or down to the river to catch a catfish for dinner. Either way, people in the neighborhood were willing to pay just to go for a little drive in the country in that beautiful car.

"When can I get a ride with that pretty little mother of yours by myself?" was a question asked to Hector by a big sloppy giant of an Okie man who had eyes for his mother. His name was Jed. Hector was five years old and still never talked to anyone but his mother, so naturally there was no reply. He did know that this guy would watch his mother and the other women in the fields from the portable toilets put out for the workers to use. Hector could see his face peering out through that wire mesh at the top of the outhouse. "Why does it always take that old boy such a long time to take a tinkle?" was a question that would go through Hector's head.

Many men were after the favors Victoria could offer. They had a certain respect, though, for what was a very fine lady. One day, Hector brought to the attention of Silas, and one helluva big Mexican man, his concerns about the extent of time Jed would use to take a piss and his constant glaring through the wire mesh at the women folk. Hector didn't say anything; he just took his uncle Silas' hand and pulled him and the huge Mexican man over to the outdoor commode. They, too, had noticed that Jed took very frequent and long

piss breaks. So their curiosity was aroused as to what Hector wanted to show them.

Silas said, “Jesus Christ, Jed, what the hell are you doing, you low-life pervert?” The big Mexican fellow had opened the door to the commode, and in one swift powerful motion not only jerked Jed senseless while he was about to ejaculate, but pulled his arm so hard he sent him sprawling to the ground outside the foul-smelling commode.

“Look at that tiny little weenie old Jed has. Can’t be much bigger than one of those sausages you get in those little cans,” the big Mexican said. By now, it had shrunk down a bit and everyone had gathered around to have a good laugh.

Silas said, “Jed, you get that sorry horny butt the hell out of here. Spanking your monkey while women and children folk are around, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Now get the hell outta here, boy.” With that, Silas gave him a swift kick on his still bare butt.

“I don’t want to see you around here no more, Jed. If I do, I’ll cut that sorry excuse for a pecker off.” And with that, the people that had gathered to have a good laugh turned back to the fields that awaited for their return. Their laughing faces were soon replaced by the straight and sullen ones they wore in the fields. Everyone wondered, would Jed ever have enough guts to show his sorry face again in this small farm community?

Hector had finally come out of his shell, and was speaking, to a limited extent, to people he liked or admired. One man he chose to speak to was an Anglo man whom Hector had admired for some time. His name was Clint. He was not part of the migrant population, but rather, was hired by the local farmers to handle the pesticides used in the fields and orchards around the area. This work instantly caught the attention of Hector, the local chemical idiot savant. Clint had a strong resemblance to a young William Holden, who at the time was a big star in Hollywood. He had also caught the eye of Victoria, and she in turn had caught

his. But for him, he had no interest in mixing the races. He really wasn't a racist. He thought she was pretty and all, but back then, interracial mixing was taboo. That was too bad for Hector; he would have loved to have Clint as his dad. Hour after hour, all they would talk about was chemicals, their makeup, uses, and how to apply them. This was the only subject Hector could relate to anyone about. He was a moron about everything else in life, but when it came to chemicals, he was a documented genius.

“Clint, why don't you want to take my mommy someplace nice, just you and her alone? I can see the way you look at her when you know she's not looking,” Hector would ask in a voice suited for someone you wouldn't think was some kind of idiot savant.

After a brief pause, at this most awkward moment to clear the blush from his face, Clint said, “Hector, I realize you and I get along well and someday, you would like a dad. But there are some differences between us you can't ignore, and your mom and I have some of these differences.” How else do you explain the unreasonable restrictions put on people by racism?

“Is it that you're white, and me and my mommy are brown?” Stunned and embarrassed at the realization that Hector had exposed him, Clint said, “That may have something to do with it.” Actually, that had everything to do with it, for if Clint had his way about it, he would have courted Victoria long before then. Clint didn't realize at the time that there was no fighting destiny, and Victoria and Hector were his destiny.

Hector was six or seven by now, and I still had a hard time trying to communicate with the kid. I never had to try to get through to an idiot savant before, and this boy had some important things to get done in his lifetime. Everything else in life really didn't register with him—except chemistry—and nothing grabbed his attention more than to watch Clint and the crew spray the fields and orchards. The rows of crops and

the perfect straight lines the orchards fell into represented order to Hector, a kind of order that had always been missing from his insecure life.

One other thing Hector and Clint had in common, besides chemicals that is, was going to the movies and watching Westerns. They would go to Stockton just about every week and watch the included hours upon hours of Westerns. Also, war movies, but mostly Westerns. One time, when Clint finally got up enough nerve and broke his bigoted routine, he asked Victoria to come along.

He said, "To hell with this racial stuff," and asked her out. So all three went to the movies, not to a matinee, but to an evening showing. The movie was *High Noon*, and from then on, my relationship with Hector would never be the same again.

CHAPTER 9: HIGH NOON FOR HECTOR

All three jumped into the '49 Buick Roadmaster. Clint also loved to get a ride in the old buggy whenever he got the chance. He drove an old '36 Ford, and many people kidded him. That's the reason why he broke down and started dating Victoria. It was his way of getting more chances to drive that great, big, wonderful new car. Anyway, everywhere they went, he drove; he was the only one allowed to drive the car other than Victoria.

They arrived that night at the downtown Stockton Theater to watch that soon-to-become Western classic. All dressed up and completely full from that all-you-can-eat buffet, Clint treated them to a movie. The three sat in that old theater waiting to be treated to a Western, that ultimate form of escapism.

Hector had seen Tom Mix and Roy Rogers before, and had really enjoyed John Wayne and Montgomery Clift in *Red River*. But when he laid his eyes on Gary Cooper, he knew he had found a hero for life. Most boys from that era liked John Wayne, but what Gary Cooper represented was something he needed in his own life, and that was order and the ability to get rid of the bad guy. It was an ability Hector would one day find he also had a talent for.

Upon seeing the glow on little Hector's face after he saw the picture, I realized I might have my chance at making a connection with the boy. Hector was eight years old by now, and he saw that award-winning movie every chance he got, as long as it stayed at the local theater. He saw it three more times with Clint, two more times with his mother Victoria, twice with his uncle Silas, and twelve times on his own, for his mother didn't mind him riding his bike the short distance from the fields to the downtown theater in Stockton. All together, he saw it twenty times including the first time, and he remembered every bit of dialogue in the movie. He could

tell you how many clocks were on the walls, how many shots were fired in the final climatic gun battle. He could even tell you how many times Gary Cooper said “Yup” in the movie.

That’s it! I thought to myself. I will someday transform that little guy into the very living likeness of Gary Cooper and allow him to carry out the old-fashioned justice that only a Marshal like Will Kane can perform. Now, how to go about all this, and how the process would take place, will all come to me later. It would all be so complicated. Life is complicated, even for guardian angels.

Before the world could move from the twentieth century and into the next millennium, some deep wrongs would have to be corrected. And that’s where this poor little simple-minded fellow Hector was going to come in—yeah, him and those chemical abilities he has, those would be the key. This was going to prove to be the trickiest and most difficult assignment I ever had to pull off. And if I could do it, I might finally have that long-awaited chance of retirement, and become a full-time greeter and escort. That is, also, if I could get good control of my mouth.

What I needed to do was to somehow send a messenger to Hector, someone to help him along to the needed end. As I kept thinking, the name of Wyatt Earp kept coming up, again and again. Why? I thought. I didn’t know, probably because he was one helluva real-life lawman in his own right. He always seemed to be a man of good moral fortitude, who told the truth, and was a good example for kids. Then I just said, “Hell! That’s who’ll I’ll send to help and explain to Hector his destiny. What better man could there be to explain the situation to Hector?” After coming to that conclusion, I felt much better.

Hector was just about eight years old by now, and I was really enjoying the time watching him grow. He still kept very much to himself, except when he was around Clint or his mother or possibly his Uncle Silas. While he worked in the fields, he would stay to himself. He wasn’t going to a

regular school for they weren't ready to have someone so different among the so-called normal children. Many considered him to be mentally retarded, but the teachers knew he had a gift, they just didn't know how to handle anyone that had the gifts he had. He had a hard time reading, unless it was something regarding chemistry. Mathematics did not register whatsoever, unless it was a formula relating to chemicals. Hence, they had no idea what to do with him; he slipped further and further behind, until he dropped out of school altogether. After that, he and his family became full-time fruit tramps.

This was so very sad a story, for here was a youngster with the ability to become a Nobel Prize winner in chemistry, and he was being ignored and swept under the table, just because he was different. Most of the people in the farm community, including his mother and Clint, really didn't appreciate the extraordinary talent Hector had. This allowed him to fall through the cracks. Although he fell through the cracks, he still grew up being loved and nurtured. The family would work the orchards in and around the Stockton area from early spring, when the cherries were ripe and ready. Then later in the harvest season, they would follow the gypsy trail north to pick apples in Washington.

The trips north would always prove to be a trying time for both Hector and his mother Victoria. They were both becoming very attached to Clint, and hated these periods of separation. He was not part of the migrate way of life. He was born in Lodi, grew up in Lodi, and would, more than likely, one day be pushing up daisies in Lodi. For Hector and Victoria, they wouldn't have cared if Clint was from Fairbanks, Alaska—they just knew he was the man for both of them, and they wanted to be where he was. Clint really felt the same way; he just had a harder time coming to terms with his feelings. He knew they would be back after a few months of being on the road to settle into another winter of content familiarity. During this period, the migrants would

get some odd jobs here or there, or do some badly needed winter pruning in the off-season.

He knew that when they got back, he would take his normal position in their lives. Victoria would cook up that great Mexican food that she was famous for, and after a great meal, they would take long Sunday drives, sometimes taking that '49 Buick all the way to Lake Tahoe. On all these trips to the country, Hector would always be dressed in his best cowboy attire. This outfit consisted mainly of a gun and holster set, a set of chaps, along with a little cowboy hat his mother bought at the local 5 & 10 Store. He was somewhat different from the other boys of that era who would have rather dressed up in buckskins and a coonskin cap. A Davey Crockett ensemble was the rage for the fashion-conscious young boys who grew up in the '50s—Fess Parker and Walt Disney saw to that. Hector could have cared less about Davey Crockett or Fess Parker—Gary Cooper was his man, and he was a sheriff with a star.

In all the small towns they drove through, he dreamed of finding the bad guys and purge the countryside of evil. Little did he know at the time that destiny would use him to correct several wrongs that had been done to folks in the past, and in the distant future. Hector had no idea that he had been chosen to one day take out more bad guys than Gary Cooper could ever have dreamed of.

“Where do you suppose his mind wanders to when we go on our little adventures?” Victoria would ask Clint in a quiet puzzling manner.

Clint would reply, “I don’t really know. He, like most boys his age, is dreaming of far-off places. They dream they’re storming the beaches of Normandy, or possibly cleaning up the Old West like Matt Dillon on the television program *Gunsmoke*.” Clint had no idea that his second choice as to what Hector dreamed of was correct. Hector never really opened up or let anyone into his dream world, but they knew

more than likely that it had something to do with the Old West.

In one of his rare verbal requests, he asked Clint and his mother, "For vacation this year, why don't we take a trip around the West?" Well, this was out of the question, seeing that they had never really been on a real vacation before, and there was never enough time or money for a vacation the likes of which Hector wanted to go on.

"Where exactly do you want to go, Hector?" Clint asked.

"Oh, maybe . . . say all the famous old Western landmarks. You know, where Custer made his last stand, the OK Corral, the Alamo. I just want to see all of it." Clint and Victoria had never seen him so animated. All the while he was talking, he was pointing his toy pistol out the car window pretending to be shooting at stagecoach robbers or a party of attacking Indians.

"I sure wish we could do something special together, just the three of us, you, me and Hector," Victoria said with a wistful tone in her voice. She, too, looked out the car window at the passing scenery.

Clint said, "If we can get the harvest in, and if we have a few bucks left over by . . . say November, maybe we can swing something and take a little trip someplace. We're not going to be able to take week upon week, and see everything Hector wants to see, but I think we could swing a little vacation."

Hector was elated; he wanted to show his joy in the normal outward manner of most people. But by being a savant, his emotions were severely restricted, for these people could not show emotions in a way that would be acceptable by others. He just sat there humming to himself. This humming, Victoria and others learned over the years, was the way Hector expressed his joy about something. However, at times, it was annoying as hell. On this occasion, he seemed happier than a black bear at a Girl Scout

barbecue. His mother, Clint and himself were ever so slowly becoming a family. Someday, hopefully, he and his mother will never have to hit the road again to work the fields and pick fruit. Rather, his mom could stay at home, and he and Clint could take care of the pesticide business he had learned to love. Together, they could be a family in a small town north of Stockton, where Clint and many farmers had spent their entire lives—in a town called Lodi, east of San Francisco, and north of Stockton.

CHAPTER 10: WILL YOU MARRY ME?

Watching the loving bond develop between Victoria, Clint and Hector was one of the finest experiences I had ever had as a guardian-type angel. Victoria would have left the migrant housing by now, and would have just shackled up with old Clint, but she was a devout Catholic, and living together was a sin. So Clint was either going to have to shit or get off the pot and ask her to marry him, or just accept the fact they would never live together. Please excuse my French about that getting off the pot; I still let my mouth slip every once in awhile, even after all these years.

He had it all planned out. When Hector, his mom, and the others came back from the apple run up north, he would ask for her hand in marriage. Then they would go off someplace, just the three of them, and get married and take that little vacation trip to some cowboy Western destination Hector was talking about.

Where would they go? Clint had no idea; they would talk about it when the time came. Hector was eleven now and the year was 1956. Elvis Presley filled the air waves during this year, and many of the migrants in and around the Stockton area claimed to have known him when he was a boy in the Arkansas, Tennessee, area. Many of these migrants had also come from these areas during the great Okie migration of the '30s and '40s. Clint was always skeptical of these people's claims that they had known Elvis. For if they were all telling the truth, Clint had it figured—and if his multiplication was right—there would have been at least three or four million people living in and around the Memphis area when Elvis was a boy. For if everyone who had claimed to have known Elvis, had really known Elvis, and their friends had really known Elvis, and their best friends from Jonesboro had really known Elvis, that would have at least made Memphis the same size as New York City, which so happened to be the biggest city in the country at the time, and probably still is by the time you read this. Instead,

the Memphis of Elvis' youth was a sleepy river city—big, but no New York City.

So one warm summer evening, just before the harvesting of the tomatoes and cherries were finished in the Lodi-Stockton area, and a week or two before the migrants would be hitting the road for their northern trek to the apple orchards, Clint got down on one knee.

“Victoria, I know I’ve been dragging my feet about asking you this. Hector and you mean the world to me, so why don’t you and I-I-I-I . . .” That “I” just hung there like the smoke after a fireworks show. He couldn’t finish that most dreaded of all questions that must one day pass through the lips of most of the male population. His reflection in the mirror didn’t really look sincere. For that matter, he looked terrified to himself. Besides, it wasn’t coming out as a question; it seemed to be coming out more like a matter-of-fact statement.

It took him many more times of practice in front of the mirror on that warm summer evening before he could even pop the question to himself.

Then it came out, and it sounded right. He said, “Victoria, I love you and little Hector very much. Would you marry me and together we can be a little family for always?” That was it, it sounded right. He would take her to that great all-you-can-eat buffet. He would have to leave Hector at home for this one, and after that, they would take a long drive along the delta, and while they were parked, watching the moonlight sparkle off the water (it was going to be a full moon that night), that’s when he would ask the big question.

He knew Hector would love to have him as his father, and he, in turn, would love to have him as his son. Clint was one of the few people that understood Hector. Hector knew this and clung to Clint, not physically clinging to the man, but definitely emotionally. Even though Clint knew Hector was a little different, being a savant and all, he was convinced deep down that he was just a regular little

boy dying for attention from a male figure. He just thought it was such a shame he would never get it from that man who died on that far-off beach in the Pacific all those many years ago.

The migrant life was a tough one, working from “can to can’t,” as they would say in the fields. Victoria and Hector would never have to hit the road again, in search of that ever-so-elusive job around the next bend if they settled down with Clint. They would probably continue to pick fruit a little in the summer to make extra money, and to keep close to their family members. Besides, it would be hard to wean themselves away from the only lifestyle both of them had ever known. Clint knew all these changes would take time, but deep down, he knew they would be the best kind of change for everyone.

It was not too late for Hector to get an education. With a more settled home environment, he may be able to come out of his shell, and eventually become part of the mainstream— although Clint thought this to be very unlikely. Hector hadn’t attended school in quite some time, and the teachers of that era refused to believe that he had a gift. And even the ones that thought he had a gift, had no idea how to help the kid.

As for Victoria, a woman whose class put a shine on every dirty, dusty, sweat-stained migrant camp they ever lived in, would certainly fill their home with that same womanly glow that only a woman of Victoria’s caliber possesses. Clint had always dreamed of having that woman in his bed night after night. They had not engaged in the sex act up to this point; Victoria’s staunch religious background would not allow it. This was an extreme source of frustration for both of them, especially for Clint. Sometimes, after some of their extended dates, he would rush home to relieve himself. And I don’t mean use the toilet. That frustration would end for both of them when each of them said, “I do.”

“Why are you so nervous lately?” Hector asked Clint one morning, while both were enjoying coffee and doughnuts. Hector had a sixth sense about human emotions.

“I’m not nervous about anything in particular, Hector.”

“Well, you sure seem nervous to me. You forgot to get your change back at the gas station. You gave them a ten, and it only came to four dollars and fifty seven cents for the gas, and you walked off and left the change.”

“I have a lot on my mind lately, Heck. Someday, when you grow up and have responsibilities, you’ll know what I mean.” Hector knew it went much deeper than that. He knew Clint was at a crossroads, he had to either shift into forward or reverse; he could no longer stay locked in neutral.

“Okay, you got me, Hector. I do have something very important on my mind. It’s a question pertaining to you and your mother.” Clint knew this would not end the conversation. Hector was much smarter than most people gave him credit for. He knew it was time for the big question.

“You know if you ask her, she’ll say yes.” Clint looked up with a surprised look on his face.

“Ask her what?” Clint fired back.

“You know, ask her to marry you.” Clint was dumbfounded at being uncovered by someone most people would have considered a mental retard, even though Hector was far from being a mental retard. In fact, by the time the twentieth century would run its course, Hector Ortega would have more impact on the century than even I would have ever dreamed of.

Later that night:

“Well, why can’t he go tonight? What’s the big deal? He always goes with us on our nights out!” Victoria said after Clint asked her out for the evening, excluding Hector.

“I just want it to be just you and me tonight, sweetheart. We never get away by ourselves. We both always work so late we never even want to go out.”

“Well, I’ll have to get a sitter for Hector. Maybe I can get Silas to come over and pass out on our couch tonight.” Silas loved his alcohol. He was like many of the pickers who drank after work; he drank mostly to numb himself from the daily drudgery of hard physical labor. Beer was his choice, not wine or the hard stuff, or even that funny smoke he sometimes saw in the fields, but just plain old beer.

Clint said, “Silas. Sure he’ll come over and watch little Heck, there’s even a fight both of them probably would want to watch. I think its Patterson and Moore fighting for Rocky’s old title. I better go down to the store. There has to be beer in the fridge for Silas.”

They parked in their usual spot at the Chuck Wagon, that wonderful place that served all the food you could consume for \$1.95. You can be sure Clint always got his money’s worth. Clint loved the place, and Victoria thought it to be a nice place also. Actually, it was the only place they had ever gone to dinner together, and they had known each other for about six years. To Clint, it made no sense to drive around looking for a better place to eat, when you already knew of a great place . . . and this place was all-you-can-eat!

Deep down, she longed to go to one of those beautiful stylish restaurants she saw and read about in the popular ladies’ magazines. The ones with chandeliers and tablecloths, the ones where the waiter talked with a French accent, even if he was a Chinese guy. All the Chuck Wagon had to offer was a cook named Bob, a cashier named Elma, and all the greasy spare ribs and fried chicken you could eat for \$1.95. One day, they would go to one of those stylish places, even if Clint didn’t get to stuff himself to the point where getting out of his chair was a major physical accomplishment.

Sometimes, she would get testy thinking about the fact that this was the only place Clint had ever taken her for dinner. Was it because he was a tightwad? Or because she never questioned the possibility that they should try someplace different? Anyway, this was a treat and a break from cooking. She watched Clint serve himself; he didn't pile the food quite as high on his plate as she was accustomed to seeing him pile it.

"What's the matter, Clint? By now, you would have gone back for seconds or thirds, but you're still playing around with that same piece of chicken you were eating five minutes ago, and your mashed potatoes look hard as a rock. Is something on your mind?"

"No, no, nothing out of the ordinary."

"Clint, you know you're full of it," Victoria said with her frustration toward Clint obviously coming to the surface.

"You're nervous about something and I want to know what it is."

"Well, how can you tell I got something on my mind?" Clint asked with eyes that were as innocent as those of a small calf.

"You're not eating your usual enormous amounts of food, that's a dead giveaway."

"You're right. Let's just have some coffee and dessert, and we'll just talk awhile."

"Well, what's on your mind, Señor Clint?" She was toying with him. She had a pretty good idea what was on his mind, and if it was what she thought it was, she was going to be pissed off. Not because he was finally getting around to asking the big question, but because he didn't pick a place with a more suitable atmosphere for such an occasion.

The Chuck Wagon was a decent enough place, but it was for families and hungry farmers, travelers, and people that only got one good meal a week. It was not the setting for

the romantic question of a lifetime. And she wasn't in the mood to hear that question being asked her in such a place as this.

He pulled the ring out of his sports jacket pocket, and to his dismay, it slipped from his fingers which were still greasy from the fried chicken that he had just eaten. It bounced twice, and almost got stepped on by some huge farmer that probably tipped the scales at well over three hundred pounds. It settled under a table about ten feet away.

He quickly jumped from the table to try and retrieve it. He said, "Excuse me, I dropped something under your table," he told the older couple that saw him dive under their table.

"Excuse me again, very sorry," he again told the older couple, all the while trying to conceal the object he dropped, from Victoria. He looked up at Victoria with a red face.

"What was that you dropped?" Victoria asked with a knowing smile.

"Just a little gift I got for you. Well, it's not really a gift, in a way it's a gift, but it's not really, really a gift." Clint was digging himself a deep hole, and he didn't even have a shovel.

"Just ask me and give me the ring," Victoria asked with that mknowing smile still plastered on her face. "What ring are you talking about?"

"The one you got in your hand, you idiot. I just saw you drop it."

Forgetting what he had earlier practiced for hours to say, he said, "Okay, okay, here it is—will you marry me?" Clint thrust his arm out towards Victoria with the ring in his palm, hoping the right answer would come back. Victoria had been in a hot, testy mood all evening, and her Latin blood was about ready to boil over.

“Yes, I’ll marry you, but first let me tell you this: You’re the cheapest, clumsiest fool that has ever asked a girl to marry him. In the six years I’ve known you, we have never gone to a real nice place for a meal, and now, you bring me to a place where people consume food—not merely for the pleasure of it, or to nourish themselves, but for the sport of seeing who can stuff their gut with the most amount of food. I know you’re in competition with the guy at the next table most of the time. You should be ashamed of yourself. And you take me to this carnival atmosphere to ask me the question of a lifetime. Well, I’ll marry you but I had to get that off my chest.” She grabbed the ring from Clint, and quickly slipped it on her finger herself to see how it looked. Ouch! She sure read him the riot act. Clint was quiet the rest of the night; he knew he owed her an apology for being so thoughtless.

He later said, “I’m sorry for taking you to that classless dump! I guess I just took it for granted that you liked the place.”

She gave out an exasperated sigh and said, “I do like the place, I just don’t think it is an appropriate place to ask someone to marry them. It’s more of a place to talk about the next big fight or how the crops look this year.” Clint knew when he was being put in his place, and he knew this was one of those times.

Clint said, “Let’s get outta here and go for a drive. We’ll get a bottle of booze and end up wherever that old endless road takes us.” Clint reached out to hold her hand warmly.

Victoria said, “All right, but I don’t want to be out all night. Silas and Hector are expecting us back.” The old endless road Clint was talking about took them to a total of about twenty- four miles, their usual distance on those short trips from home. People so used to getting up at such ungodly early hours have a hard time staying out late, even if it was on such a special occasion. When they got home, Silas was passed out on the couch as expected, and Hector was

watching some old Western on the small black and white TV they had managed to save enough money for.

“Silas, Silas, get up and go on home. I’ll talk to you in the morning and tell you the good news.” Victoria was used to waking Silas up after a few too many beers. It was the expected thing to do. She didn’t mind.

Victoria looked into the tired eyes of Hector and said, “As for you, little man, you’re going to have a new father.” And with an unusual reply of sarcasm, Hector said, “Oh, boy, what a surprise.” As if he wasn’t expecting it.

“You’re just tired. We will talk about it in the morning.” And with a mother’s loving kiss and a hug, Hector was off to bed.

Silas said, “Good night,” as he wandered out the front door scratching his ass and rubbing his eyes at the same time. Everyone slept well that night.

CHAPTER 11: REMEMBERING THINGS PAST

So the sun set on another harvest season. Everyone in the small migrant community was overjoyed to hear about the engagement of Victoria and Clint.

“Damn, it sure took him long enough to get around to asking the big question,” Silas told a small group of men gathered in the nearby orchard.

“Yes, sir, he sure is a lucky man to have such a beautiful woman as Victoria,” said another as he stomped out a hand-rolled cigarette. “When are they going to get married?” a Mexican man named Juan asked Silas.

“I don’t really know when, but knowing those two tightwads, it won’t be nothin’ big.” A woman overhearing the conversation said, “What do you mean there won’t be nothing big? They’re going to get married in church and have a big reception and everything. They must do what’s right in the eyes of the lord.”

Silas replied, “That would be nice, and we can hope for it. But considerin’ the both of them, I don’t think so.”

That was the end of the conversation and the small group dispersed to their daily chores. Clint had bought her a small modest diamond, but it was bigger than the Hope Diamond in the eyes of Victoria. All the women in the community thought it was beautiful, and all the men thought he probably spent too much on something so sentimental. Victoria and Hector did not follow the others that fall up north for the annual apple harvest. Instead, Hector helped Clint around the pesticide shop, and Victoria got a job as a seasonal worker in the tomato cannery in nearby Stockton.

It was late summer, and they would have to plan what they were going to do about the wedding, if they were going to get it in that year. It wouldn’t be fair to others if they planned on having a big wedding so close to the holidays. These

people were on tight budgets, and even a seemingly small expense would have to be considered extravagant. Clint and Victoria loved all these people immensely, but neither wanted to put anyone out on account of their wedding.

“What do you suppose we do about our wedding, sweetheart?” Clint asked in a rather casual way.

“I don’t know—let’s just elope,” Victoria replied in an equally casual manner. A splash of surprised relief swept across Clint’s face. “You mean, you really want to elope, and chance the wrath of the entire community coming down on us?”

“Wipe that pleasant grin off your face, you cheapskate. I know it’s not the right thing to do. To these Okies and Mexicans, the tradition of watching family members grow and move on at different important stages of their lives, well, it’s the most important thing in the world to them.”

Clint slid across the couch which sat in the modest little house that Victoria and Hector occupied, and touched Victoria’s face tenderly.

She moved closer and said, “Now, I don’t want you to feel that you’re getting away with anything, or that I’m a complete tightwad like you. It’s just that I’m thirty-one years old and you’re thirty-six, you old fart.” A smile tightened across her beautiful face.

“Well, it’s just that I’ve been through all that big church wedding stuff years ago when I was a young woman, and I personally don’t want to go through it all again. Unless you got your heart set on it. This is a first for you?”

Clint responded with an immediate, “No, no, I agree with you. I don’t need all that fancy big church stuff. I can die in peace without it.”

“Okay, then, it’s settled. We’ll get ourselves married by eloping.” To Victoria, this sounded cheap, coming from Clint’s lips, but she knew he didn’t mean anything by it.

Clint said, “What are we going to do about Hector? Is he going to go with us on our wedding trip?”

“Of course, he’s going with us,” Victoria fired back.

Clint said, “Don’t get all excited, I’m just asking. After all, there’s going to be some activities we may want to be engaging in at any time of the day or night that Hector can’t be around for. And I’m not talking about family activities.” This brought a look of simple disgust to the face of Victoria. Then she smiled coyly.

Clint blushed a bit, and then said excitedly, “Let’s make it that little family vacation that Hector was talking about several months ago. We’ll just hit the road and see what the end of it looks like.”

“Now, we’re not rich, and we sure enough don’t have all the time in the world to go traveling all over tarnation.” Victoria stopped talking with a questioning look on her face. Then she said, “How about us three getting married in say . . . Reno . . . or maybe Carson City, and then going to one of those great Western locations Hector had his heart set on?”

“Sounds good to me,” Clint said with a simple shrug of his lean but powerful shoulders.

“Besides, I’ve never even been out of the state. Came pretty close, though, on that hunting trip with my dad when I was a kid. Hell, yes! That sounds like a grand adventure to me.”

“One thing I really hate to do is leave Victor now. He really isn’t doing very well.” Victoria was always the one that would worry about anyone hurting, or those she thought were hurting. Clint’s eyes and head rolled back in a moment of exasperation. He learned long ago that Victoria was a loving, caring person, second to none, but moments like these tried his patience. There were plenty of people around to care for Victor, while they went on their wedding/honeymoon.

Victor never could work much in the fields along with the

rest of the family; his war injuries prevented that. What was nagging him now wasn't the injuries he sustained at the hands of the Japanese Imperial Marines on Guadalcanal, but rather the pain inflicted by the hands of his own fascist countrymen in the wrath-filled fields of California during the '30s. Although Victor was only a boy working the fields along with his family after their arrival from Oklahoma, he was often the target for kicks and punches from the goons that suppressed the desperate folks of that time.

Victoria said, "Victor took some pretty bad beatings when he was a kid from those police goons, and I just think he's really feeling the results of those beatings." Clint had heard of those small but deadly groups of police thugs hired by the big farmers to control the migrants, but he never really believed the stories that he heard through the years. He reasoned, how could anyone treat his or her fellowman in that fashion? That was the question many people had asked about human nature over the years.

Clint said, "How do you know it was those beatings that are causing Victor's pain today?"

"I don't. I only know that Victor's injury from the war was when he took that grenade in the ass, and now his pains aren't in his ass, but rather, he has his nagging headaches and stomach pains." Victoria could sometimes be a rather descriptive storyteller.

Clint replied with his head cocked to one side, "I would just rather believe it was a Jap marine we could blame his pains on and not some sorry sap from around here." Victoria nodded her head in agreement.

Victoria said, "It was when we were working those fields in the Imperial Valley, after the family first arrived here in '36. Even I remember the times when Victor would come back from a day in the fields, sometimes with a bloody lip, or all hunched over from a kick to the ribs. He wasn't the only one who got worked over. Anyone that spoke up about anything

pertaining to working conditions or pay were marked, and then beaten if they didn't straighten up and fly right."

"What do you mean marked?" Clint asked with a questioning look.

"I mean, if they so much as disturbed the goon's little system of slavery just a little bit, they were marked, and if they kept it up, they just disappeared."

"Disappeared? What do you mean? They were moved to another job?" Clint asked.

"No, no, my silly little Clint. They disappeared off the face of the earth, never to be heard from again. Didn't you ever read that book by that guy John Steinbeck in school *The Grapes of Wrath*? What he said was no bologna. I know; I lived through it. In fact, some of the old timers remember seeing that guy Steinbeck hanging around when he was writing that book." Clint sat there with his mouth open in awe, never hearing these stories from Victoria's mouth, after all these years of knowing her. Some things people would rather forget, I guess?

"Was Victor the only one in your family that got worked over?" Clint asked with a little apprehension in his voice.

"None of my next of kin were in those work camps. But Victor was the oldest of the boys, about eighteen at the time, and generally was the one who stood up for himself and anyone else he thought needed to be stood up for. That made him stand out amongst the workers. Hector's dad, Samson, and Silas I guess, were too young; they were both about fourteen or fifteen at the time. I suppose the goons weren't into beating up kids that young. As for any of the other men in the group, they pretty much kept their mouths shut and starved."

"I've never asked you, sweetie . . ." Sweetie was one of Clint's terms of endearment for Victoria. "But how did you ever meet your first husband, Samson? That is, if you don't mind me asking."

Victoria said, "I don't mind you asking, and I really don't mind answering. In fact, I've always wondered why you've never asked before. Well, this is how it pretty much went: Back in '36, when the Ortegas were making their epic journey to California with all the other lily-white Okies, I was living with some relatives someplace down in Arizona, I think it was Flagstaff. Anyway, one day when me and my cousin Carlita were down at the local 5 & 10 Store, we saw the funniest sight I think I've ever seen in my entire life. Actually, I feel ashamed for the laughter the memory still brings me." She stopped for a moment to let her laughter subside. "Now, across the street from the 5 & 10, where my cousin and I were shopping, was this old Texaco gas station, it was at the bottom of this pretty steep hill, when out of nowhere came this old jalopy of a truck. It had everything, including a kitchen sink loaded on top of it, it really did. It had old mattresses, fire-burnt pots and pans, and people hanging all over it. Samson later told me it was an old Hudson Super Six sedan they had bought for the trip to California. Anyway, they rolled down that hill with the gas station as their destination, going at about thirty or thirty-five miles per hour. The brakes must have been pretty worn because they didn't slow down one bit. Well, they made it to that gas station all right, but in the process, they took out two gas pumps, and almost run over the owner and his dog. At the time, it really wasn't funny, but looking back, it makes me break up. It turned out they had this system where, whenever they found themselves at the top of a hill, they would turn off the engine to save gas, and just coast the rest of the way down. It might have saved them gas, but it was terribly hard to control the car without power." Victoria, at this point, was again laughing so hard tears were streaming down her face.

"Well, that's a wonderful and funny story but it doesn't tell me when you met your husband," Clint said with a little laughter in his voice.

"I'm getting to it, give me a chance," Victoria said while hardly able to contain herself.

“It must have been a miracle out of scripture, because not all that much damage was done to the old Hudson. The men got together and straightened the bumper and the front axle.”

She continued, “In the meantime, me and my cousin walked across the street to see if we could help. There were people everywhere—cops, firemen, rubbernecks and bystanders everywhere you looked. After looking over the bunch that did the damage to his station, the owner realized he would never get paid for the damage they caused. Although the Okies were very sorry, and would surely have paid for the damage done (eventually), he just wanted them to get lost and move on down the road. Amongst the group of desperate wanderers, we noticed that there was some of us among the Okies. I could hardly believe that there were Mexicans traveling with these white folks. One young fella that caught my eye was a young Mexican boy, or I should say, man. He was nearly six feet tall and probably weighed more than most mature men. He had dark wavy hair and a lighter complexion compared to most Mexicans you might meet, but he still had many of the strong Mexican features that are hard to describe. Then when our eyes made contact, that was the moment our destinies were welded together forever.”

“Victoria, you’re looking a little flushed reliving those old memories,” Clint said with a touch of sarcasm in his voice.

“Well, you asked me how I met Samson, and I just told you.”

“Did you say anything to him? Did you ask him where he was going? Where they came from? Did you ask him anything?”

“No, I didn’t say a thing. I would have been too nervous to talk to him anyway. I just knew that someday I would see him again,” Victoria said with her voice sounding soft and distant, as if it were echoing down a pipe that was connected to the past.

“Well, what did your cousin think of Prince Charming?” Clint asked with a little perturbed tone in his voice. He felt edgy, and a little jealous.

“I don’t think she even noticed Samson. She was too busy flirting with all the yellow-haired Okie boys. Besides, I never even mentioned the connection I thought I had made with Samson that day with that hysterical scene unfolding all around us. To this day, Carlita still doesn’t know that was the day I first laid eyes on Samson. As a matter of fact, you’re the only one that I have ever told that story to.” Clint just sat back with a little of edginess and jealousy bubbling to the top of his emotions while he listened to the story Victoria was telling.

“So do you still have feelings for old Samson?” Clint asked while trying not to let Victoria see the little bit of jealousy brewing within him.

“For God’s sake, Clint, you’re not jealous, are you? Samson is dead, and yes, I will always have some feelings in my heart for him. But you’re my man now. I never left him or divorced the man. He was killed in the war, and I moved on with my life. Besides, you’re my very own William Holden.” This brought a smile and a sense of relief to Clint; he was feeling a little insecure scouring the depths of Victoria’s past. They both got up from the small but comfortable couch and wandered out to the front porch. The house always got stuffy in the late afternoons of an Indian summer.

“So, when did you finally meet up with Samson again?” Clint asked with some hesitation in his voice. The subject was still open. Besides, his curiosity was getting the better of him.

“You still want to know more about all of this old stuff?”

Victoria knew that some of these old subjects could become a little touchy, especially when people are sensitive. But she also realized that this is an issue that might as well be resolved now. It couldn’t be allowed to smolder inside Clint, after all, Clint just wanted to know how Samson and Victoria

first met. It wasn't that the subject was so hard to explain to Clint, it was still and always would be a very sensitive issue for Victoria. Samson might have been gone for many years now, but she knew that her love and memory of him would stay in her heart forever.

Clint had it easy; he didn't have much of a past to share with Victoria, no extra baggage to carry into the marriage. He had come close to marriage a couple of times, but he liked being a bachelor too much, not having to answer to anyone but himself. He had seen almost all his friends marry and divorce within a short period of time, and knew that most of those marriages were only desperate attempts to hide from loneliness and the fear of growing old alone. Besides, he knew that when the right woman flashed that certain smile his way, he would be hooked for life, because deep down, he considered himself the marrying type.

"Well, can you tell me how your two destinies were finally welded together?" Clint had a hint of playful sarcasm in his voice, as he took her hand and strolled down the dirt road lined by cherry trees. The always welcome late afternoon delta breezes had come in just in time to cool off both of them and their moods.

"You pretty much know the story, Clint. I saw him in Flagstaff, Arizona, in, I guess it was about '36, the year they came out. Samson and I are about the same age, he might have been one or two years older. In the summer, or between crops, their family would load up that old Hudson and head down to San Diego to visit some long-lost relatives, I guess. It wasn't really all that long a trip, and besides, it was a good place to cool off from the heat of the Imperial Valley. They stayed with their relatives for their short visits in the small town of Chula Vista, just north of the Mexican border and just south of San Diego. Well, it just so happens that I am from a little town called Coronado, just across the bay from San Diego. My mother, Anna Ortiz, cleaned the homes of the old retired admirals that lived there, and my dad, Windsor

Ortiz, washed dishes in the area hotels or took care of the yards of those old retired admirals. It was a beautiful place to grow up in, but by no means did we spend all our time at the beach. We were broke most of the time. Besides, many people back then looked down on Mexicans going out to Coronado Beach. It was a rich resort town. We always would go a little south to Silver Strand Beach. I guess that was where the poor colored folks were pushed to.”

“Yeah, it always seems like the poor folks are put some place out of the view of the rich folks.” This statement, coming from Clint, was a little amusing to Victoria. Clint grew up working hard and taking on responsibility at a young age, but he never had hunger pains in his stomach or undergo the hardships and prejudice that these Okies and Mexicans had to learn to endure. As for Victoria, until she met and ran away with Samson, she never had to undergo many of the hardships that Clint had been fortunate enough to avoid in life. Oh, yes, there were the cases of bigotry, and the other little lessons of life that constantly taught you that you were at the lower echelon of society, but she never went hungry and she always had a roof over her head.

“So you met Samson again down at this Silver Stand Beach?”

“Yes, that’s where I saw him again. I never really met him the first time.”

Clint said, “Oh, yes, the first time you only welded your eternities together forever.”

“I didn’t say that, did I really say that?” Victoria replied with a tad of embarrassment in her voice.

“I don’t really feel comfortable dredging up all these old memories.”

“C’mon, I’m only kidding you, I want to hear the rest of the story.” Clint gave her a little tickle to her stomach to try to cheer her up. Besides I wanted to hear the rest of the story, too. Being a guardian angel, you get to see and hear

everything; it's a Peeping Tom's delight. There are times when I give a client some privacy, but I usually have to know everything that's going on to know the inner workings of the individual.

"God, it seems so long ago," Victoria said while her eyes looked to the sky.

"It was the summer of '38, two years after that comical scene in Arizona. After helping my mom clean homes all day, she would say something like, 'Victoria let's pack a little picnic lunch, walk down to the hotel and wait for Daddy to get off work, and then take a little stroll down the Strand and have supper, maybe even take a dip in the ocean.' I can still hear her voice saying almost those exact words. It got dark late in the summer, and we had this routine down pat. Well, there we were, hiking down the road to the beach that usually was occupied by poor folks or servicemen."

"Same thing in some people's book," Clint said with a chuckle.

"I'll even bet there were signs around that read, 'Sailors and dogs stay off the lawn,' am I right?"

"Yes, Clint, you're right. How in the world did you know that?"

"I had a friend who was in the navy down in DeGo, that's how."

Victoria gave Clint a "please don't interrupt me again" look.

Victoria continued, "Anyway, let me get back to the story. It really wasn't that long of a walk, maybe a half-mile or so, so we really didn't mind it. We didn't own a car. Everything in our little town was within walking distance anyway, so we were used to walking everywhere. So there we were—Mom, Dad, and I. I didn't have any brothers and sisters so I was used to keeping a lot of company with my mom and dad. We were all in a somewhat late afternoon summer's haze, just walking along with no conversation happening, when out of

nowhere, an apparition from the past drove up beside us. It was that old Hudson I saw

got smashed two years earlier.”

Victoria continued, “The driver asked us, ‘Where you folks goin’? Do you need a lift?’”

“Oh, we’re walking about a quarter mile down the road, to the next beach,” Victoria’s dad had said.

The driver then said, “Well, jump on in, no sense sweatin’ out on the road. You folks are welcome to ride with us.”

Clint was looking at Victoria with amazement written all over his face. The clarity in which she could remember everything was uncanny, but the thing that was almost supernaturally eerie was the fact that her prediction of seeing Samson again was about to come true.

Victoria went on, “‘Scoot over Samson and let these folks sit down a spell,’ the driver yelled while everyone tried to squeeze in the front seat. The backseat was already packed with kids ready to hit the beach. My pop said, ‘I’ll jump up on top, let you and Mom sit down here, we’re only going a few hundred yards.’ My pop was always the one to give up his seat for the ladies. Some of the bigger boys would always hop out just about every time the car stopped. They would act as human battering rams, straining every one of the pubescent muscles and tendons in their youthful bodies to try and get that massive Okie carrier going.”

Clint interrupted, “Pubescent! Where in the world did you learn a big word like that, honey? It sounds to me like some kind of cuss word.”

Victoria replied, “Its just one of those words I picked up while reading one of those ladies’ health magazines they have in the doctor’s office. It means having reached the age of puberty, you know, when a boy starts to change into a man, and a woman starts to do that thing they do every month. You know, the bleeding and all.”

Clint's face grimaced after he realized what the word meant. Then he said, "I know, I know—just go on with the story."

Victoria smiled and then continued, "So with everyone situated and packed in like sardines, we rolled the rest of the half mile to our undetermined location on the beach. This happened to be one of those times when those pubescent, youthful, energetic boys got out of the car and helped that big Okie carrier down the slight incline that led to the beach, with the engine turned off."

"Where you folks from?" the driver asked Victoria's parents.

Victoria said, "My mom gave a quick glance to the man and said, 'Just down the road. We live in Coronado; we're caretakers of one of the big houses there.' My mom was very shy, and being in the company of strangers like this made her very uncomfortable. But she did manage to ask the same question that the driver just asked us, 'Where you folks from? You don't look like you're from around this area,' she said. The driver, whose name was Juan, happened to be Samson's dad. He answered, 'Well, originally we came out to Califormee from Oklahoma, oh, about two years ago, I reckon. Right now, we're just makin' a little visit to some kinfolk in Chula Vista. We're normally pickin' fruit out in the Great Imperial. We saved a little money to come over here for a few days.' All this surprised the hell out of my mom for these were Mexican folks that came out from Oklahoma."

Victoria's mom asked, "You say you folks came out here from Oklahoma, all by yourself?" Juan, Samson's dad, knew exactly the point Victoria's mom was trying to make. And that point was: How could these Mexican folks be traveling with all these white folks?

The driver said, "We came out with white folks; we were about the only Mexicans in that caravan that was run out of the Dust Bowl. Me and my wife had sharecropped down around the Sallisaw area for years, and when the land dried

up and we were run off the property, we all packed up and headed west. We came out with some white folks that went by the name Joad.” Victoria’s mom was still impressed by the story, even after the truck stopped to let Victoria and her parents off.

During the short trip down to the beach, Samson and Victoria had been sandwiched between Juan and Victoria’s mom in the front seat of that old Hudson. Neither one of them had said anything, but they both knew one of each of their most heartfelt wishes had come true—they actually did see each other again. For Samson had been just as impressed with Victoria as she was with him, on that dusty street corner in a town called Flagstaff somewhere in the state of Arizona. Cupid wasn’t messing around with these two; he wanted them together.

“Aren’t you getting bored by this story by now? It’s starting to get pretty late,” Victoria asked Clint.

“Not one bit,” said Clint as he stretched his long arms into the soon-to-be-night sky. Besides, I also was really getting into this story. Yes, even guardian angels get a little nosey from time to time.

Clint asked, “Well, did you finally say anything to him this time?”

“Oh, yes, we both knew in a second where we had seen each other. It really startled everyone when I asked him how he’s been. I figured someone had to break the ice. It’s funny, not a single word was exchanged between either of us almost two years before, but we knew in an instant where and when we had seen each other. He tried to act coy about everything, like he really didn’t remember, but that soon evaporated.”

“You know this girl?” Juan, Samson’s dad, asked.

And Samson said, “Yeah, Pa, I remember her from that wreck we had in Arizona on our way out here to Californee.”

Victoria’s mom asked her, “Is that when Dad and I sent you

to stay with your cousins in Arizona a couple of years ago?”

“Yes, ma’am, that’s when we first met.”

“Well, why didn’t you ever mention meeting such a nice boy, as this boy seems to be?” Victoria’s mom gave a little point in Samson’s direction.

“Both of us were really feeling by then that we were on the hot seat. By that time, everyone was out of the truck standing around listening to what I wished was a more private conversation.”

“I don’t blame you,” Clint told Victoria.

“Everyone wanted to know what we talked about two years ago. Samson and I said we didn’t exchange any words. And right then and there, everyone gave a knowing look at each other. It was one of those looks that said, ‘Ah! Now I know what’s going on here.’ I think we let the cat out of the bag, I think they knew that we had been attracted to one another.”

Samson’s dad asked Victoria, “You mean to tell me, little gal, that you actually were there the day we wrecked into that gas station?”

She said, “I sure was. Me and my cousin Carlita saw the whole episode unfold from across the street.”

Samson’s dad said, “Geez! That sure was some God-awful situation that happened back there. We offered to pay for the damage when we could, but I reckon the owner of the place figured we were just bums, and would be better off just movin’ on down the road.” Victoria stopped talking for a moment, and waited for a reaction from Clint.

“Well, that’s it, that’s when we met again. Any more questions?” Clint yawned and stretched his long arms into the now dark night sky.

“Yeah, Victoria, I do want to someday hear more. You’re quite a storyteller. But for now, that’s it, I’m ready to hit the

sack.” They walked down that same dirt road lined by cherry trees that led to Victoria’s small flat, holding hands and not saying a word. You could hear Phil Silvers on the television from the small house next to Victoria’s place.

“That guy sure cracks me up,” Clint said with a small chuckle.

“Anything cracks you up, you silly guy.” By now they were standing on the front porch of Victoria’s small little flat.

“Well, I’ll see you in the morning.” Clint gave Victoria a small kiss on the lips, and with a single little hop from the porch and a couple of long strides with his lanky legs, Clint was in his old pickup headed back down that same dirt road lined by cherry trees. They both slept very well that night.

CHAPTER 12: HIS PURPOSE REVEALED

Nothing else was ever said about those long ago days of how and when Samson and Victoria first met. It was always an awkward subject for both of them to discuss. Victoria had run away that year to join up and work with Samson and his family in the fields. I guess nothing stops true love. She had come up with a story that her folks had been killed in a bus accident, and by the time anyone had checked out her story and found it to be false, she and Samson had already married. This is what caused the division in her family later on.

The days were getting much shorter now, the fall harvest was in, and soon, Victoria would no longer have to fret over an ailing Victor. Victor would soon be on the other side with Hugo and more than likely, Wilma. For soon Victor was going to die from the beatings he took from those thugs so many years ago.

While many of the migrants had permanent but modest housing, Victor had always lived by himself in a small trailer. He had never married, possibly because of the shame he may have felt by not having any balls between his legs. Sorry, sometimes I get a little too descriptive. It would be like driving a new Ford without the wheels attached. He lived his last days in the fall of '56—or was it the fall of '57? Anyway, he lived his last days drinking beer and taking pain pills which he got from the VA hospital just to make his life tolerable.

“Victor, Victor—hey, Victor.” Victoria tapped on the screen door while calling her brother-in-law’s name a few times through the open door of his trailer.

“You really shouldn’t leave your door open at this time of the year. It’s starting to get a little chilly out.” She opened the screen door and walked into the tiny but well-kept trailer.

Victor was dead and she knew it the instant she saw him. After trying to take a pulse that had permanently disappeared some ten hours earlier, Victoria made a quick sign of the cross, and said a quiet good-bye to her friend and brother-in-law. No tears had come to her eyes yet, for the shock and surprise of finding him dead had frozen her emotions. Later that night, in the arms of Clint, she did break down.

“Why is it that all the good, hardworking folks in the world are the ones that get kicked around and abused?” she asked a sober and quiet Clint.

“He was the bravest of the bunch back in those work camps. He was only a kid, but he stood up to those bullies.” Clint said nothing. He just stared straight ahead, his eyes unblinkingly still, while to once again focus on the images of Victor that were etched upon his heart and mind.

Hector might have been somewhat of an idiot savant, but he knew what death was, and the death of Victor hit him as hard as it did anyone. He would ask his mother why and how Victor died. And she answered him as truthfully and as straightforward as she possibly could. Little did Hector know at the time that he would be the instrument that would be used to bring justice not only for Victor’s death, but also for crimes yet to be committed, and some that have long been washed from people’s memory. When he and his soon-to-be dad Clint and mother take that trip to Tombstone, I would bring Hector face to face with the greatest lawman of all time —Wyatt Earp. It wasn’t going to be easy, but I’ve done some pretty tough stuff in the past. I already got the okay to do anything to get the job done. In his case, I would either have to transport little Hector back in time or bring old Wyatt forward. These were some of the things I would have to iron out.

At the funeral home later that week, while all the people that had known Victor in the small farm community of Lodi were giving their last respects, the shell of a once proud man

lay in state. Victor in his prime stood about six foot two and weighed about one hundred and ninety pounds—solid muscle, no fat. At least, those were his dimensions when he went into the marine corps. After the war, he would forever measure six foot one. People would joke that he left an inch on one of those islands in the Pacific. If that's all he left on those islands, he would have been a lucky man. In his prime, he had thick dark wavy hair and a dimpled chin. Many thought he had the characteristics of a Latin Victor Mature. All that remained now was a hollow shell, which bore no resemblance to the Victor people knew in his prime.

Hector just stood there in front of the open casket, with his eyes fixed on the mouth of the now dead Victor. I didn't have anything to do with it, but I think somehow Victor was talking to little Hector that day at the funeral home.

He said in an otherworldly voice that only Hector could hear, "Hector, you must avenge my death someday. Not only my death, but the deaths of many others." Although Victor's mouth was not moving, Hector continued to get these messages. He must have stood there in front of the open casket for at least fifteen minutes. Everyone was quite surprised.

"Little guy, I love you a whole bunch, and someday, we will meet again. But you have been chosen to do some great things in your lifetime. In the coming months, you will experience some things that may not seem normal to you. Don't be frightened, everyone you come in contact with in these situations are your friends. Have fun on that little cowboy vacation you and your mother and Clint are going on. You guys deserve it. And you take care of those two, I love them a lot. I'm all right here on the other side. I've met all sorts of folks over here. I think my favorite is this little chimp-like gal. She sure keeps everyone in good spirits. Anyway, you go and comfort the others, and tell them everything is all right. Good-bye, my little buddy." Hector smiled, turned and walked to his mother.

After the funeral, and during the short drive home, the three of them—Clint, Victoria, and Hector—talked about the wedding and where they would go for their little family trip afterwards.

Clint said, “I think we could get married in Carson City and take a drive to Yellowstone, and then maybe we could head over to the Little Big Horn Battlefield and see where old General Custer had a bad day. That would be a good cowboy trip—that’s what we wanted to do, wasn’t it, take a trip to some cowboy historical site?”

“Look,” Victoria said, “if we go up there at this time of year, we might hit some pretty bad weather, and I really don’t want to be stranded in a snowstorm on my honeymoon.” Clint nodded his head in reluctant agreement.

“Well then, what’s your suggestion, Victoria sweetheart?” Clint asked.

“I was thinking . . . You know I have some relatives down around San Antonio. We could go and see the Alamo. I mean, that’s where a handful of your gringo relatives held off a whole bunch of my relatives for, what did they say, ‘Thirteen days of glory, at the siege of Alamo.’ Or some doggone thing like that.” Victoria would sometimes come up with little known facts about history or trivia that surprised everyone.

“That’s way too far to drive,” Clint said, “we only have two weeks and that would be putting too much pressure on us, time wise.”

They rode for awhile with no one making a sound, when Hector unexpectedly spoke up.

“How about the OK Corral? Many people say that’s where the last shots of the Civil War were fired. You see, the Earps and Doc Holliday were Northerners and the Clanton and McLowery Gang were Southerners, and Wyatt Earp was the greatest cowboy since Gary Cooper, wasn’t he?” Actually, Hector was correct. Hatred between the North and the South lingered for years after the Civil War. Victoria and Clint looked

at each other in stunned amazement. They were also a bit amused by the comparison of Wyatt Earp to Gary Cooper. But they knew that if there was one or two things that the boy knew, it was his chemicals and cowboy folklore. They didn't care, they were just savoring this moment of watching Hector break the shell that had held him inside himself for so long.

"That's a great suggestion," Clint said, "it's not all that far, not like the Alamo or Yellowstone, and maybe we could hit Vegas or the Grand Canyon on the way back."

"The OK sounds okay to me, too," Victoria said. "I'm sorry, did that sound kind of corny?" Both Clint and Hector looked at each other with a look that said, "Nah, Mom, that wasn't corny one little bit."

Then Clint said, "Then it's settled. We will hit the road next week, head to Carson City first, and then south to Arizona." The small soon-to-be family drove the rest of the way home with a sense of calm and satisfaction none of them had experienced before. Each, though, quietly thought about Victor, and remembered the times they all had together.

CHAPTER 13: HELP FOR THE STRANDED

They left in the cover of darkness (hoping to prevent anyone from seeing them leave) on that cold November morning in the fall of '57. Clint and Victoria knew they were going to break quite a few hearts by taking off like this and not telling a soul about their plans, but they were grown adults and they felt they were doing the best thing. A note was left on the door of Victoria's place telling everybody everything's all right, and that they would be back in a couple of weeks.

Victoria wrote in the note: "Now, y'all," Victoria liked to say y'all a lot, "don't fret over us, we will be home in a couple of weeks, and when we get home, me and Hector will both have an Okie last name. So that ought to give you a hint as to what's going on. Like I said, we'll be seeing you in a couple of weeks. Love, the Johnsons. P.S. OOPS! Did that give it away?"

So all three piled into the Buick Roadmaster, that same vehicle that had taken them on so many enjoyable trips in the past. They had decided to head east on Highway 88 out of Stockton, when suddenly the skies began spitting rain. None of them had ever even been in the snow before—let alone driven in it—so the reports of possible snowy conditions going over the mountains didn't do Clint's nerves any good.

Just out of Jackson on Interstate 88, they started getting hit with their first salvo of snow flurries.

"Sure is pretty, almost like a winter wonderland," Victoria said with the nervousness that had been locked inside showing itself in the tone of her voice.

"I hope it doesn't get too bad over the summit. I don't have chains, and I never even put the damn things on before anyway. Can't be that hard, I suppose. A lot of people go

to the mountains,” Clint said while white-knuckling his grip on the steering wheel.

“It kind of reminds me of that Donner Party story,” Hector said. Clint looked in his rearview mirror to look at Hector. He knew that Hector didn’t speak up often, but when he did, he usually knew what he was talking about. Especially when it came to stories about the Old West or anything to do with chemicals, that boy was a walking encyclopedia. I’ve probably told you that before, but I can’t stress the point enough, so I’ll tell you again— when it came to anything to do with chemicals or the Old West, that little son-of-a gun Hector knew his stuff. So there, I told you again. By now, he knew as much, or more, as Clint himself about the different uses of chemicals on crops or weeds.

Clint said, “The Donner Party, seems I remember hearing about them in school. Didn’t they get caught in the snow or something like that?”

Hector was more than eager to give them the whole story, he said, “They were trapped alright, just north from here, near a lake that is now named after them—Donner Lake.”

“Is that it, is that the whole story?” Clint asked.

“No,” Hector said, “out of the eighty-seven that were trapped that winter in 1846, only forty-seven survived, and they only did that by eating the dead.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, do we have to be talking about all this gruesome stuff right now!” Victoria said while looking back over her shoulder at Hector. Hector’s face lightened up while describing the Donner Party’s ordeal. By now, both Victoria and Clint were probably wishing Hector would shut the fuck up, and crawl back into that shell that up till then, they were so used to him being in.

Hector went on, “They lived in deep snow caves, sometimes as deep as twenty-five feet, and that was where they spent the winter feeding on the bodies of the dead.”

“That’s it, I’ve heard enough. Stop talking about this ghoulish subject,” Victoria said while trying to conceal the concern in her voice.

The concern was the result of the fact that they were heading into the unknown on a dark, cold, snowy evening, and the morbid dread that such an incident could indeed happen to them. True, they were not in a wagon train, and they were on a usually very busy, well-traveled road in the middle of one of the most populated states in the country, but it was beginning to snow very hard and they hadn’t seen another car for miles.

“Do we know where the hell we are?” Victoria asked with a voice that could no longer hide her concern.

“Yeah, yeah, I know about where we’re at,” Clint said while gripping the steering wheel hard enough you could see the veins protrude in his hands.

“We’ll be passing a lake called Silver Lake, and then head over to Carson Pass—if only I could see where I was going.” By now, the visibility was about zero, and the wheels were quickly losing traction on the now very icy road. They were going all of about 15 miles an hour, being passed by an occasional semi-truck or a Greyhound bus full of modern-day gold diggers headed for those mines full of suckers in Reno or Tahoe, when suddenly Clint lost control of the car and slid into a snow drift.

“Oh, fuck!” Clint said without the slightest hesitation. After realizing what he said and who the people were that heard him say it, he quickly apologized. For sure, Hector had never heard him say such a word, and Victoria would be hard-pressed to recall if she had ever heard it come from his mouth. Whether either of them had ever heard that word pass through his lips before didn’t really seem to matter at the time—it was a great tension breaker. They all looked at each other, and after a pregnant pause, they all broke up laughing. They must have laughed for almost five minutes, tears streaming down their cheeks in uncontrolled laughter, when

they stopped as suddenly as they began. Sitting there, looking at each other in the almost complete still silence and darkness, Clint spoke.

“Sorry, I said such a dirty word. It just slipped out,” Clint said while still trying to fight off the giggles.

“That’s okay. Under the circumstances, I’ll forgive you. Just don’t let it happen again,” Victoria said while trying to fight off those same giggles. After several silent minutes of watching the snow collect on the windows, the tension-breaking mood created from the cuss word Clint blurted out had evaporated from the car, and once again, the reality of being stranded in the Sierra Nevada Mountains in a November snowstorm struck them. An almost claustrophobic mood came over Victoria while the winter’s first coat of snow started enclosing them in their car. It was extremely dark, which only intensified the feeling of being enclosed.

After sitting in the silent darkness for what seemed like an eternity, but actually was just a few minutes, Victoria exploded verbally.

“I have to get out of here! Go for a walk! Do something! I’m going to suffocate in here!”

Clint put his hand on her arm to try to calm her, and after putting one of the blankets, which they brought for such an occasion as this, around her, Clint said, “Listen, sweetheart, we have no chains, it’s a blinding snowstorm out there and we can’t walk anywhere because we’ll freeze to death. Let’s just stay here and relax. Someone will be through here by morning to clear the roads. Let’s just sit here and get some shut-eye, someone will be by.”

Deep down, he was probably as scared as she was. Hector had already resigned himself to the fact that they were stuck, and settled back for the time being, trying to curl up with a pillow and some of the blankets they had brought. The wind howled, and at times, was so strong it shook the car. Victoria did her best to ward off the overwhelming feelings of

claustrophobia. These feelings, coupled with the stories told earlier about the Donner Party, put her on the edge of panic. She also thought of submarines, and how tight and closed in all those sailors must feel like when they are submerged below the ocean's surface. *Yet, they don't flip out*, she thought. At least, not in the movies, they don't. Clint and Hector had long since nodded off, but Victoria and her imagination were both more than wide awake.

She did manage to enter that almost state of sleep where you're half-awake and half-sleep. That place where dreams and reality mix, where you can hear the real world around you being fused with the thoughts of the half-asleep mind. With the memory of the Donner Party stories still fresh in her mind, and the reality of the terrible winter storm thrashing their old Buick outside, the stage for that state where the dream world and the real world collide was set. In her dream world, all she could see was the darkness of being buried in a snow cave with death all around her. But the real world was filtering in through the sounds of the wind and cold. Together, both of these created a condition where getting a good and sound rest was impossible. It also created a condition where, when she did wake up, her mind was not able to distinguish between the darkness of being buried 20 feet deep in a snow cave, and being in the enclosed darkness of a snow-bound old Buick.

Hector and Clint were awakened by the most horrifying scream imaginable. It was Victoria awakening to pitch darkness and not being able to distinguish between that dream world and the real world. All she knew was that it felt like she had been buried alive, and in her state of total panic, she had to get out of where she was.

"Let me out! Let me out!" she screeched in an almost inhuman voice. She was pushing the car passenger door with every post-pubescent, pre-menopausal muscle and tendon in her adrenaline-pumped body in an attempt to get it open, even though it already had a good amount of snow piled against it.

“Let me out! Let me out! I don’t want to be buried alive.” Her adrenaline must have been pumping pretty good because she fought off Clint’s efforts to calm her and pushed the car door open all in seemingly one single burst of fear-enhanced energy.

Once outside, she continued her temporary slide into a state of madness. She could hardly see anything, the visibility was zero, and she was running blindly down a frozen road in the middle of nowhere.

Hector and Clint were just emerging from the car yelling, “Come back, Mommy!” and “Come back, Victoria!” respectively. She was temporarily out of her mind and they had to get to her and calm her down before she really hurt herself. Being in conditions like these for too long could easily end in hypothermia. I knew these folks were really in big trouble, and I knew that if I didn’t step in and do something, there was a good possibility that all these folks, including my client Hector, stood a good chance of perishing that night. That’s when it struck me. I’ll come to them as an apparition of two legends that had come to many folks’ aid in times of distress in the past: Wyatt Earp and Hector’s hero, Gary Cooper. I would have rather waited awhile before I introduced Wyatt to Hector, at least until they got to Tombstone, but if I waited, they may not survive this night.

Now, regular angels like myself have very limited powers, as far as taking shapes or changing situations to their liking is concerned. But there are times when we can distort reality when reality itself is in question, and that was exactly the situation these folks found themselves in. I couldn’t just pop an apparition of Wyatt and Mr. Cooper out of thin air; I don’t have the ability to do that. But if I could find some kind of living platform—an animal, bird, insect (I usually try to stay away from the insects), anything alive like that—to build my apparition on . . . Oh, yeah, plants don’t work worth a damn either. I quickly scanned the area for anything I could use, and I came up with two nearby deer—a buck and a doe.

So, in the state these folks were in, especially Victoria, I could actually cause these two animals to unknowingly change into the apparition of Wyatt Earp and Gary Cooper. Victoria was still in a bad way. Still running from the car and in a state of almost complete exhaustion, she was nearly on the verge of passing out. Her weary legs could no longer carry her stressed-out body. She slipped and fell flat on her face. Her lungs desperately gasping for air, which would have come to her much easier back in Lodi at sea level, she just lay there, exhausted, face down in the ice and snow. Suddenly, the winds quieted down and she heard faint steps that weren't from a human in front of her. It sounded like a large animal—possibly two. Whatever it was, it wasn't human, she thought. The snowfall had lessened slightly, so her visibility was now better than it was earlier.

Upon looking up from her prone position, she saw the source of the footsteps she had heard. The two large adult deer were about fifty or sixty yards away and heading toward her. She felt relieved, but when the deer started taking on the shape of two cowboys from the Old West, she felt she was seeing things. She closed her eyes for just a moment, and when she opened them again, there stood Wyatt Berry Stapp Earp and Will Kane, U. S. marshal, more popularly known as Gary Cooper. One, a hero of the Old West, the other, a Western hero of the modern screen.

Wyatt said, "Calm down, ma'am, we're here to help. Me and my partner Will Kane, a fine marshal in his own right, will throw some chains on that there horseless buggy and have you and your family down the road in a right big hurry." Just for your information, Will Kane was the character Gary Cooper played in the movie *High Noon*. As for Wyatt Earp, he would have had no way of knowing Will Kane—or for that matter Gary Cooper in his lifetime, the former being nothing more than fiction, while the latter was just a young struggling actor when Wyatt died. In fact, Gary Cooper, who was now alive, would probably be a little angry if he knew I was using his likeness as an apparition. As it

turns out, he would have only three years to live; he would die of cancer in 1961. Is everyone out there still with me? It can get pretty confusing in this guardian angel business.

“Yes, ma’am, what Wyatt said is for sure true. He’s been helpin’ folks run stage coaches out in these parts for I reckon several years now,” Will Kane said with a reassuring twang in his voice. Both men towered over her; they were both tall and lean. And both, especially the Kane character, seemed somewhat familiar to her. She couldn’t see their faces, for both had scarves covering them. This, however, didn’t hide the familiar voice that she heard come from the man named Kane. She just couldn’t place that voice as the one she had heard many times, in many a dark and quiet movie theater.

By now, they had helped her to her feet, and were covering her in a blanket that I had supplied them with. I try to think of everything.

Victoria asked, “Where the hell did you two guys come from?” She seldom swore, but this was not a time to worry about manners.

Wyatt answered her, “I’m a guessin’ you could say we were sent to help you and your family down yonder at a time when you needed it.”

Victoria replied, “What do you mean you were sent? By who? I swear to God I just saw you two guys change from a couple of good-sized deer into the two cowboy-looking guys standing before me.” By now, the wind had completely stopped blowing, the snow had stopped falling, and there was an eerie calm that descended upon Carson Pass.

She repeated the question, “Won’t you please tell me where you two guys really came from?” This really perplexed her as it would any normal person.

Gary Cooper, a.k.a. Will Kane, answered, “Well, ma’am, it’s like this, me and my friend Wyatt here don’t really know

where we came from. All we know is we're here to help you and your family that's down yonder."

It dawned on her, "My family! Oh, God, they're back in the car!" Just then, they came in view, running and sliding their way to Victoria. She had run further from the car than anyone had realized. Now, neither of these apparitions of Wyatt and Gary, a.k.a. Will, had any idea where they came from or where they would go after they helped these folks. They only had the limited knowledge that I allowed them to have, and for now, that wasn't much.

Wyatt, that's a very unusual name, Victoria thought, and that other fellow, his voice sure sounds familiar. She just couldn't place where she had heard that voice before. Just then, her family had reached her. Together, they held each other in one big simultaneous hug.

"Sweetheart, you scared the hell right out of me. Don't you ever do that again, you hear me!" Clint said, all the while shivering and gasping for air.

And Hector said, "If I had known you were afraid, Mommy, I would have never gone to sleep. I would have stayed awake with you."

"I know, I know, it was stupid of me to run like that, but everything was so real to me. I mean, those stories you told earlier, and the storm, it was all too much for me to handle," Victoria said, all the while hugging the both of them back.

"Who are these two gentlemen?" Clint asked Victoria.

Wyatt again was the one that answered, "Well, sir, my name is Wyatt, and this here is my partner Will Kane. We're here to help you folks."

Clint said, "Help us? You wouldn't have a set of snow chains by any chance, and the knowledge of how to put the damn things on, would you?" Clint said this in an almost joking manner, never expecting to see Wyatt pull a set of new snow chains from his duffle bag.

“Who the hell are you guys,” Clint asked, “a couple of angels?” Both Wyatt and Kane looked at each other and smiled.

Kane said, “That would be as good a guess as any, I guess, seein’ that neither one of us rightly knows who the hell we are. All I know is my name is Will Kane and this here is Wyatt, and I don’t know his last name by gosh. What is your last name, Wyatt?” Wyatt gave a blank stare in Kane’s direction; he didn’t even know what his last name was because I never gave his apparition that information.

“Hell, I don’t know what my last name is. I can’t recollect much of anythin’ right now, no how.”

Clint said, “You boys don’t know who you are, and the only reason you’re out in the middle of this snowstorm is to help save our asses . . . that’s weird! That’s really, really weird! Anyway, we’re glad you’re here. Let’s get back to the car, and get those chains on. I’ll give you boys a lift down the mountain and a few bucks for your trouble.”

Wyatt said, “Now, bucks, that’s a word I recollect. Isn’t that some kind of a deer?”

Clint leaned over and whispered to Victoria, “These boys are strange.” Although they seemed strange, Victoria, Clint, and Hector never felt that they were in any kind of danger being around them. Quite the contrary, they hadn’t felt this secure since they left home.

The snow had stopped falling, the sky was now clear, and the bright full moon gave off enough light for the chains to be put on the car without any trouble. Victoria and Clint watched in amazement as the two cowboy types put the chains on like old pros. Hector never spoke a word to anyone during their encounter with Wyatt and Kane. He knew instinctually that they weren’t of this world, and that they were truly there just to help them in their time of need. Victoria tried real hard to place that familiar voice that belonged to

the man named Will Kane. Suddenly, it struck her like a ton of bricks.

“I know who you sound like!” she said with great excitement. “What was the name of that movie? Ahhhh . . . it’s right on the tip of my tongue . . . *Sergeant York*! That’s it! You sound just like Sergeant York!” The two men just kept on working, seemingly not hearing a word she said.

Clint looked at her and said, “That’s funny. To me, he sounds more like Gary Cooper.” They both thought for a moment and then realized the stupidity of both of their statements.

Clint gave out a little laugh and said, “Gary Cooper is the actor that played Sergeant York in that old movie years ago, when you were just a kid, sweetheart.”

“Well, I couldn’t remember the actor’s name, but I can always remember the characters they play,” Victoria said. To Hector, he didn’t sound like Sergeant York or Gary Cooper; he sounded exactly like the person he was supposed to be at that very moment, Marshal Will Kane from the movie *High Noon*. He should know, he had seen the movie twenty-seven times up till that date.

Just as the two men were finishing putting on the chains, the scarf fell from the face of the man named Will Kane. Gary Cooper himself didn’t look more like Gary Cooper.

Victoria gasped in amazement, “You’re the guy we were just talking about, aren’t you? I can’t remember the name.” She really couldn’t remember the name Gary Cooper. Clint looked at Kane with equal amazement.

“Gary Cooper, that’s who you look like. God, you could be his twin brother. Has anyone ever told you that—that you look just like Gary Cooper, and you sound just like him, too?”

Kane looked at both of them and shrugged, “I don’t reckon I know who this here feller you two are talkin’ about is. And if I do look like that feller you’re talkin’ about, he must be one

good-lookin' rascal." He gave out a little chuckle at that comment.

Both men straightened their legs from the squatting position they had been in. Both men were tall and angular, with the toughness of the West written on their faces.

Will said, "Well, folks, I reckon we're all done here. I guess we'll be movin' along down the road."

Clint repeated his earlier offer, "We can't leave you two guys up here in the middle of nowhere. You're going down the hill with us, we'll take you home, and we won't take no for answer."

Wyatt spoke up, "Home, we have no home, we're just here to help you folks get along down the road. Now, why don't you all get in that there horseless carriage and try out those chains? We'll just stand here and see if we need to adjust them any. Now, get on in the buggy, folks."

As they were sitting in the car and warming up the engine, Clint again remarked, "Those two guys are the strangest, oddest two guys I ever met in my whole life. Just think of it, they don't have homes."

Clint thought for a moment. "I know! They must be bums! Or tramps! Or maybe even hobos!"

Victoria agreed, "They are a strange duo, that's for sure, but I don't think they're bums. They must live out in the forest or something—maybe they're mountain men."

Clint nodded in agreement, "Sounds reasonable, I guess."

The car was all warmed up, and the three were once again comfortable and in good spirits.

Clint rolled down the window to speak to Will and Wyatt, "Okay, I guess I'll try to pull out of this drift we're stuck in. You guys sure you don't need a lift somewhere, you sure you'll be all right up here?"

Will spoke up, "Me and Wyatt here, we'll be just fine. It's

been our pleasure helpin' you folks out in your time of need. Now, get a move on, and we'll see if those chains will be needin' any adjustment."

"Just one more thing, Mr. Kane, if you don't mind," Victoria yelled out the window.

"Sure, ma'am, anything. What is it?" Will said.

"Could you say, 'I'm a gonna be a gettin' me one of them there beef-critters,' could you say it, please?"

Will Kane looked perplexed but said, "Sure, I can say that for you, ma'am. I'm a gonna be a gettin' me one of them there beef-critters. Is that okay, ma'am?"

"Sergeant York! Sergeant York! That guy looks and sounds just like Sergeant York, or Gary Cooper, or whoever," Victoria said while in hysterics.

"What was that all about?" Clint asked. "You probably embarrassed the poor guy. Beef-critter, what's that suppose to mean?"

"Oh, never mind, you wouldn't understand," Victoria said while still giggling to herself. "It's just a line Sergeant York had in the movie he was in, and I thought it was funny," Victoria said while still chuckling to herself.

Clint looked at her and shook his head, "Man, anything can be amusing to you."

Then he once again looked at Will and Wyatt. "Okay, guys you take care, and I'm going to try to pull out of this drift." He rolled up the window, and waved to them one last time before lead-footing the accelerator. Within seconds, they were out of the snowdrift. After they got unstuck, he again rolled down the window to once again thank the two cowboys.

"You guys sure saved our necks, we'll always remember you. God bless the both of you." And with that, he rolled up the window for the last time.

As they rolled down the icy road, Clint tried to focus through the rearview mirror, to see if he could see the two men and wave one last time. But to his surprise, he didn't see two men, what he saw were two large deer, one a buck and the other a doe.

“Well, where did they go? And where the hell did those two big deer come from?” he asked in complete amazement. Victoria didn't want to look. She remembered the two deer she thought she saw earlier, right before she met Will and Wyatt. As they drove slowly off into the now clear Sierra Nevada night, they couldn't help but feel that they had had a brush with a world that is different from their own.

Clint said, “Honey, this has got to be the strangest night I've ever had in my entire life.” Victoria nodded in agreement as she slowly dozed off from total exhaustion. Hector was already asleep, well aware that what had happened to them was not part of this world.

Clint thought over the events that just happened and said to himself softly, “You know, if I had to put my finger on it, I would say we had a brush with a different zone of reality. That's it! A zone! Sort of a twilight zone! Where reality and dreams are one.” Little did he know that he had just coined the name of a soon-to-be-popular television show. The only thing, however, that seemed to be missing from tonight's weird episode was a monologue from a cigarette-puffing Rod Serling. He then put his arm around Victoria and looked out the window at the starry night. And as they drove into that starry night, a weird tune went over and over in Clint's head... DO-DO-DO-DO... DO- DO-DO-DO ...

CHAPTER 14: THE BONDING OF MATRIMONY

Two hours after they said their final good-byes to the two apparitions on the mountain, Clint, Victoria, and Hector rolled into Carson City, Nevada. Tired and worn out, they checked into the first motel with a vacancy. It was called the Earp Motel named after the legendary Western gunman. He had spent time in the silver mines of Nevada during his long and eventful life.

They had no idea that the motel was named after one of the apparitions that had just helped them hours before. All they knew was that they were dead tired and needed some sleep. The next day, they awoke to the pleasant smell of bacon and eggs and coffee coming from the small cafe that was part of the Earp Motel. After washing the sleep from their eyes, they headed to that very same cafe for a bite of breakfast.

“Well, what do you two want? You can have anything on the menu as long as it’s under one fifty,” Clint said while smacking his lips and rubbing his tummy. Victoria gave him a look that said, “I’ll order anything I want, and I don’t care if it costs three dollars or more, and that goes for Hector, too.” Anyway, she didn’t say anything; she just gave him the look that said that.

When the waitress came to take their order, Clint said, “Bring coffee for all three of us, well, a least for me and my wife, not the boy. And I’ll have the ‘Hungry Traveler.’” That breakfast consisted of three eggs, a small steak, and a stack of pancakes and all the coffee you can drink—all for \$1.48.

Victoria said, “You little piggy, Clint.” And then she proceeded to order two eggs with toast. Hector, who was normally very shy in public, but had recently made great strides in personal interactions, ordered a cheese omelet with bacon on the side and a Coke. While Clint was ordering

his food, he had referred to Victoria as his wife. This had surprised both Victoria and Hector, but especially Clint himself, for he had never referred to her as his wife before, verbally. To himself, he thought that he liked the way it sounded when he said it out loud. He also wondered to himself if Hector and Victoria had noticed when he said it. They did, but nothing was said about it. After all, they weren't quite married yet. And at this point, they didn't want to give Clint any reason to get cold feet.

While they waited for their orders to come, the three just sat there quietly looking at the walls. There were murals of the Old West on all four walls, each depicting some landmark event of that long ago time. One wall had a picture of a cattle drive. The next had a picture of the completion of the transcontinental railroad in Utah in 1869. Clint thought to himself while looking at that picture, which showed a very large group of men gathered on the now completed railroad. He thought, *Those old boys back then sure were a bunch of tough-lookin' old boys. They must have had nuts the size of grape fruits to do the things they did.* The third was a picture of Indians looking down upon a wagon train from a hillside. But the one that really grabbed the attention of all three of them was the one that was on the wall right next to the booth they were sitting in. It was a mural depicting the gunfight battle at the OK Corral.

Clint said, "Hector, that's where we're going, down to Tombstone, where the Earps, together with Doc Holliday, shot it out with the Clantons and McLowerys." Hector didn't need a history lesson about anything dealing with the Old West, he probably knew as much or more as most college history professors on the subject. Just as Clint started to describe the events leading up to that fateful gunfight, the waitress brought the food. Nothing else was said; they just ate.

While they were waiting to pay the cashier, the three noticed more pictures of the Old West and, in particular, pictures of

Wyatt Earp himself on the walls leading out of the cafe.

“You know, if you put a scarf on that man’s face, he would be a dead ringer for one of those guys that helped us last night,” Victoria said while studying one of the pictures closely.

“Yeah, and wasn’t his name Wyatt, too?” Clint asked while looking at that same picture. “What was that guy’s last name?” Clint again asked quietly.

“I don’t think he ever said what his last name was, but his first name was Wyatt,” Victoria said, still gazing at the picture.

“I wonder if those two guys are doing all right since we left them.” Clint said while they walked out of the diner.

Victoria smiled and said, “Something tells me they’re doing just fine.”

After their breakfast, they took a stroll along the main boulevard in downtown Carson City. After finding out from a stranger where they could find the justice of the peace, they continued their little stroll with a certain prolonged urgency, knowing this would be their last stroll as single people, and also realizing that the next time they took a walk down the street together, it would be as a family. They probably had already started looking at themselves as a family, but this was making it official.

The ceremony was short and informal, and Hector was allowed to be the formal witness to the accident . . . Oops! I mean, witness to the vows they took. Clint gave Victoria a modest diamond ring, and Victoria gave Clint an equally modest gold wedding band. There were no tears at this small wedding ceremony, only a handshake and a hearty congratulation from the justice of the peace. And after signing a few papers and paying a minimal fee, they continued their stroll, this time, without the anxiety and urgency that had earlier nagged them.

They felt as if a giant weight had been lifted off their shoulders. Clint and Victoria were taking turns saying “Mr.

and Mrs. Johnson” out loud. Victoria liked trying out her new name; she liked the name Victoria Johnson, and had always relished the time when that would indeed be her name. Not that she didn’t like her Spanish surname, Ortega, but somehow, having an Anglo name, she could now imagine how life would have been had she never been born a poor Mexican girl. She could imagine growing up with white parents, in a white neighborhood, with a white picket fence, wearing white clothes that would always stay white because she never would have to get them dirty working in the fields. But the thing she liked best about imagining a life being born white was the fact no one would ever look down on her again for not being white.

“Victoria Johnson, it has a certain graceful ring of decency to it, doesn’t it?” Victoria asked while savoring the sound of it rolling off the tip of her tongue.

Clint said, “You do realize, dear, there are places in this country where folks don’t look too kindly on different races marrying and taking up as a family. There’s even places around that might not even serve us a meal, or places that wouldn’t rent us a room for the night.”

Victoria was well aware of places such as these; she realized the bigotry that was passionate in some parts of the country but said, “My loving Sénor Clint, my brand-new husband, we live in the liberal West, these are the nineteen fifties, most of that stuff goes on in the redneck, in the deep South.” Clint let it go at that, after all, Victoria knew all too well about bigotry. Preaching to her about bigotry would be like telling the Pope how to be a good Catholic . . . it’s a waste of time, and doesn’t need to be done.

By now, it was past noon, and the three were ready to hit the road and head south.

But before they left, Hector asked, “Could we get something to eat? I’m hungry!” Hector usually didn’t make many requests, but everyone was hungry so they went for a bite to eat back at the Earp Cafe. As they sat down and ate

their burgers and fries, they each, once again, quietly studied the murals on the walls.

“Sure must have been some time to live in, back in the Old West,” Clint said with his mouth full, and mayonnaise dripping down his chin.

“C’mon, Clint,” Victoria said, “even in the Old West, they had some manners in public. Wipe off your chin.” Clint grumbled to himself and quickly complied with her request.

While leaving the cafe, Clint and Victoria again commented on how much the photographs of Wyatt Earp on the walls reminded them of the mysterious man that had helped them the night before.

“And his name was Wyatt, too,” Clint said while trying to make some sense of the striking resemblance.

“Who knows, maybe it was Wyatt Earp’s ghost we met, and it still hangs around to help people out in trouble.” Victoria gave Clint a “you’ve got to be kidding” look, and that was the end of that conversation.

They then all piled into the Buick Roadmaster, the same vehicle that had taken them on so many adventures before. Clint pulled the road map out of the glove compartment.

“Looks like were going to have to travel east for awhile, then hit Ninety-Five south,” Clint said while focusing through his newly bought glasses.

“We’ll take Ninety-Five all the way to Arizona, then head east again till we hit Flagstaff. You should remember that place, sweetheart,” Clint said with a little sarcasm, for that was the place she first saw Samson.

“Then we’ll have a straight shot south to Tucson and then on to Tombstone. Should take about twelve hours of straight driving, I figure.” And Clint was usually pretty good at figuring distances and the amount of time it would take to reach a certain destination. He would usually measure a trip by how

many piss- breaks it would require to reach a certain destination.

This trip, however, he had no idea how many it would take, so he called it “an open-ended piss-break trip.” Victoria didn’t appreciate referring to the trip like that, but Clint thought it was funny, and Hector also got a kick out of it.

After they got into the car, Hector just sat in the backseat of that big old Buick, knowing that after this trip, he would never be the same again. He did not know how he would be different, he just knew, and like so many of the so-called handicapped in the world, he had a special sense and understanding about his surroundings. A kind of sense that the so-called normal folks in the world don’t possess. And through this sense, I would explain to him his destiny for the next thirty or so years. I would let him know how he would be used as an instrument to right some wrongs in the past, and some wrongs that haven’t even been committed yet. Like taking care of the real assassin of that soon- to-be young president of United States, JFK. Yes, Lee Harvey Oswald was there that fateful day in Dallas, and he did, indeed, fire a couple of the shots that were aimed at that handsome young president, but that poor dumb-shit couldn’t hit the water if he fell out of the boat. Sorry, I still sometimes have some trouble with my mouth.

Anyway, I would let him know there is going to be a lot of work for him to do, and he would be very instrumental in getting the job done. Hector just sat there in the warm glow of knowing they were finally a family. Watching the sagebrush, jackrabbits, and the hills that could tell a thousand stories of the Old West roll by, Hector’s eyes slowly dropped into the sleeping position.

His eyes opened briefly when Clint proclaimed, “I’m hungry! Is anybody else hungry?” Hector smiled to himself, comforted by that familiar comment from Clint, his new dad. The Buick rolled into the Nevada sunset.

CHAPTER 15: PRESIDENT WYATT EARP?

From the time they left Lodi two days earlier until that very moment, there had been something strange about their trip. Neither Clint nor Victoria could put their finger on it, but both felt strongly that there was something very strange going on.

It got even stranger when, in every town they passed through, there was something named after that great lawman of the Old West—Wyatt Earp. There was the Wyatt Earp Filling Station, in the little town of Yerington, Nevada. Then there was Wyatt Earp Memorial Cemetery in Hawthorne. Tonopah's main market was called Earp Mart. But the strangest thing they saw that was named after that legendary lawman was the sight they beheld when they rolled into Las Vegas, Nevada.

The city looked like an oasis to these dirty, tired, and amazed desert travelers. But they couldn't believe their eyes when they saw the biggest casino on the strip. Do you have any idea what the name of it was? That's right, it was called The Earp Brothers' Casino, and when Clint and Victoria saw it, the hair stood up on the backs of their necks.

"What's with this? Every town we went through, from Carson City to Las Vegas, has something named after Wyatt Earp! You'd think the guy was the greatest American that ever lived." Clint was perplexed, but also amazed by the events that were taking place. He asked, "What do you think of all this Wyatt Earp stuff, honey?" Clint asked her, realizing she had no real explanation, and she did attempt to give one.

"Maybe we never realized just how big he was in this part of the country. Sort of like Mark Twain in Missouri, or Davy Crockett in Tennessee." The mention of the name Davy Crockett perked up Hector's attention. Again, any mention of Western characters would more than spark Hector's interest.

Clint looked at Victoria and shrugged his shoulders and said, "Victoria, that sounds like a good explanation, and if I had to bet, I would have to say that probably isn't far from being the truth." Then he rubbed his stomach and said, "I'm hungry! Let's go inside this Earp Brothers' Casino and see if we could grab some grub."

Upon entering The Earp Brothers' Casino, the three desert travelers were greeted by the hosts and hostesses handing out discount tickets to the Roundup Buffet.

Clint exclaimed, "Hotdog! An all-you-can-eat buffet for only one ninety-five, you can't beat that bargain anywhere. Let's go!"

The main gambling hall must have been about the size of the Cow Palace in San Francisco, because when Clint got one look at the place he said, "Holy Jesus! This place must be the size of the Cow Palace in San Francisco." Clint was never a religious man, but sometimes he did get inspired. After assuring the host that they were not going to stay and gamble while Hector was with them, the host allowed them to pass through the main gaming room to get to the buffet.

All the hosts and hostesses, dealers and pit bosses, and even the cocktail waitresses, were dressed up in Western attire.

They were all real friendly, yelling, "Howdy, partner!" and telling Victoria, "You're sure lookin' mighty purty tonight, miss." She knew they were lying; she said to Clint, "I know I don't look purty, I must look like crap! Sitting in that car all these hours, and not having a chance to get cleaned up." Victoria was right. I had seen her look better from time to time, but hey, the hosts were just doing their job. There was even one feller dressed as if he was trying to look like a Gary Cooper-type cowboy personality. This quickly caught the attention of Hector who studied his every move. But after studying him for a few moments, Hector thought him to be a real phony, coming to the conclusion that he wouldn't have lasted ten minutes in the Old West.

Part of his phony cowboy's job was to walk around the casino hootin' and a-hollerin' and occasionally firing off blanks from his .45 Colt revolver. Whereupon, after firing them, he would pretend to blow the smoke away from the gun barrels, twirl them both high into the air, and then slip them both smoothly back into the holster.

Well, this particular night, this phony cowboy must have been sippin' the free drinks because he was getting a little carried away with the .45 shootin' bit. He was shooting off way more blanks than he should have been, acting like some quick-draw artist or something like that, when suddenly, some angry big old bruiser, who had been losing at the tables and was also drunk, came over to the phony cowboy, ripped both of the six-shooters out of his hands, and promptly threw both of them in the big fountain in the center of the casino.

All the big old bruiser could slurringly say, while the drunk phony cowboy looked on, dumbfounded, was, "You sorry sack of shit cowboy. You and your goddamn gun firin' made me lose my concen- concen-concentration at the tables, and I lost a whole mess of dough. I ought to kick your sorry phony cowboy ass." But that's all that was said while the now completely quieted casino watched that angry big old bruiser turn and stagger toward the exit.

This was the main reason Hector came to the conclusion that this phony cowboy wouldn't have lasted ten minutes in the Old West. No real cowboy from the Old West would have stood there and watched some big drunk rip his six-shooters from his hands, and promptly throw them into some damn fountain.

So after the show featuring the phony cowboy and the big bruiser was over at the center of the casino, and after paying the cashier and getting the discount that was provided for them by the hosts, the three got in line for the buffet. The plates were hot, the way they usually are at all those all-you-can-eat buffets.

In fact, one plate was so hot Clint burnt his hand, and

embarrassed both Victoria and Hector with a, “Holy Shit! Can’t they cool off those damn plates before they put them out?” He quickly forgot the pain the hot plate caused him and promptly began packing his plate.

After sitting down and getting situated with drinks and silverware, Victoria and Clint again saw something that made the hair on the back of their necks stand up. The same exact murals that were on the walls back in the Earp Cafe in Carson City were on the walls here in the Earp Brothers’ Casino.

Clint said, “Looks like that artist is pretty popular in these parts, too. Those murals on the walls are the same as the ones we saw in Carson City.”

Victoria nodded her head and said in a rather sarcastic manner, “They sure as hell are.” The three just kept on eating. I think they were getting tired of seeing strange things.

After eating, they took a little walk before deciding not to spend the night in Vegas. They decided to push on to Tombstone. Victoria decided to be the first one to get some sleep and then she would spell Clint awhile and let him get some sleep while she took over the driving duties. Victoria slept almost all the way to Flagstaff, when suddenly she was gently shaken by Clint.

“Sweetheart . . . hey, sweetheart, we’re getting into Flagstaff, isn’t that where you first saw Samson?”

Victoria, after wiping the sleep from her eyes and generally looking around and getting her bearings, said, “Yeah, this pretty much looks like the same area, but that was a lot of years ago, things have changed.”

After pulling over and changing drivers, both Victoria and Clint were again wide awake and entering Flagstaff at first light. Hector was still sound asleep. Looking at the gas gauge, Victoria exclaimed, “We better get some gas—and quick! We better take this turn off and head into downtown Flagstaff.”

Upon entering Flagstaff, and just running on fumes, Victoria saw a sight that for years after the event, still gave her goose bumps.

“That’s it! That’s the same gas station that Samson and all the Okies ran into.”

Clint said, “Well pull in, they’re open, we can at least stretch and get some gas.”

The strangest thing of all and which Victoria exclaimed was, “It’s the same place but nothing has changed from the way I remember the place, and that was twenty years ago!”

Clint said, “Maybe they kept the old-fashioned look all these years, you know, for old times’ sake, or something like that.”

After pulling into the station and telling the station attendant to “Fill her up,” the three got out of the old buggy to stretch. Hector was yawning, and wiping the sleep from his eyes, while Clint wandered around, and checked the place out.

Clint said to the attendant, “Boy, everything around here is like antique, even the cigarette and the candy in the machines are wrapped in old-time wrappers. Have you kept everything like the old days for a reason?”

The attendant gave Clint a queer look and said, “What do you mean, sir? Nothing here is antique; it’s all as modern as can be. Say, what model car is this? I haven’t seen anything on the road like this before, it must be one of next year’s models.” Then Victoria noticed the gas pump that years ago had been hit by the Okies. It had some damage to it, almost as if it had recently been hit by another car.

“Looks like somebody else hit this pump again. It must just be a good target for cars. I remember this was the exact pump that was hit by a bunch of folks when I was a kid,” Victoria said while studying the pump carefully.

The attendant gave Victoria a puzzled look and said, “What do you mean, ma’am? Up until that bunch of bums hit

it last week, no one has ever hit it. I should know, I'm the first and only owner of the place."

Clint and Victoria gave each other lost looks. They were both chilled to the bone by what seemed at the time like supernatural surroundings.

The attendant looked at Victoria and asked, "Ma'am, are you all right? You look mighty pale."

After a few seconds' pause, Victoria regained enough composure to ask the attendant, "Sir, if you don't mind, could you describe to me the folks that did hit your pump?" With that, both Victoria and Clint both braced themselves for the answer.

The attendant said, "Sure, I can tell you who hit the pump. It was a carload of those Okies from the Dust Bowl. They are a filthy bunch. They offered to pay for the damage, but I don't think they had enough money to get to California. So I just gave them a little gas, and told them to keep on moving. Is anything wrong, do you know these people?"

Victoria had to get in the car and sit down; she felt a wave of nausea rush over her.

Clint was almost as shaken as Victoria, but did manage to ask the attendant, "Sir, if you don't mind, can you tell me who the president of the United States is?"

The attendant looked at him with as much bewilderment as they had for him and said, "What planet have you folks stepped off? Why, it's Roosevelt, you know FDR? He's the guy with the New Deal."

By now, Hector had gotten a pack of chewing gum and had gotten back in the car. Clint paid the attendant a Depression-era price for the gasoline, and jumped back into the car.

The attendant waved to the three bewildered travelers and said, "You folks drive safe now, and take care of that new model car you got there. That Detroit sure comes up with some winners."

As they slowly left the driveway of the filling station and rolled down the road toward the interstate, Clint looked in his rearview mirror and noticed that everything had changed. It was no longer a Depression-era gas station, but rather, it was now a spanking-new, late-1950s-model gas station. The attendant was gone, and was replaced by two teenage boys who were now the attendants, and who were obviously flirting with two girls at the gas pump. Clint also noticed a sign near the station that wasn't there before; it read: "Free steak knives with every fill up." *Man!* Clint thought, *That's a good deal. Too bad we just missed out on that deal.* But then, he immediately thought that under the circumstances, it wasn't that big of a deal.

Victoria looked at Clint and asked, "If all that we just saw at that filling station is real, is it possible that Samson is still alive? Or was all of that back there just a fake?"

Clint said, "Victoria, I'm going to pull over here and you look back at that station, and you'll see that things look a whole lot more up-to-date." After pulling off to the side of the road, Victoria looked back, and after observing that the station had changed to a more modern station, she quickly opened her car door and promptly threw up. The mix of emotions, and the supernaturally bizarre occurrences had gotten to her.

"Oh, sweetheart! Are you all right?" Clint asked while patting Victoria on the back.

"I guess that buffet must have upset my stomach, I always eat too much at those damn buffets; it must have been those raviolis and oysters." Victoria said while trying to regain her composure.

Clint said, "Raviolis and oysters! What are you trying to do, kill yourself?"

Victoria asked, "What in the world is going on? Ever since we left home, all these strange things have been occurring. Those weird men that helped us on the mountain . . . and

everything named after the Earps, and those same murals in the casino back in Las Vegas, and now, the gas station . . . what in the world is happening?”

Clint said, “I have no idea what is going on, but one possibility is . . . you’re going to think I’m crazy . . .”

Victoria said, “Don’t worry. I already think that.”

Clint continued, “Now, don’t laugh, but what we may be experiencing here is a parallel world.”

As the car started once again on its Western adventure, Victoria asked, “What in the world is a parallel world?” Clint scratched his head, and thought deeply of a way to describe what he meant by a parallel world or universe.

“A parallel world,” he began while scratching his head, “is the possibility of an entire world existing, right here, in this very space we live in, just moments ahead of us—or behind us—but just occupying another space in time. Einstein proved it, at least in theory, that time and its relationship with space can be distorted or bent, given the right circumstances.”

Victoria’s mouth dropped open and said, “Clint, I thought you were a pesticide sprayer, not a physicist.”

Clint smiled and said, “I always was an Albert Einstein fan. I mean, any guy that can invent a bomb like that is okay in my book.” Clint didn’t realize that Einstein had very little, if anything, to do with the actually inventing of the atomic bomb.

Hector spoke up and asked, “Gee, Dad,” he just started calling him Dad, “do you really think that is what is happening to us?”

Clint just shook his head and said, “I don’t know, Hector. If it is, we’re in the process of making history.”

And he was right. They were the first people ever to cross over to another parallel world, or I should say, get a glimpse of what another possible reality might be. What had happened on their journey was what we in the guardian angel

community call, “crossing an energy bend.” What that is (and like I said before, these are the first people in my modern memory that have crossed “The Bend”) is the absorption of unfathomable amounts of energy by a human being, and of them surviving to talk about it. Astronauts, and those guys that were used as guinea pigs in those above-ground atomic explosions, came pretty close to experiencing the energy needed to cross “The Bend.” And the people that were waxed at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the atomic bomb blasts actually absorbed enough energy to cross “The Bend.” That kind of energy in the wrong hands can prove to be nothing but folly, as proven by the number of people that died. But in the right hands, great things can be done.

Jesus Christ, when he performed his miracles, repeatedly used enough power to cross “The Bend.” And John Glenn, when he saw the fireflies in space during his orbits around the earth, was just getting a glimpse of “The Bend.” That is to say, that he actually saw the gravitational pull that was holding him in earth’s orbit—the fireflies were merely the visual manifestation of that gravitational power.

In this case, I was given the okay to open the power door for Hector and his family. What they were seeing was another possible reality, not that it really was reality, they were just seeing the world as it was had Wyatt Earp become president of the United States. And that’s all parallel worlds are, a glimpse at what might have been, or what might be, sort of like that movie I referred to at the beginning of the story—*It’s A Wonderful Life*—when George Bailey got to see what life would have been like had he not been born.

You see, these folks were going to Tombstone to see where the greatest gunfight ever took place. Little did they know that I was going to show Hector the actual gunfight, on the exact day it happened, October 26, 1881. Not an acted-out thing, but the real gunfight! With the real Wyatt Earp! Clint and Victoria would miss it; they will have a nap to take. And in order to do this, it was going to call for an enormous amount

of power. And that's what they were going through right now—a power door!

Also, at times when a person gets a glimpse of, or crosses, “The Bend,” the possibility of crossing a timeline also exists. You might actually cross a parallel world or bend and actually end up in another time. That's what happened moments before in the gas station. They were actually back in the 1930s for just a few moments. And that is what I hope to accomplish when I take Hector on a trip back to the actual gunfight at the OK Corral. Like I said, Clint and Victoria would be napping when I have Hector meet Wyatt.

So this is what they have been traveling through since they left Lodi—a parallel world or another possible reality. And that was what the countryside would have looked like had Wyatt Earp ever become president of the United States. Had he not become an outlaw himself after the gunfight, the possibility was there for a run at the White House. He was a Republican, and had come from a very prominent Midwestern family. He was also one of the most famous and popular men in the country at a time when the most looked-up-to men in the country were the ones settling in the West. Had Wyatt Earp become president, the Western landscape would have had many things named after him and his brothers. And that's what they were seeing, a countryside with the signature of Wyatt Earp everywhere.

Victoria said, “It's your turn to get some sleep. You want to pull over and I'll take over?”

Clint gave her a tired look and said, “Now, honey, you just got done throwing up, are sure you're up to driving for a few hours?”

“I'm all right, just pull over and then you can get a little rest,” Victoria said this while she gave him a tender stroke in the cheek with her warm hand.

After pulling over and changing drivers, the three settled in for the last leg of their journey to Tombstone. Within

minutes, Clint and Hector were fast asleep, as the old Buick rolled into another new Arizona morning. As Victoria drove, she couldn't help but wonder what the source was of all the strange things that had recently happened to them in the last two days. They had been so preoccupied with the strange and bizarre, they hadn't found the time or the mood to consummate their new wedding vows. By now, even with Victoria's strict Catholic upbringing, they had already broken down to the temptations of the flesh and had had carnal knowledge of each other, but they still had to go through the formality of consummating their wedding vows.

Maybe tomorrow, she thought, after we get to Tombstone, and settle in to a hotel, Clint and I could get a little romantic. We could send Hector down to get a milkshake and he could play some pinball or something. That should be long enough for our romantic interlude, and then Clint would be fast asleep anyway. Victoria was starting to get a little bit aroused by her romantic thoughts, so she decided to throw some cold water on them for now. After all, she couldn't do anything about them here, at least not with Clint as a participant.

Everything was now ready. I had now generated enough power to fulfill my mission. And that was to take Hector and whoever was with him (it so happened to be his parents) back to the actual gunfight at OK Corral. And after doing that, have the real

Wyatt Earp explain to Hector what's in store for him. Then Hector would be an official lawman of the modern West! Now, isn't this damn story getting good! I just get goose bumps every time I tell this thing.

CHAPTER 16: THE MEETING

Upon arrival late that afternoon in Tombstone, the three checked into a nice little hotel named after, guess who? That's right, Wyatt Earp. And guess what was on the walls of the hotel's restaurant? You guessed it, the same murals they had seen in two other locations on their journey up to then. By now, the strange sights and constant reminders that Wyatt Earp had once walked these same streets did not faze them; they had gotten used to the unexpected.

That night, Clint and Victoria consummated their marriage. They waited for Hector to go to sleep. The plan to have him go play pinball or miniature golf for a while fell through, as there were no such facilities in the general neighborhood. So after an unrestrained but quiet romp (the mattress springs squeaked, and they didn't want to wake Hector and have him see them in a lustful embrace), all was once again quiet in room 124. Ten minutes after sexual contact had begun, Clint was sound asleep and snoring. They had done their official duty and consummated their marriage; they were cemented together forever.

The next morning, after eating breakfast in the hotel dining room and looking quietly at the now familiar murals on the walls, Clint decided to ask a few questions about the late, great Wyatt Earp.

He went out to the hotel lobby while Victoria and Hector went back to the room to get cleaned up. There, he decided to ask the hotel clerk a few questions. Clint started talking to the clerk while picking up a brochure about Tombstone at the counter.

Clint said, "Boy . . . that Wyatt Earp sure was some man, just about everything from Reno down to here is named after the man, you would think he had been president of the United States once or something."

The clerk looked up from under his glasses and said, "Are you kidding, sir? Did you forget that part of American history?"

"What part?"

The clerk answered, "The part where you had to remember the presidents' names."

Clint said, "Well, I'm no history buff, but I know Wyatt Earp never was president of the United States." With that, the clerk at the counter gave Clint another brochure; this one was about the life and times of Wyatt Earp.

The clerk said, "You sit down over there and read this. It will refresh your memory. After all, he was president when we invaded Mexico and made it part of the United States of America." *Mexico*, Clint thought to himself, *isn't part of the United States . . . or is it?*

After taking a seat in the lobby, and studying the cover of the brochure, he opened it with some hesitancy. He knew for certain that in the world that he and his family had come from, Wyatt Earp had never been president of the United States. He also knew that this brochure may just hold the proof that, for some reason unknown to him, they had for sure stepped into another world.

Upon opening the brochure, he noticed the words in big bold letters: WELCOME TO TOMBSTONE, THE TOWN THAT WYATT EARP PUT ON THE MAP, OUR 23rd PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES. Clint could hardly believe the words he was reading. After gathering his thoughts, he dared himself to read on. He discovered that Wyatt Earp had run against, and had beaten, Grover Cleveland in the presidential election in 1888. He had run as the Republican candidate, and William McKinley was his running mate. Clint went on to discover that Wyatt was President from 1889-1897, and had again defeated Cleveland in the 1892 election.

Clint read on, with no new revelations about the life of Wyatt Earp being learned. Until he came to the part of the brochure that described how an assassin's bullet took the life of Wyatt Earp in Arizona while he was at an election rally for a friend. One man was arrested; he was a distant relative of the Clanton gang. After all those years, the wounds of that October day in 1881 were still open and bleeding. Clint knew that, some years later, the man that inherited the job from Wyatt—McKinley—would also be gunned down by an assassin's bullet in Buffalo, New York.

Clint had read enough. He gave the brochure back to the clerk.

“Go ahead and keep it,” the clerk said, “they're free.”

Clint said, “That's all right, I know the rest of the story.”

The words that Clint had just read weighed heavily on his mind. He knew that the past that he had just read about, and the things they had been seeing, was not the history he knew, but was another possible past. These strange things would not have to weigh heavily on his mind for much longer, for a strange need for sleep was descending upon him and Victoria.

After returning to their room, Clint flopped down on the bed and lethargically said, “Victoria . . . let's hurry up. We only have a little while before they recreate the gunfight again.” Clint was yawning and stretching, and had just propped a pillow under his head. He had not quite committed himself totally to a nap just yet, for if and when he ever kicked his shoes off, and swung his feet up and around, and flopped them on the bed in the direction of the TV, that was the sign that a nap was imminent, and any effort at fighting it would be futile.

Hector was sitting quietly on the edge of the bed watching a football game on the TV with Clint, both waiting for Victoria to finish getting cleaned up. Clint had just reached

that point of no return, as he had just kicked off his shoes, and had swung his feet up on the bed.

Victoria came out of the bathroom and said, “Now, Clint, get up. You’re the one who’s always in a hurry. You can’t take a nap now.” The same strange need for sleep that I had caused to descend upon Clint was soon to envelop Victoria as well.

Victoria sat on the edge of the bed giving Clint that look that said, “And you’re the one that’s always in a hurry.” But a yawn soon spread across her face, and her arms soon stretched toward the ceiling fan.

“God, I’m suddenly sleepy,” Victoria said while lying back on the bed. She still had both of her legs over the side of the bed, and both of her feet were still flat on the floor.

Victoria asked Clint, “What do you say we both take a little nap? We can catch the next gunfight recreation at three o’clock.” Clint was already out like a light, and snoring big *ZZZZZZ*’s.

Victoria looked over at Hector and said, “Clint and I are going to take a little nap, sweetheart. We’ll catch the next gunfight show at three. Why don’t you watch some TV, or go downstairs and get some ice cream or something? Clint and I will be around in a little while.” By this time she had kicked off her shoes, put a pillow under her head, and had taken total possession of her side of the bed.

Hector said, “I’ll be downstairs, Mom, waiting for you and Dad in the lobby.” Victoria didn’t hear him, she was already out cold.

Now, the stage was set for me to show Hector the actual gunfight at the OK Corral. I had to spare his folks any more stress that the time bend had created, that’s why I caused sleep to come upon them. Hey, it worked for a few guardian angels when they put the Roman guards to sleep before Jesus rose from the dead. I wasn’t in on that job, but it worked just fine.

You see, after Clint and Victoria wake up, they will have no recollection of all the strange things they had been

through or have seen since their trip began. The world will be back to the way they remembered it. And in fact, they will feel as if they had already seen the gunfight show, and will feel no need to see the three o'clock recreation. That would save them some money (missing the show), making Clint a happy man.

On the other hand, when Hector steps out of that bedroom door, the date would not be October 26, 1881 as first planned. I had notified Wyatt that I really didn't feel Hector should be a witness to one of the most violent events of the Old West. I mean, the kid was only twelve going on thirteen, and I should have considered his age much earlier. So I decided to set the meeting up for October 27, 1881, one day after the gunfight.

When Hector opened the door to go down to the lobby, Wyatt was at the door waiting to greet him.

"How was your trip, son? I see your folks are takin' a little nap. Nothin' wrong with that after such a long trip. I'm still amazed at those horseless carriages you folks scoot around in." Hector looked at Wyatt with amazement, but was not surprised to see him. He had been expecting a visit of importance for some time. And to him, all the strange goings-on so far on the trip have only been a prelude to such a visit.

Although Hector was still somewhat socially retarded, he was losing much of his shyness and asked Wyatt, "Aren't you one of the fellows that helped us back at the snowstorm, the one named Wyatt?"

Wyatt said, "By golly, young feller, you're absolutely right. My name is Wyatt Earp," as he reached out to shake Hector's hand.

"And who might you be, young man?" As if he didn't know.

Hector looked at him with a smile that would have lit up an Arizonian night sky, and said, "My name is Hector Johnson,"

Hector said it proudly, as if Wyatt was the first person to hear him say his new name.

Wyatt asked Hector, “And I’ll bet you want to know who that tall lanky feller was that helped me?” By now, they had walked down the stairs to the main lobby, where they each both took a seat in big leather chairs.

Hector said, “Well, yes, Mr. Earp, if you don’t mind telling me.”

Now Hector had an idea who that guy was up on the mountain that helped Wyatt put the chains on the car. After all, the guy he suspected of being that guy was his biggest hero in the world, next to Clint, of course.

“Well, Hector little buddy,” Wyatt said, “that feller was Marshall Will Kane, or better known to you as Gary Cooper.” Hector’s bright smile became even brighter.

“Now, young feller, I reckon you want to know what you’re doin’ here talkin’ to me, on the exact date of the greatest gunfight in Western history? Well, you and me, we both have what you call guardian angels. Mine served me good in all the scraps I had in my lifetime. His name was Harold. Yours, on the other hand, is the one that set up this meetin’, and his name, he told me, was Spencer. He was a right nice feller, for a guardian angel, that is.”

I have to admit that in all my days stuck to the confines of this sometimes dismal planet, Wyatt Earp has always ranked as one of my favorite people. But Harold! Again, I ask, who the hell gives us our names? Hector looked over at Wyatt with amazement, but was not surprised to find out that he had his own guardian angel all this time.

Hector asked Wyatt, “My angel’s name is Spencer, and he has always watched over me?”

“That’s right, little partner, he has always watched over you. He is the one who decided that you’re a little too young to be witness to the actual gunfight at the OK Corral. There was two fellers killed in that fight, and it was not a pretty

sight, it was terrible. You see you are here in Tombstone and the date is October 27, 1881, one day after the actual gunfight. I came out of that fight without a scrap, thanks to my good old angel partner, Harold.”

Wyatt looked at Hector and said, “You always dreamed of bein’ just like your hero Gary Cooper. Well, guess what? Your wish is comin’ true, little partner. You’re goin’ to become the double of Gary Cooper. You see, the way it was described to me by your buddy angel, Spencer, in order for an angel to make an apparition appear, they must have some livin’ thing or foundation to build on. An animal, or some such critter like a deer or bird or somethin’ like that. What your angel buddy Spencer used for me to appear to you and your folks up on the mountain, was a big old buck deer that happened by. He used a doe deer so the apparition of Gary Cooper could appear.”

Hector looked at Wyatt with some bewilderment and said, “So in order for you to appear to people, there is some being or whatever needed to build upon?”

Wyatt said, “That’s right, son.”

Then Hector asked, “Well then, Mister Earp, what did they use today to build upon for you to appear to me now?”

Wyatt looked at Hector with a gruff but lovable smile and said, “Nothin’, son, I’m the real Wyatt Earp. You actually went back in time to meet with me. Up on the mountain, that wasn’t me little buddy, that was an apparition of me.”

Hector said, “I think I understand now. I have been chosen to be a platform or foundation for an apparition to be built upon. For some purpose unknown to me, but I think you know.”

Wyatt reached out and put his hand on Hector’s shoulder and said, “That’s right, little buddy. Now you’re gettin’ the idea.”

Hector looked around. All the people, animals, everything everywhere was in a frozen state, or in other

words, in a state of suspended animation. Even the wind ceased to blow. The rough and gruff cowboys that were at the adjoining bar in the hotel (a bar that didn't exist in the 1957 version of the hotel), wore expressions of excitement on their faces. That was due probably to the eyewitnesses' retelling of the story of the great gunfight they saw the day before.

The funniest thing that Hector had noticed, though, while everything was frozen in time, was the sight of the horses that were tied up in front of the hotel and bar. Hector noticed that a couple of the stallions were in a state of obvious excitement, which turned Hector's face blush red. But the sight that really cracked up not only Hector, but Wyatt as well, was the turd falling out of the butts of two of the horses. They were suspended in mid-air, and would not complete their fall until the meeting of Hector and Wyatt was completed.

After both Wyatt and Hector completed their laughing together, and had taken a thorough look through the window at the frozen world around them, they each went back and took their respective seats in the big leather chairs.

Wyatt said, "Now, Hector little buddy, I don't have a whole lot of time to talk to you. Your angel buddy Spencer can't keep this here space in time frozen for very long, so I best get to tellin' you why you're here."

Wyatt went on, "Now, your angel buddy wanted you and your ma and pa to have a good Western vacation, after those two fine folks got married. And I surely hope you and your folks are havin' a good time. Are you and your folks havin' a good time?"

Hector replied, "We are having a real good time, but we have seen quite a few strange things on our trip, Mr. Earp."

Wyatt gave a little chuckle and said, "You folks have been goin' through a time bend, and occasionally, you might have gotten a glimpse of a parallel world. You probably saw the

world where I had been president of the United States. I hate that one, I died too young—some punk shot my sorry butt.” Hector gave Wyatt a blank stare, for he had no idea what Wyatt was talking about.

Wyatt paused for a moment and then said, “I forgot that you wouldn’t have any idea what I’m talkin’ about. But I know your pa does; he’s figured it out. But after he wakes up from his nap, he won’t have any recollection of any of the strange things he’s seen. Yeah, your daddy read some of the literature at the front desk in the lobby. It told of another possible history or parallel world, it was the one where I became president of the United States, and later was assassinated by an old foe. That’s all I meant when I said, ‘But I know your pa does, he’s figured it out.’ He just figured out why everything on your trip down here had my name on it. You were just traveling through another possible past.” Hector knew something strange had been going on, but this information seemed to clear up the matter for him.

Wyatt once again put one of his large leather-like hands on Hector’s shoulder and said, “Like I said, son, we don’t have much time before this time pause stops, so let me get right down to it. Son, you have been chosen to right some wrongs that have been committed upon folks. Some of those wrongs have already been committed on folks, at least in your own time, they had already been committed. One of these is seein’ justice done to those murderous, evil fellers that beat your uncle Victor during that Great Depression I won’t live to see, thank God. Victor wasn’t the only feller that got beaten to death by those thugs—hundreds, maybe even thousands of folks got beaten, or murdered by them there thugs.”

Wyatt went on, “Now I know this here is tough stuff for a youngin’ your age to take. But many of the victims of these here men I’m talkin’ to you about were the babies, who starved to death. And many of the old folks were forced to work themselves to death, and that shows no respect to old folks, not one bit. I’m here to tell you, that your very own

uncle Victor took many of his beatings at an age not much younger than you are now. Now, that ain't right, son. And nobody has ever stood trial for a single one of these here crimes I just told you about."

Wyatt gave Hector a trusting look and said as he patted him lightly on his shoulder, "Until now son, until now."

Hector looked at Wyatt and said, "Now, Mr. Wyatt, sir, I'm glad to have been picked to do this thing, and I have always known a day like this would come—I don't know how I knew, I just knew."

Wyatt nodded his head in agreement, and Hector continued, "I know I'm simple. I've heard folks talk about me behind my back, when they thought I didn't hear. They would even talk about me when they knew I could hear them, thinking I wasn't smart enough to understand what they were talking about, but I knew they were talking about me, and what their words' meaning was."

A small tear appeared in the corner of Wyatt's right eye, as he said, "Now, son, many folks in the past that have had great tasks laid before them to tackle were also a little messed-up like yourself. Moses couldn't talk a lick when he headed all them Hebrews in the desert, and Joan of Ark was a kid near about your age when she took over that whole big army in France."

Hector added, "Yeah, Wyatt, and look how they both ended up: Moses had to walk in the burning-hot desert for forty years, and Joan of Ark got even hotter than him—she was burned at the stake." Wyatt didn't reply after that.

Wyatt thought for a moment about what Hector had to say on the subject.

Then Hector spoke up and said, "Wyatt, you can count me in on anything you want me to do."

Wyatt felt instantly relieved, and then smiled and moved his chair a little closer to Hector and said, "Well, son, I hear about these here parts that you're a real wizard with chemicals,

somehin' I know not a lick about. Now, what your angel buddy told me to have you do is mix up some secret brew to pour justice down on some of these evil folks that have it comin' to 'em. Mix up somethin' real secret that will take care of all these varmints, maybe we'll call it somethin' like . . . I-I-I-I . . . don't know . . . maybe somethin' like . . . Hector's Juice—yeah! That's it! We'll call it Hector's Juice! That's the right nice name for the stuff.”

Well, folks, at least now you know how this book got its name. Hector got excited by all these knew revelations, then he asked Wyatt, “Now, these bad folks that you want me to go see, when I use the stuff you want me to make for them, that Hector's Juice, will those folks die?”

Wyatt looked concerned and said to Hector, “Now, son, these folks will die, and I know you're just a youngin' right now, but you don't have to worry about none of this for quite a spell. But when the time comes, you'll be ready. When it's time for you to carry out your work, everything will come to your mind, people, places, times—everything you'll need to know. I know right about now that it ain't a bit comfortin', but when the time comes, you'll be ready. And just remember, I'll always be with you along with your angel buddy. Many great people in the past, at times, felt like they were alone, but they never were—and you won't be, either.”

Wyatt went on to describe some of the evil varmints that would meet justice in the form of a miracle, called Hector's Juice. One small group slated to meet the justice they had eluded for so long would be the three men that were largely responsible for the fascist tactics used against the migrants in the 1930s. Names would be given to Hector later. They were the three men that ran the three major Associated Farmers Groups in California. They were largely responsible for giving the OK to such tactics as beatings that would eventually take the life of Uncle Victor.

“They were evil men,” Wyatt went on to say, “only interested in making money at the expense of thousands of exploited folks, hungry and livin’ out on the road. Those folks were hardworkin’ folks, down on their luck, not lookin’ for a handout, only a hand. In my day, those evil men that helped starve children would have been taken out and hung at the nearest oak tree, they most surely would have been.”

Hector could see that if Wyatt would be given this mission at some point in his life, he would have surely jumped at the opportunity to carry out justice. But this was all up to Hector now.

Hector said, “Okay, Wyatt, like I said before, you can count on me. I’ll do whatever you want me to do when the time comes.”

Wyatt smiled and said, “I know you will, son, I know you will.” Wyatt continued, “One more varmint that you will most surely have to get one day is the varmint that will someday gun down a fine young president in Dallas. But like the others, you won’t have to worry about him for a few years. You will be the one to bring that scum to justice. The whole world will never know who the triggerman was that blew off the top of that fine young president’s head, but you will. Everyone will think that feller Oswald did it, but he couldn’t hit the broad side of a barn with a scattergun. It was another feller whose name was Hank Shotwad that did it, and that feller would kill you dead faster than Doc Holliday, and with no remorse. I’m glad I never had to meet the likes of that varmint in a gunfight.”

Hector felt extremely lucky to be the one chosen to carry out justice on these evil men. He knew that Wyatt and his angel buddy, I, Spencer, would always be at his side.

Wyatt said, “One more thing, when you go to carry out these missions that I’ve been here tellin’ you about, you will become Gary Cooper. You will become the livin’ double of Gary Cooper, your hero, and for a few moments, you will be

Marshal Will Kane handin' out justice to a world that very seldom sees it."

They would have to not only wait for Hector to grow up a little bit more, for him to carry out his missions, but they would have to wait for the real Gary Cooper to pass away, which would be in a few years. The reason being that when Hector transformed to the apparition of Gary Cooper, we wouldn't want anyone around getting him mixed up with the real, living Gary Cooper. Besides, I don't know if the real Gary Cooper would have approved of us using his image as an apparition. I just wanted Hector to become his hero, even if it was only for a short time. He deserved it.

Wyatt stood up from the big leather chair, stretched, and said, "Well, Hector little buddy, that's about it for now, my time with you is just about over. You know how I can tell?" Hector shrugged his shoulders no, he hadn't any idea how Wyatt knew the time with him was running short. "Them there turds have finished fallin' out of the butts of those horses, that means time is startin' to move again." Both Hector and Wyatt laughed.

"Now, I've been tellin' you about everything you'll be needin' to know for now anyways. When this here meetin' is over, you will always be rememberin' it. Your folks will wake up refreshed and ready to head home. They will be feelin' like they saw the recreation of the Gunfight at the OK Corral. If I was you, though, I wouldn't tell them of our meetin'. Let it be our little secret."

Wyatt went on to say, "Now, son, look around, for you can say for sure you were the world's first time traveler; you went back to October 27, 1881, one day after the Gunfight at the OK Corral. You, for sure, can think of yourself as being very fortunate for being chosen for this here mission of justice. And I am also thinkin' of myself as being very fortunate for gettin' to meet such a fine young man like yourself, Hector."

Tears started to well up in Hector's eyes. Wyatt went on to say, "Now, son, let me walk you upstairs to your room, your folks will be wakin' up soon."

So Hector and Wyatt walked upstairs where Wyatt gave his newfound friend a hug good-bye and told him not to worry about his future mission; it would all come to his mind.

Wyatt went on to say, "I hope you and your folks have had a good trip. You take care of them, they look like right good folks to me. Now, after you go through that door and this here meetin' is over, the power that made this meetin' possible will be turned off. The parallel world you and your folks have been livin' in for I reckon a few days now, will no longer exist, and things will be back to the way they were before your trip ever started."

Wyatt went on, "Your folks won't remember anything of the strange goings-on, or the strange things they saw. But you will, son. You will remember everything. They will feel like they had a good relaxin' trip and a real fine honeymoon with their son. Now, you have to go, son, back to your own time." Clint, however, would always have a strange feeling that there was something strange about their trip.

Wyatt turned to walk down the steps, and said with his back to Hector, "Once again, you take care of your folks, hear!"

Hector waved good-bye and said, "Thank you, Wyatt, I'll always remember you." Hector watched Wyatt walk down the stairs and disappear into the past to which he belonged. In an instant, the building in which Hector was standing aged nearly eighty years. It was once again 1957. Jerry Lee Lewis could be heard on the radio in the background singing "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin On."

Hector turned and opened the door to his hotel room. Upon entering, he could see his folks finishing their nap. They both had been asleep for nearly an hour. He thought it

best to take Wyatt's advice and not tell them about his trip back in time. Actually, he felt better than he had ever felt in his entire life. He felt he now had a destiny and a purpose in life, and he finally saw himself as part of a family, something that had been missing all his life.

Clint sat up and swung his legs, and assumed the position he was in before he took his nap.

He bent to put his shoes on and said, "Hi ya, Hector. Did you go downstairs and get some ice cream or something?"

Hector nodded yes and said, "Did you and Mom have a good sleep?"

Clint yawned and said, "I can't speak for your mom, but I sure had a good sleep, and you know all I could dream about it is that recreation of the OK gunfight. I sure had a good time seeing that." Hector thought to himself, *Wyatt was right, they would both feel as if they had seen the recreation of the gunfight.*

Victoria was now awake. She took a deep breath and then stuck her head under a pillow. She said, "Clint! Did you cut a fart?"

Clint said, "No, it wasn't me, it was Hector." (Pause) "Okay, okay, it was me. I thought you were still asleep."

Victoria pulled her head slowly from under the pillow and said, "No more beans for you, boy, hear!" It was a fitting end to a trip that up to that point, stunk! But now, all three were happy and laughing.

After going downstairs and enjoying a meal, this time without having to look at those all-too-familiar murals, the three got into that old Buick and headed home. Passing all the landmarks that in another reality bore the name of Wyatt Earp and his brothers, they told jokes, and each shared their favorite experiences about the trip. As for Victoria and Clint, it was strange for Hector to hear their accounts of the trip, for they had no recollection of all the strange things that happened before Hector's meeting with Wyatt. All their

memories of the trip must have been artificially planted into their brains during that outside-induced nap they had taken. Hector, though, couldn't tell them his favorite experience of the trip, and that was meeting the real Wyatt Earp, a man from the Old West he would never forget.

CHAPTER 17: A YANKEE PRESIDENT DIES IN DALLAS

The fall of '57 soon slipped into the past, and before anyone knew it, six years had gone by. Hector was now eighteen years old, and although he still stayed to himself, he never again was the idiot savant he was before his little family had taken their cowboy vacation/honeymoon.

All those years later, Clint and Victoria thought something strange had happened on that trip, but they just couldn't put their finger on it. They both had noticed a marked improvement in Hector right after that vacation ended, again, nothing they could put their finger on. It was just the way in which he now carried himself. Still a stooge to some people, and to others, just a moron that knew a lot about chemicals. But to his family, he had become a fine young man.

One day (I think it was a Friday), Hector and Clint had just finished spraying the barn of a local farmer. It was the third week in November, 1963, and the leaves were turning in the trees. Everything was right with the world.

Clint said, "Hungry, Heck? Let's go get a bite to eat."

Hector smiled and said, "Race you to the truck." Hector could always beat Clint now in these little races they had, for Clint had noticeably slowed in recent weeks.

After getting in the truck, Clint always turned on the radio to get the latest scores from the sports world.

He said, "Wonder how the Packers will do this Sunday. Bart Starr, he sure can play, and Hornung, he's something else." On this day, though, there would be no sports scores of any importance. In fact, next to the news they were about to receive, nothing seemed to have much importance.

Clint turned on the radio, and immediately heard what all the radio stations on the dial were broadcasting—live reports from Dallas that said: President Kennedy Has Just Been Shot.

And not too long after that report, another updated report said: President Kennedy is dead. Simple, and to the point.

All Clint could say for a full five minutes with an occasional pause was, “Well I’ll be a son of a bitch somebody shot him! Well I’ll be a son of a bitch somebody shot him!” I swear to God that’s all Clint could say for a full five minutes. Clint said aloud, “I voted for Nixon, but I didn’t want anyone to shoot JFK. I had the feeling after that Bay of Pigs thing, someone would try to knock his dick in the dirt.” And then he started up again, “Well I’ll be a son of a bitch somebody shot him! Well I’ll be a son of a bitch somebody shot him!” He went on for at least two or three more minutes like that.

Hector didn’t say a word. He just sat there listening to Clint go on and on about the Cubans, or that maybe it was one of Marilyn Monroe’s old lovers that pulled the trigger. He had all sorts of weird theories running through his head.

All Hector could think of was, *This is exactly what Wyatt told me would happen years ago. A fine young president would be assassinated, and I would have to avenge his death.* Hector knew he soon would be given more information about the killer and how to seek him out. He also knew the world would never know that President Kennedy’s death would be avenged, not by the hands of Jack Ruby, but by his own.

That night, all Victoria and Clint talked about was the assassination. I think I even saw Victoria’s eyes glass over with tears.

Clint, on the other hand, repeated several times again, “Some son of a bitch shot him! Some son of a bitch shot him!”

Victoria gave him a little simulated slap and said, “Watch your mouth, dear. I don’t like hearing that language and neither does Hector.” Clint was just suspended in a state of disbelief. Most of the world joined with him in that same state.

Two days later, Clint, along with the rest of the world, waited breathlessly before their TVs to get a glimpse of the man that shot that fine young president. At least, he was the man that was arrested for the crime.

Clint said, “He sure looks like a puny kind of fella compared to all those big Texas sheriffs. He doesn’t look like such a bad guy to me.” Then out of the dark shadows, a place where most assassins lurk, a man sprung, and shots rang out. Oswald was shot dead.

For the next five minutes, I again swear to God, all Clint could say again was, “Well I’ll be a son of a bitch, somebody shot him! Well I’ll be a son of a bitch, somebody shot him!”

Then the realization set in, and Clint said under his breath, “Now, we’ll never know the truth. Whoever did this will cover it up very well.”

Hector knew that he would soon find out the answer to the question the rest of the world would never know for sure—who killed John F. Kennedy? That night, while the world was preparing to say good-bye to JFK, Wyatt came to Hector in a dream. This was not a visit to see how things were going, but rather, it was to give Hector information about the assassin and where to find him.

In his dream, Hector learned that the man who fired that final shot that killed JFK wasn’t Oswald, but was a much more skilled marksman. In Hector’s dream, Wyatt did tell Hector that Oswald was there in Dallas and actually fired all the shots (except for one) that were aimed at Kennedy, missing badly on all his attempts. He also learned that the man that fired that final fatal shot (the one that didn’t miss), fired his rifle from the top of the Texas Book Depository, and not from a window like Oswald. After he did his evil deed, he merely disassembled his Mannlicher- Carcano 6.5 millimeter Italian rifle and threw it in a small furnace that was located on top of the roof. The furnace was there for the purpose of burning papers and other things discarded by the depository. The real killer also regularly visited a strip joint

in Dallas owned by one Jack Ruby, the man who killed Oswald. And it was in that very strip joint that Jack Ruby owned where the plot to shut up Lee Harvey Oswald forever was hatched, following his arrest.

Wyatt went on to tell Hector that along with Oswald, the assassin also worked in the depository, and was actually in charge of the operation of the furnace on the roof of the building. He got it very hot, so the rifle could be melted down quickly. In his dream, Wyatt told Hector that both Oswald and the other assassin had known each other in the Marine Corps, and that the other assassin was a Korean war vet, a sniper. The motive for the killing was never explained to Hector, just that the man's name was Hank Shotwad (if you had a name like that, you would be pretty tough, too) and he would soon live in San Antonio with his mother.

In Hector's dream, Wyatt let him know that he would be going to San Antonio alone on business. And he would find old Hank Shotwad working at Lackland Air Force Base where he would soon have a job giving haircuts to the new recruits. That was all the information that was given to Hector that night in his dream, but it would stay with him always.

Upon awakening the next morning, Hector knew that Wyatt had come to him in his dream, and that he had given him important information.

That morning, as the three ate breakfast, Clint said to Hector, "Heck, I'm going to be sending you on a little business trip." Hector's mouth dropped, along with Victoria's.

Clint went on, "You're getting to be quite a young man. I'm sending you to San Antonio to check on buying chemicals I might want to use in our business. You know a lot more than I do about the chemicals now, and I trust your opinion about things such as this."

After a pregnant pause in the conversation, Clint went on, "The trip won't be until April. That will give you some time to

get used to the idea of going someplace far away on your own.”

Victoria spoke up, “Honey, do you really think it would be a good idea for Hector to go such a long distance on his own?”

Clint responded, “He’s a young man now, and I rely a whole bunch on him in the business. He’ll be just fine. And you know how I haven’t been feeling well lately. Besides, I couldn’t leave the business alone for a week, it’s best I stay home.”

All Hector said was, “Sure, I’ll go. I know there’s something positive for me to do down there.” And that’s all that was said on the subject for the next five months.

During the intervening five months, Hector started wearing a cowboy hat, something he had never done before. Something else was starting to change—his voice. He was starting to sound a lot like Gary Cooper. Many people thought he was just trying to imitate the way his lifelong hero talked, but he was actually starting to sound like Gary Cooper. In that time, he had also grown two inches, which brought him to six foot four inches tall. Many also thought him to be sick because his skin was starting to turn a pale sort of white. These, however, were just the last steps before Hector would make his final transformation into his lifelong hero, Gary Cooper. All this wasn’t alarming to Clint or Victoria; they just thought he was having one final growth spurt before becoming a full-grown man.

Hector was also doing almost all the hands-on work in the business now; Clint was just tired all the time. He had gone to the doctor, but all the doctor said was, “You’re working too hard, go home and get some rest.” Clint was much sicker than that, though. Clint had cancer of the liver and kidneys; he had gotten it (no doubt) through years of using chemicals while not being protected. He never wore gloves, or safety glasses, or for that matter, any other kind of safety equipment. The years of exposure had taken their toll.

Like I said earlier, in the months leading up to Hector's trip to San Antonio, the changes in Hector's voice, and even his mannerisms and slight changes in his skin complexion, led many people to compare Hector with Gary Cooper. This was just the natural progression to making him a Gary Cooper double. Some of these changes would stay with Hector for the rest of his life, like the changes in his height, voice, and even his skin. As for the final transformation to a Gary Cooper double, that wouldn't occur until shortly before Hector dealt out lethal justice with Hector's Juice. This, in many ways, is a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde story.

For a long time, up to this point, Hector had been diligently working on that secret potion that Wyatt had instructed him to make. Hector's Juice is what Wyatt called it, and Hector had no idea what to do with it now that he had formulated it. He had no guidelines to go by to come up with his final spray solution, so he just mixed one great big mixture of some of the most lethal and non-lethal chemicals he could think of. In fact, he never wrote down exactly what he mixed, so he never mixed the same ingredients twice. He could have mixed vinegar and water, and it would still have had lethal effects, for Hector's Juice and Hector were just the vector to spread the long-awaited justice. They were just a symbol of its real but unseen power. The true power it possessed came from the judge of all of us. Hector reasoned that he would mix some in a hand spray tank, and see what it does. He didn't know whether to spray it on bugs, plants, or to see if it would take the rust off his old red wagon.

He concluded, *I can't hurt anything that's already dead, so, hey! I'll spray it on those dead roses at the back of the shop and see what happens.* With a few short spurts from the sprayer, the bushes almost instantly showed signs of life. It brought those plants back to life! Hector thought, *This stuff has the power to restore life, and to take it away!*

Wyatt was right, Hector thought, this stuff would be like magic, and I know exactly how to use it now. When I meet

up with those evil varmints, I'm going to spray them with it. Just like you would any pests you're trying to get rid of.

Hector also knew that when he used this stuff on its intended target, the power released from it would not be of this world. He could hardly wait for his trip to San Antonio and his first step toward his destiny, as he liked to tell himself. He liked to almost pray to Wyatt and thank him for bringing him confidence in himself.

He would also say to himself softly, "Thanks, Wyatt, for letting me know I have an angel buddy. I think I always had a hunch I did have one." Wyatt, Hector thought, could somehow hear him when he talked to him like this, so this helped Hector to feel better. To Hector, talking to Wyatt had almost become a religious experience. When the day finally came for his trip, Clint and Victoria were the ones to take their now grown son to the airport.

Clint said, "Now, boy, you're gonna be gone for five days, try to get as much information about those chemicals as you can. See if we can use any of them around here."

Hector reached out and touched Clint's now weakening body and said, "Dad, are you sure you can handle things while I'm gone?"

"Sure I can handle things, I've spent my entire life handling things. Now get on that plane."

Victoria didn't say a word; she just stood there with a single tear running down her cheek.

Hector bent down and gave her a kiss and said, "See you in few days, Mom. Don't worry, I'll be all right." And with that, Hector was up the steps and inside the plane. His spirits would fly as high as that plane, that day in April 1964.

CHAPTER 18: NO MERCY FOR MR. SHOTWAD

So Hector was finally off the ground and heading toward San Antonio. Hector had never flown before, so the sheer excitement of the new experience kept him awake for the entire flight, even though the flight was at night.

Hector knew that San Antonio was the site of another great Western showdown, that one being at the Alamo. He could tell you the whole sequence of events leading up to that epic battle— how many men fought the battle on both sides, and what time of the day the battles took place. He could probably tell you how many pounds of beans and tortillas Santa Anna’s men consumed on their march north. On this flight, though, Hector spent most of his time thinking to himself, *I wonder what it would have felt like fighting next to Davy Crockett and Sam Bowie, and knowing you’re going to die.*

Slightly dozing after a glass of Coke, he thought to himself, *God, I would have liked to have been there with those brave fellas. After all, when the battle took a turn for the worse, and the gringos started getting beaten, I could have taken the uniform off a dead Mexican and pretended I was fighting for them.* Hector smiled to himself and continued looking out the window at the darkness and the lone blinking light at the end of the big plane’s wing.

Upon arriving at Stinson Airport in San Antonio, Hector immediately took a cab to his hotel. It was a small hotel off Commerce Street, which wasn’t far from the Alamo. It also had a wonderful view of Lake Elmendorf. After settling into his room, I made a strange drowsy feeling descend upon Hector. Hey, the guy needed some sleep anyway.

In the dream, I once again used Wyatt to tell Hector details of his upcoming task. Wyatt told him that just about everything was within walking distance of his hotel—the

company he needs to contact for the business, restaurants. Even the Alamo itself was almost within walking distance. But when Wyatt told him that the man he was sent there to terminate just lived around the block, Hector awoke in a sudden, sweaty instant.

After a few moments, Hector's eyelids once again got heavy, and Wyatt was able to give him further details. He gave him details like the address of the home Henry Shotwad shared with his mother, and when he could find the "prick" at home. Wyatt told Hector to first take care of his business with the chemical company, and then phone his folks. After that, he would deal with Hank Shotwad.

The next day, Hector did exactly as Wyatt told him, and took care of his business with the chemical company. After finding out that some of the chemicals would work well on the mildew on their cherry trees, he immediately phoned home to tell Clint the good news.

"Hey, Dad, how's everything there? You feeling alright?"

Clint said, "Well, not really son. I'm going into the hospital for some more tests tomorrow. How's everything working out there?"

"Just fine. I'm ordering some stuff for the aphids and our mildew problems, and I'll be home in a couple days. I hope everything goes all right with those tests. They should have taken those tests a long time ago. How's Mom doing? Is she still worrying about me all the time?"

"Son, your mom will worry about you her whole life, but she knows you have to grow up, and she knows you can handle things. Ever since our trip to Arizona years ago, you have been doing just fine."

There was a dead pause on the telephone, and then Clint said, "I always thought there was something very strange about that trip. Well, anyway, you take care, and we'll be seeing you in a couple days, okay, son."

“Okay, Dad, I’ll talk to you when I get home. Give Mom a kiss and hug for me. Good night, Dad.” And with that, Hector hung up the phone. Clint savored the times Hector called him Dad.

That night as Hector slept, Wyatt once again came to Hector in his dream. He told him that tomorrow would be the day to avenge the death of JFK. He told him the address where he could find Hank Shotwad was 1118 Kennedy Way (how’s that for irony?). He told him that he could find this place just two blocks away. He also went on to tell him that Hank’s day-off was tomorrow, and he would be home all day. Wyatt told him that he didn’t have to mix much of the potion, just an ounce or two of Hector’s Juice/per 1 gallon of water. After all, it wasn’t the amount that mattered, it was magic. After the dream, Hector slept deeply.

The next day, Hector awoke early, and he immediately felt different. He just laid there staring at the ceiling, until his head was clear enough for him to get up. Looking toward the end of the bed, he noticed his toes sticking out from under the blankets. At first, he didn’t think a thing about it, just wiggling his toes and savoring the morning quiet. Suddenly, he noticed that his toes were white, not just the slight pale his skin color had been taking on in recent months, but actual white people white, the kind of white Gary Cooper was.

“Holy shit! Holy shit!” Hector yelled as he leaped from the bed. He ran to the bathroom to look at himself in the mirror.

“Oh, my God, it happened just as Wyatt said it would, I’ve become a Gary Cooper double!” During the night, I had finished Hector’s transformation into the Gary Cooper double that had been a long time in the making.

“What the hell do I do now?” he asked himself out loud. He stood there for a full five minutes just looking at himself in the mirror, every feature of his face was the exact same feature he saw looking back at him from that dark movie theatre back in Stockton.

After reality had set in, he turned and went back into the bedroom. There he saw the clothes that I provided for him, the same clothes Sheriff Will Kane wore in *High Noon*. Just as Hector was getting dressed, he heard some unusual scratching at the door. He walked over and opened it. There sat a big black cat. I mean, this stud must have been 15 pounds. The cat immediately came in and purred and meowed, and rubbed his long, fat, feline body against his leg.

“Where you from, little feller? Or should I say big feller.” Animals were never one of Hector’s favorite things; he was always a little afraid of them. But on this morning, he seemed to have found a new friend.

“Well, come on in, fella. I have some business to take care of, but you can stay here till I get back and then I’ll feed you a nice breakfast.”

After putting the cat on the bed, Hector finished getting dressed. The cat watched him dress from his black Stetson hat to his never-worn-before cowboy boots. He even had a badge to wear, signifying he was a U.S. Marshal. Everything was the same as in the movie, except for only one difference: Hector would carry no gun. He had Hector’s Juice, and after getting dressed, he sat down and mixed some in a spray tank he had bought at the corner hardware store. After mixing up a more than sufficient amount, he once again checked his look in the mirror, shook the mixture in the spray tank, turned, and patted the cat that was now in a comfortable position on the bed. After that, he bent down on one knee to say a quick prayer to God and Wyatt, for today was judgment day for Henry Shotwad.

Hector had two blocks to cover to get to Henry’s house. That would take less than ten minutes.

“Howdy, ma’am,” Hector said as he tipped his hat to a cleaning lady as he left his room. His sheets were the next to be changed. “Won’t be long, ma’am, just leave them there potato chips on the dresser, as I’ll be eatin’ them later.” As he

turned to walk down the stairs, the cleaning lady gave him a look that said, “Where have I seen that guy before?”

As Hector walked down the street, birds hovered above him, dogs pulled their masters so they could get a sniff of him, cats came by the droves from their usual resting places to purr and rub up against him, even squirrels dashed from the trees to cross his path. Animals had a special sense of the supernatural, and they were now attracted to him in huge numbers.

People passing him in their cars gawked out the window at the spectacle; he looked like the Pied Piper with all the animals following him. At this point, though, Hector had assumed the stern character of Marshal Will Kane, with one intention, and one intention only—to see justice done. Even all the animals following him were not a distraction; Hector had made the complete metamorphosis from Hector, a young Mexican fellow with a genius for chemicals, to his hero Gary Cooper, a.k.a. Marshal Will Kane.

In his right hand, Hector carried his spray tank, while his left swung freely. After turning the corner on Kennedy Way, Hector suddenly picked up his pace. Much the same way that Wyatt, his brothers, and Doc Holliday must have done on their final approach to the OK Corral that day in October 1881. The houses counted down to 1118, two more to go and he would come face to face with the assassin of JFK. A white picket fence surrounded the premises, and as Hector opened the gate to go to the door, all the animals that were following him settled on or just outside the white picket fence.

Hector stepped up on the porch and knocked on the door. Henry Shotwad answered it.

Hector asked, “Hello, sir, is Mrs. Wad here, I mean is Mrs. Shotwad here?”

With the usual disgust in his voice, Hank Shotwad answered, “No, Mrs. Shotwad is not here.”

With a little chuckle in his voice, Hank asked, “Boy, what the hell you all dressed up for? Is the circus in town or something?”

“No, sir, for sure the circus is not in town. If it was, I would surely be goin’ to it when I’m done here. But I do reckon you might know when your wife will be home?”

“First off, boy, it’s not my wife, it’s my mother. And second, it’s none of your goddamn business what time she’ll be coming home. What the hell you doing here anyway?”

“I represent Will Kane Pest Control, and your ma gave me a call to do a little spray job for her. You see, she got one of them there coupons out of the newspaper, sayin’ how I’ll do a spray job for twenty-five percent off the regular price.” Hector was playing with Hank. You see, two weeks earlier, Hank had murdered his mother and buried her in the crawl space under the house. He wanted to try to collect on her Social Security. Hector knew this from one of the dreams I let him have. And she was more than ripe by now.

Hector asked Hank, “So, may I come in, sir?”

“No, you can’t come in, you sorry Gary Cooper wanna-be, and if you don’t get the hell off my porch, I’ll stick that spray nozzle up your ass and make you wish you never saw my face. Now, get the hell outta of here . . . pronto!” Hector then grabbed Hank Shotwad by the neck and shoved the spray nozzle up to his mouth.

“Look here, boy, I’m Marshal Will Kane from the Arizona Territory, and I’m here to carry out justice. I know you got your mama buried under the house, and I know you’re the one who killed JFK. I also know about your fat-ass friend, Jack Ruby, but I’m not goin’ to bother with him. I know you both were in cahoots to frame Lee Harvey.” Reaching down for the knife he kept in his sock, Hank met a power he didn’t know existed on this earth. Hector had grabbed Hank by his left hand and made Hank hit himself in the mouth,

which was the hardest punch he had ever received in his entire life.

“Who the hell are you, man? I never kilt no president and I sure as hell never kilt my mama, and I don’t know no Jack Ruby.” “You did so kill the president and your mama. I have a friend that saw you do it.”

“Who you talking about? That running rabbit worthless Lee Harvey, that’s who told you?”

“No, Hank, for sure it wasn’t Lee Harvey. You hung that poor boy out to take the whole rap, for sure you did. No, the secret of you being the assassin of JFK will end with me, I’ll never tell anyone about you.”

“Then, what are you doing here dressed up like you just stepped out of a Hollywood Western?” Hank asked as beads of sweat started to form on his forehead.

“I’m here to . . . what’s the word for it? It’s what you do to varmints that have been raising hell with you . . . eradicate! That’s it, eradicate! I’m here to eradicate you. After all, that’s what pest control people do, right? Now, you show me where the crawl space is.”

“What do you want to know where that is for?”

“I plan on raising your mama up from that crawl space and after that, I’m a goin’ to take care of you. Now, where’s that crawl space?”

“Follow me, I’ll show you,” Hank said as total fear showed on his face for probably the first time in his life. You see, Hank Shotwad was always the intimidator in his life; he wasn’t used to being intimidated, and he knew he met his match in Hector. Hank took Hector to the crawl space that was located in Hank’s mother’s closet.

“Open it up, Hank,” Hector said.

Hank said, “You better hold your breath, I didn’t bury her that deep.”

“Don’t worry, Hank, your mama ain’t goin’ to stink. Now open it.” Hank opened the crawl space door. It was dark and immediately, some cool air rose from it. Hank looked into the hole and spit out a tooth that had been dislodged when Hector made him hit himself in the mouth.

“What was your mama’s name, Hank?”

“My mama’s name was Lola. Geez, you didn’t have to make me hit myself so hard, I just lost a tooth.”

“Well, after today, Hank, you won’t have a mama no more, and you won’t have to worry about your teeth no more, either. Your mama won’t ever know she had the evil likes of a son like you.” And with that, Hector started spraying Hector’s Juice into the crawl space. Almost immediately, there was movement in the dark void below.

“C’mon there, young lady, you got a whole life ahead of you.” With that, Hector reached down and grabbed the hand of a young woman that could have been a double for a young Lana Turner. This was Lola at twenty years old, four years before she would even have Hank. She was dirty, but other than that, she was in fine shape.

After coming out of the hole, she looked at the son she would never know she had, or might have, or whatever, and asked, “Why are your eyes so sad, son? It’s such a beautiful day.” With that, Hank broke down crying, asking forgiveness from his mother.

All she could do was stare straight ahead at him and repeat, “Why are your eyes so sad, son? It’s such a beautiful day.”

“Now, ma’am,” Hector said, “you go on out in the front yard and wait for me, I won’t be long.” By now, Hank was frozen with fear. Not since the days of Lazarus had anyone risen from the dead.

“Now, Hank, I’ve come here to get rid of a pest, and by golly, that’s what I’m goin’ to do.” Hank knew he was going to

die; he got down on his knees and was crying profusely, begging for his life.

Hector said, “Now, let justice be done.” Hector than started

dowsing Hank with Hector’s Juice. With the same suddenness that brought Hank’s mother back from the dead and gave her a new start on life, Hector’s Juice went to work on Hank Shotwad. Everything inside Hank started burning; he was cooking from the inside out . . . only very slowly. He would feel more pain than any of his victims ever did. Not that that was any consolation to his victims. After five minutes, Hank’s shrill screaming, which no one could hear outside, ceased. He had gone unconscious. Ten minutes later, Hank was nothing more than a puddle of nothingness. There he was, nothing more than the main missing part of a puzzle that the world would never solve—the answer to, “Who killed JFK?” The puddle that Hank had become was sweet, and quickly attracted ants. They took care of the final remains of Hank Shotwad.

Hector was no longer Gary Cooper. Before he left Hank’s house, he had changed back to Hector. The clothes, though, remained on him, and actually fit Hector as well as they would have fit Gary Cooper himself. Both were nearly the exact physical size as adults. Hector closed the door behind him and went down to Lola who was waiting at the gate with all the other animals. Hector took her hand and walked her to the local police station, where he left her as a missing person. He knew she would be all right. After that, Hector went back to his hotel room, packed and went home. For some strange reason, he never went to see the Alamo. Even stranger, he would never again have a desire to see it.

CHAPTER 19: MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

Victoria greeted Hector at the airport in Oakland. Hector couldn't get a return flight into Stockton. As they drove along the country roads that led to their hometown of Lodi, both were quiet and relaxed. Victoria was trying to find the right words to explain to Hector that Clint had cancer. Hector knew something was wrong when he didn't see Clint at the airport to greet him. He had always loved to drive that wonderful big Buick that they still had. He loved to put the roof down and let the wind blow through his hair as their little family took trips to no place in particular.

"Where's Daddy Clint?" Hector asked to break the uncomfortable silence. Daddy Clint was just a "term of endearment" that Hector just recently started using.

"Well, son, Clint's at home. He's not feeling too well."

Hector made it easy on Victoria when he asked her, "What kind of cancer does he have, Mom?"

Victoria looked at him with her eyes starting to turn red and said, "How did you know he had cancer?"

"Because Dad has been feeling bad for way too long, and he hasn't been getting any better. Besides, you've been awful quiet."

"Hector, you sure are my special guy, and Clint and I are so proud of the way you're growing up." A small smile started to show across Victoria's face.

"What's with those cowboy clothes you got on? Did you pick them up in San Antonio?"

Hector looked away into the countryside and said, "No, I just got them from a friend."

The two didn't say much more on the way home. Hector just briefly discussed the trip, and by no means did he bring up his encounter with Hank Shotwad. Victoria told Hector

that she had heard some news reports that a man fitting the exact description of Gary Cooper had been seen walking the streets of San Antonio, and some strange commotion about animals. She asked him if he had heard the same reports seeing that he had just been there and all, but he just shook his head no and smiled.

“Yeah, Heck, even Huntley and Brinkley had a report about it.”

“Walter Cronkite” had something about it, too. “I guess there were so many different animals following this guy that they even caused a few car wrecks.”

Hector just said, “Nope, I didn’t hear a thing about it. I just hope nobody was hurt.”

“No, I don’t think anyone was hurt,” Victoria said, “it was just one of those human interest stories they put at the end of the newscasts.”

The sky bent back to reveal the modest skyline of Stockton. Soon they would be home. As they drove into the driveway, the front window of the house showed the silhouette of a man Hector at first didn’t recognize. It was Clint, and he seemed to have aged years in less than a week. First off, he was limping from a fall he had taken from the front porch. You see, the tests that he went to take that week showed that he had cancer for some time and it had spread to his brain, causing the dizziness that led to him falling off the porch. He had also lost some ten pounds in less than a week. The cancer had started in his liver some months earlier, and he had ignored all of the symptoms until just recently.

He walked out to the porch and waited for them to get out of the car and approach the house.

“How’d it go, boy, down in San Antonio? You order any chemicals you think we might need?”

Hector answered, after giving his dad a hug, “Yeah, I ordered some stuff for the weeds and our mildew problems.

You look terrible, Dad. I was almost afraid to hug you thinking you might break. You're losing a lot of weight."

"Yeah, boy, I hate to say it but I won't be on this earth much longer. The doc told me." Victoria turned her head quickly to hide her tears and then, just as quickly, she went inside the house. She hated it when Clint tried to make light of the situation. Deep down, he was terrified of the thought of dying, and she knew it. Hector reached out and rested his hand on Clint's shoulder in the familiar manner that told Clint Hector had something important to say.

"Dad," Hector started, "when I was down in San Antonio, I took care of some very important business."

"I know you did, son, and your mother and me are very proud of you."

"No, Dad, I'm talking about something other than taking care of the chemical business stuff. It's just one of those things that's very hard to explain . . . not only to you, but to anybody."

Clint looked at him with a puzzled look and said, "What do you mean, son?"

"I really don't know exactly what I mean, only that there is a good element at work in this world, and I was chosen for some reason to do some of its work. And there is an evil, conscience-free element in this world that would run rampant and free like the cancer that is growing within you, if it wasn't held in check occasionally by the good element."

"What are you saying, son? That you are doing the work of God?"

"Well, it has never been explained to me that I am doing the work of God, only that I have been chosen to do some tasks in the name of justice for everyone."

"So, you're kind of like Superman or Batman?"

“Don’t make fun, Dad. What I’m trying to tell you is I want you to be reassured that I, you, and Mom—and everyone—has an angel buddy.”

“You mean, a guardian angel, Heck?”

“Whatever. I had it explained that they were called angel buddies, and I just know that when you’re gone or when Mom’s gone or whoever, there will be an angel buddy waiting for us, ready to greet the spirit that leaves our bodies.” By now, the two had sat down on the swinging chair that was on the porch.

Both sat silently for a moment thinking of the conversation they had had up to that point, when Hector suddenly said, “Now, Dad, I probably have already told you more than I should have. I just know that you’re afraid and I wanted to reassure you from my own personal experience that there’s much more.”

Clint said, “You know, Hector, I already feel better. I’ve always known you to tell the truth. Even years ago, before you started getting better, I knew there was something very special about you, a certain truth about you. I think it was ever since that trip to Arizona that I saw the real change in you.”

“Well, Dad, you’re right, the changes did start to occur after that trip to Arizona. You don’t remember much about that trip, do you, Dad?”

“Not much, only that I had a great time. It almost seemed like parts of the trip never really happened though. Why, boy, you know something about that trip that I should know?”

“Oh, no, Dad, let’s just say it wasn’t your normal family vacation.” Hector smiled to himself.

The two got up from the swinging chair. Clint put his arm around Hector as they went into the house. *Bonanza* was on television and the two quickly took their normal viewing positions, Clint in the big chair, Hector and Victoria on the couch. Clint loved all the Westerns. *Gunsmoke*, *Wagon Train*,

The Rifle Man, Rawhide . . . you could name anything with guns and horses in it, and Clint would like it. The great Western is where Clint and Hector first bonded, watching all those matinees of *Red River*, and of course, *High Noon*. And there they were, in the last months of Clint's life, still bonding with the television Western that ruled the airwaves of that era. After the show, Hector got up and gave his mom a kiss goodnight and then looked over to Clint to say goodnight. He didn't say anything to Clint, though; he was already asleep. Hector turned and went to his room. Hector loved his home, it was a place where he loved and was loved. All three had good dreams that night, especially Clint.

CHAPTER 20: THE VISIT

The spring gave way to the typical hot weather a San Joaquin summer brings. Hector's uncle Silas was now working regularly with Hector. Clint could no longer do his regular duties around the shop the way he used to. It was early June and between picking cherries in the nearby orchards and helping in the shop that Silas proved his weight in gold. All his years after the war, Silas walked with a slight limp, caused by the frostbite he got while fighting in the snow at the Battle of the Bulge. He nearly had to have both his feet amputated, and actually had four toes removed from one foot, but this rarely slowed him down from putting in a full day's work. He would often talk about the old days when the family was all together and working in the fields.

"Yeah, they was tough times back then, but we was all together," Silas would tell Hector who was usually busy mixing and experimenting with some chemicals.

"Now, it seems everyone is gone . . . my brothers Victor and Samson, my folks, and now even Clint is on his way out." Hector stopped his mixing to look over at Silas. What he saw was the look of a man that was living his remaining years in the past, constantly reminiscing the years gone by. Silas had been married twice over the years, with neither marriage lasting more than two years. The years of being on the road following the crops, coupled with drug and alcohol problems, prevented either marriage from ever working out. He had never had children and had always secretly envied the family life people with children have. That's why he especially enjoyed being around Hector now, he was like the son he never had.

One day that summer, late in the afternoon, an elderly Mexican couple came to the Johnson home. When Victoria answered the door, she nearly fell over from the shock caused by the presence of the couple. It was Victoria's

parents, Windsor and Anna, and they hadn't seen one another in many years, over twenty to be exact. Only one time had she been back to see her folks since she ran away with Samson all those years ago, and that was 1941. Some twenty-three years had passed. Nothing was said for all those years, no communication at all. For a long time, Victoria's parents didn't even know what happened to her, and when they found out that she had run away to be with a boy, that was too much shame to bear.

Even the time in '41, when she and Samson went to Coronado to make amends for Victoria's running away several years earlier, would prove not to be enough. So all those years later, there they stood, old and gray.

"Mom! Dad! What are you doing here?" At this point, tears of joy were streaming down the faces of everyone who was standing at the door. All their pointless, petty differences seemed to evaporate right before their eyes.

Anna said, "Do we need a reason to come see our daughter and her family whom we had heard so much about over the years? Besides, if we waited any longer, we might all be dead."

"Isn't that the truth. Tell me, Mom, how did you know where to find us after all these years?"

Anna answered, "Through the grapevine dear, through the grapevine. You know, daughter, the farming community in California has a grapevine that runs the entire length of the state, literally and figuratively." I guess that was a good enough answer for Victoria, for the subject of how they had found out information about her and her family never came up again.

Reaching out and hugging her dad, Victoria said, "And Dad, you look as big and strong as the last day I saw you some twenty odd years ago."

“Now, don’t you lie to me, Victoria, you can’t kid a kidder.” The three had now gone into the living room to sit and talk.

Anna said, “I heard you have a son, and his name is Hector?” “That’s right, Mom. He’s nineteen now and pretty much runs the family business. You know Samson was killed in the war, right?”

Anna answered, “Oh, yes, it was terrible news, but we couldn’t put aside our petty differences and come and comfort you, wasn’t that terrible?” Anna’s voice and hand gestures told of and showed real Latin sincerity. Yet, even though they both seemed sincere to Victoria, both of her parents seemed stiff and a bit uncomfortable about being there after so long.

“That’s all right, Mom. Did you know I had remarried?” Windsor spoke up, “Yes, we heard, and we understand he’s ill. Is that true?”

“Yes, Dad, you heard right from whoever your sources are. He has cancer and is now in the hospital.”

Anna said, “I’ve heard he’s a good man, he’s treated you and your son well.”

“Yes, he has, Mom, yes, he has.”

Windsor said, “Well, that’s all anyone could ever ask for.” And with that, the conversation then shifted to Hector.

Anna asked, “We heard your son is gifted, is that true?”

“Gee, Mom, you have heard a lot of things from whoever your source is. Well, that’s right, Mom. At a young age, we could tell he was different. He never talked much, and when he did, it was only about chemicals. He was what some of the experts that we talked to call a savant. But he has long since grown out of that. He runs our chemical business now since Clint’s unable to do it.” Just then, Hector and Silas drove up in the company truck. They had just finished a late spray job.

“Well, Mom and Dad, you can meet Hector and his uncle Silas right now, they just drove up.”

When Hector walked into the house, he hadn't any idea who the elderly couple was that, in their own way, so urgently wanted to meet him. These two elderly people were trying to reach across the years and, in one final effort, grasp at everything that had been lost in the past. Of course, this is an impossible task, but it was their way of trying to make a connection before they ran out of time.

“Hello,” Hector said in his still shy manner when he found himself in the presence of strangers.

“Hector,” Victoria said, “these folks are your grandma and grandpa, Anna and Windsor.” Hector had never even seen a picture of his grandparents before, but instantly could see his own resemblance in Windsor. And his mom, he thought to himself, looked so much like her mother. Hector walked over and gave both a polite hug.

“And this,” Victoria motioning to Silas, “is Uncle Silas. I guess you would call him my ex-brother-in-law, Samson's brother.” Silas reached out and gave a hearty handshake to both Windsor and Anna.

Silas said, “This is incredible, meeting you folks after all these years. Did you drive up here today?”

Windsor said, “Yes, we did, we wanted to see our daughter and meet her family before it was too late. We're not getting any younger.”

Silas looked over at Victoria and asked, “Did you want to go to the hospital and see Clint tonight? This would be a great surprise for him to meet your folks.”

Victoria said, “Yeah! It might give him a heart attack, but it would be good for us to visit him.” Victoria looked over at her folks to see if they were interested in visiting Clint that night. After all these years, she had that strong natural instinct to look to her parents for final approval to do something.

Anna said, “Sure, we would love to meet your husband. Let us just get cleaned up a little.”

Victoria said, “You do that, I’ll make some supper and we can all be over there by seven.”

As Hector was getting cleaned up to go down and visit Clint at the hospital, he couldn’t help but think about how strange it was to see his grandparents for the first time. As I said, he had never even seen a picture of them before, and nothing much was ever spoken about them over the years. In fact, it was a subject that until fifteen minutes ago, never really crossed his mind. The curve of the chin, the color of the hair, the build each one of them possessed—even in the way both of them stood—Hector could instantly see the resemblance he and his mother had to people he had never really thought about before. His grandparents on his dad’s side had long since passed away, but still he had vague memories of them. As for Clint’s folks, they were still around and doing fine. This, however, was a strange first for Hector—seeing people that are absolute strangers but are still his own flesh and blood.

After getting cleaned up, the five sat down to a supper of chicken and raviolis. There was just enough, luckily, considering that Victoria hadn’t planned on having any company for supper that night. No one spoke much at supper; everyone seemed to have somber thoughts about Clint and the condition he was in at the hospital. It was a strange situation for everyone, having to share supper with people that for each of them amounted to being total strangers. Victoria could hardly think of anything, from her distant past, to even talk about. She didn’t have any sisters and brothers, and as for most of her other relatives, they were still in Mexico, as far she knew. Here she was at age forty-one, and her parents were total strangers.

She did manage to recall some of her neighbors she had as a child growing up in Coronado. They were well-to-do navy people who happened to be Caucasian, and Victoria,

being Mexican, was reluctantly allowed to play with the Kelsey kids. It wasn't the kids that had a problem with Victoria being Mexican; they just couldn't play together when Admiral Kelsey was home. He was born and raised in the deep South, Alabama to be exact, and although the children had lived their entire lives on the west coast, he would have never allowed his children to play with what he called "an inferior race." She did, however, ask what happened to the Kelsey family and their two Caucasian children whom she liked so well, Joan and Joe.

"Mom, whatever happened to that family that lived next door to us in Coronado? What was their name, Kesey or Kelsey, something like that?"

"Well, dear," Anna said, "the father, Admiral Kelsey, was killed during the war, I think he went down someplace near the Philippine Islands."

"Oh, that's too bad," Victoria said.

"No, it's not!" Windsor said abruptly. "The man hated us, and anybody else that had darker skin than he did. He was an asshole, redneck, bigot. We were only good enough to clean his house or mow his damn lawn. I hope the fish are picking his bones clean in 'Davey Jones' locker.' The prick wouldn't even let you play with his lily-white kids." Obviously, Windsor never liked the man.

"But I played with his kids, all the time, in fact," Victoria said.

"No, dear, only when he wasn't at home, or when he was out to sea."

"Well, then," Victoria asked, "what happened to the kids, Joan and Joe?" She still remembered their names.

Anna said, "I don't know, dear. After the war, they moved back east and the wife got the admiral's pension. I don't know whatever became of the kids."

Feeling exposed and embarrassed at his outrage, Windsor said, “Folks, I’m sorry for those harsh words I just had for old, long gone Admiral Kelsey, but the man used to anger me. And I couldn’t say anything back then. I just want you to know I’m sorry.” Victoria asked no more questions about that time long ago, after all, many of them seemed like bad memories for her folks. Her memory of that time was just too vague and distant to have any constructive recollections. Her life had started when she met Samson; everything before that seemed like somebody else’s past, not hers.

After supper, all five piled into that great, big, wonderful ’49 Buick that had been part of the Johnson family for so long now. It was a short trip of about twenty or thirty minutes to the hospital.

After arriving at the hospital, everyone seemed to have a good visit with the now terminally ill Clint. Even though he was now terminal, he was still quite strong and in good spirits. He was excited to see everyone, and especially surprised to meet Victoria’s parents for the first time.

“You’re right, Victoria,” Anna said, “he does resemble William Holden.”

Clint smiled weakly and said, “Well, it could be worse, I could look more like Boris Karloff after his make-up was put on.” Everybody laughed for a moment. It helped break the awkwardness everyone was feeling.

Windsor talked about how impressed he was with Hector, and how well he seemed to be running the chemical business. Silas told Clint that he had taken it on himself to put a new alternator on the Buick. It had a hard time keeping a charge. And the whole time they were there, Victoria held Clint’s hand like it would be the last time she would hold it. Everyone spoke to Clint except Hector; Hector knew the end was near for Clint.

All he said to Clint that night was, “Everything is going to be all right, Dad, don’t worry.” And with those words,

Hector touched Clint's hand and followed the others out the door.

As the Buick was pulling into the driveway, Hector could hear the phone ringing through the open window of the living room. He bounded from the car like the gangly young man that he now was, eager to reach the phone before it stopped ringing. It was Clint.

Victoria asked, "Who is it, Hector?"

"It's Dad, he just wants to tell me and everyone else good night."

Victoria said, "Tell him to hang up that phone, he needs to rest."

"He also says that he is so happy to have finally met your parents, after all these years. He says, 'Tell Anna he can tell now where you got all your beauty from.'"

Victoria said, "Sure, I'll tell her."

Clint said to Hector, "Well, son, you take care now and give everyone there a big hug, and give your mom a kiss for me. You know, you were right, son, about having a buddy. The moment my gravity-bound body released its earth-bound spirit, he was there to greet me. And Wyatt is here, too, and says to tell you 'howdy.'" Just then tears started to form in the eyes of Hector. Hector knew that Clint was now gone from this world, and I, again, was not chosen to be an escort.

Clint went on, "Wyatt's here explaining about that Arizona trip, and telling me about the special tasks you have been chosen to carry out. You get to become Gary Cooper. He was always your hero, wasn't he, son? Are you there, son? You're not crying, are you, boy? Anyway, you take care of your mother and tell her I love her a lot. God! There's a little apeline gal up here that's entertaining everyone, she's loads of laughs. You know you're the only one I could talk to now, you're the only one who would understand. I've got to go now, son. I love you, son."

Hector said, "I love you, too, Dad." And with that, Hector wiped the tears from his eyes and hung up the phone.

Just as soon as Hector had hung up the phone, it began to ring again. Victoria came over to answer it.

"Hello." It was the hospital. "Yes, this is Mrs. Johnson." The hospital, "Yes, Mrs. Johnson, it's with our deepest regrets to notify you that your husband has passed away. He passed no sooner than you and the others left the room. We tried to catch you. We're all very sorry."

Victoria said, "That's impossible! We just talked to him on the phone."

The hospital said, "That couldn't be possible, he passed away about thirty minutes ago. Mrs. Johnson . . . Mrs. Johnson, are you there?" Victoria had hung up the phone, stunned and crying. She knew that the only one that could understand what had just happened was Hector. The subject would never come up between the two. They both knew Clint was in a better place.

Victoria, like Clint, knew that Hector had something very special about him. She knew that Hector knew what happened on the telephone that warm summer evening in the summer of '64. No one else in the house that night ever had any idea about the brush Victoria and Hector had had that night with eternity. Victoria waited till the next morning to tell Silas and her folks that Clint had passed away the night before. Victoria's parents decided to stay for the funeral. They had come north to comfort their daughter, and they were going to stay and do just that in her time of need.

Hector spent several sleepless nights praying for the power for him to transform into the likeness of Gary Cooper. That way, he could use Hector's Juice to duplicate the miracle he performed in San Antonio on Hank Shotwad's mother, and bring Clint back to life. I couldn't do that for Hector and he knew it. He still spent those tearful nights

lying in bed, silently crying to himself and asking for the power to bring Clint back to life.

Victoria was to never marry again, although she still possessed the beauty that attracted much attention in the past. She simply had no interest in marriage. Two of the most important loves in her life had been taken from her at a young age. Now all she wanted to do was spend the rest of her life in quiet solitude, never to take up with a man again. Although Hector had grown into a fine-looking young man, he would never take a woman in his life. He, like everyone that knew him, knew that he was different and special. This specialness included the lack of sexual desire. It's not so much that he was incapable of being attracted to a woman, or that he was physically unable to perform the sex act. To him, the very thought of all the chemical functions that were going on simultaneously during sexual intercourse, and not being in control of them, was too much for him—this being the greatest of all chemical miracles, the creation of another human being. So this chemical paranoia that Hector had is what would forever keep him from pursuing any woman. To Hector, the act of lovemaking was the pinnacle of being out of control. He thought it to be repulsive, and yet at the same time, in one word—wonderful.

So Clint was laid to rest on August 6, 1964, Hector's birthday. Hector was nineteen years old now, and he was poised to take on phase two of his mission of justice. I would soon give him the information he would need, by relaying to him through his dreams the names and locations of the three remaining culprits that persecuted and killed men, women, and children during the great Okie migration of the 1930s. For now, though, it was a time for quiet reflection for Hector and the people who had known Clint.

I swear to God that I have never seen a more well-attended funeral in all my days here on this earth. I mean, for a private citizen, that is. Sure, the pharaohs had some pretty big ones, and a president here and there, and it

seemed as if the entire town of Los Angeles came out for Valentino's funeral in Hollywood. But for an everyday Joe like Clint, nope, his has got to be the biggest send-off to the hereafter I ever saw. I mean, the whole town of Lodi must have showed up. Farmers from as far south as Modesto and Turlock, and as far north as Sacramento, came to give their last respects to a man who would be missed by all that knew him.

After the funeral, everyone went back to the different corners of the state they came from. Many of the people that attended the funeral Victoria or Hector had never seen before. And after they all went home, they would never see again. The reach of Clint and his appealing personality went far beyond the city limits of Lodi or Stockton.

Victoria's folks, as I said, stayed for the funeral, and even hung around for a week after. She was eager to see them go, especially her mother, for the same things that had bothered her about her mother as a youth, came back to bother her as an adult. Many of these things had long been forgotten by Victoria and her mother alike, but came out of dormancy once they were around each other for very long. It was time for them to say good-bye. For now, at least.

"For now, at least" would prove more like forever, for Victoria would never see her folks again. Silas still helped Hector with the chemical business, and lived in a small room that was adjacent to the shop behind the house. Each night, before Hector went to sleep, he would wonder if this would be the night he would receive his next prophetic dream. Instead, he would dream of Clint and all the good times they had as a family. Those long drives in the country in that great, big, wonderful old '49 Buick Roadmaster would dominate his dreams, the days when they were together as a family—just Clint, Victoria, and Hector. And each morning, he would wake refreshed with the fact that he once had a dad named Clint.

CHAPTER 21: VENGEANCE FOR THE WEARY

Things had changed so much over the years, but the reason why things had changed so much was mainly because the people had changed so much. Many of the fruit tramps that had been familiar to Hector and Victoria through the years, and who used to work around the Lodi-Stockton area following the never-ending cycle of growing and harvesting up and down the west coast, were now gone. Some died, some moved into better and more stable work. The kids would grow up and learn a trade other than working in the fields, and many had just moved away and settled in other farm communities. But as for the ones that loved the nomadic way of life, and the feel of the earth between their fingers, the ones that loved to wake on a spring morning and see the sunshine stream through a new crop of cherries hanging from the trees, they would be here for a long while to come.

Silas was one of those nomadic wanderers that would forever yearn for the feel of fruit in his hands. It didn't matter if it was fruits or vegetables, cherries or beans, lettuce or apples, just as long he could either have a part in the planting, growing, or harvesting of them. He was a natural-born farmer who was now spending most of his time in the pesticide end of farming. It was all for the better. Silas was now a confirmed alcoholic who looked much older than his forty-six years. At least now, he had more stability in his life. Whereas before, he, like many of the others, would follow the ghost-like trail of crops that would sometimes materialize in jobs, but more often than not, prove to be nothing more than rumors of work.

Hector and Silas continued to work side by side with little difficulty, other than the fact that Silas was usually fighting off a hangover. Hector was always safety conscious while working with chemicals; he knew by instinct, and by the

natural gift that he had been given, that working with chemicals was not to be taken lightly. Even though he protested, Hector would force Silas to wear protective clothing while handling, mixing, or spraying the chemicals they used. Hector's senses were tuned into the Mother Nature Channel, and he could see, from the very beginning when he used to work with Clint, that chemicals could and would raise havoc with the balance of nature. He had told Clint to stop using DDT long before Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring*, the book that exposed many of the dangers chemicals can cause to the environment.

Silas would ask Hector, "Why do I have to wear this respirator and all this other crap when I use chemicals? Nobody else around here does."

And Hector would answer, "Cause I like you Silas—no, actually I love you—and I don't want the same thing that happened to my dad happen to you."

Silas would always give Hector a queer look that seemed to ask the question: "How the hell do you know what caused Clint's sickness?" But you see, Hector did know the damage that Clint was doing to his body by not protecting himself from the chemicals. Hector had been born with the knowledge that, without treating chemicals with respect, they could disrupt the magical cell division process in all living things (which is cancer), and that is exactly what happened to Clint. That is also why Hector was not surprised when he first heard Clint was sick. He had watched Clint directly expose himself to chemicals constantly, but felt helpless to tell him about it. I mean, Hector knew more about the chemicals that were around than the chemists that invented them.

So Hector and Silas became the working team that Hector and Clint once were. For months, Hector wondered if he would ever receive another one of the promised dreams he had come to expect. It was now 1965 and it had almost been a year since his encounter with the evil assassin of JFK,

Henry B. Shotwad. The “B” stood for Booth. His father had been a Southern sympathizer and a member of the K. K. K., so the middle name he gave his prick son was the last name of another assassin of a president of the United States, John Wilkes Booth.

Henry’s father would say, “I think what we need in this here country is mo’ men the likes of John Wilkes Booth. That way, all good white men could at least own a couple of them there shiftless niggers, that is if they wants to.” Henry’s father spent most of his time being unemployed. There was only one thing Henry’s father hated more than blacks, and that was Northerners. That is no doubt where Henry had gotten his hate of JFK— from his loving father.

Hector would think back on the hate that must have motivated a Henry Shotwad to commit one of the greatest crimes of the century. He remembered the day he entered the presence of that same Henry, and could feel the evil radiate from the man. The way he talked was evil, the way he looked at you was evil, and the way he treated others during his lifetime was evil. So it took a harsh punishment to bring such evil to final justice.

So Hector had an idea that his next mission of justice would be to seek out and destroy the equally evil tormentors of that desperate American wave of humanity that sought refuge in the promised land called California.

One night, in the fall of ’65, Hector felt a strange need for sleep at a much earlier hour than he was used to. He had just finished supper and was already yawning and feeling the heavy weight of sleep tugging at his eyelids. It was only 7:20 P.M. as he set off for bed.

Victoria said, “Hector, is something wrong? You never go to bed this early.”

“No, Mom, I’m fine. I’m just feeling a little extra tired tonight. Must be the extra workload Silas and I have been taking on lately.”

“But, honey, you’re going to miss *Lost in Space* tonight, and I was going to make some popcorn, or maybe we could make some root beer floats or something later.”

“No, Mom, I’m just too tired. I couldn’t stay awake another half hour to watch it. Just tell me in the morning what I missed.” And with that, Hector went over and gave his mother a kiss good night and was off to bed.

Hector was asleep the instant his head hit the pillow. He was so tired that night that he had altogether skipped his normal routine of brushing his teeth, taking a pee, and seeing that his window was cracked open for some fresh air. His mind drifted into that world that is all so real while you’re there, but upon awakening, is nothing more than bits and pieces of a lot of nothings. This, though, would not be one of those dreams. I was going to burn into his memory the names, and especially the faces, of the three men that he would need to remember to wreak justice upon.

Wyatt was once again the messenger that brought the vital information that Hector would need to identify and locate the “Fearsome Threesome.” That was what they were called by the Okie migrants in the ’30s.

Wyatt said, “How have you been, Hector? I was very sorry to hear about your dad, Clint. But you can rest assured that he is in a better place. Now, you’re goin’ to be seekin’ out and eradicatin’ some more varmints here shortly. They were known as the “Fearsome Threesome” years ago, but after you get through with them, they will be nothin’ more than food for them little ant critters. Now, I don’t want you to get them confused with the LA Rams’ “Fearsome Foursome” consisting of Deacon Jones, Rosey Grier, Merlin Olson, and Lamar Lundy, but that’s exactly where you’re goin’ to find them three varmints—at a 49er football game. You’ll be going to a 49er football game on October 14, and all three of them evil rascals will be there. You see, all three of them are LA Rams fans and they’ll be sittin’ in Kezar Stadium drinkin’ beers and chompin’ down dogs. The names of these here bad

hombres are Clive Osburne, Jake Whitmore, and Harold Simmons. These were the three most powerful fellers in the Imperial Valley Associated Farmers Group. They were the power behind the fists that were constantly batterin' those poor, frightened folks in the southern part of California in the 1930s."

Wyatt stopped conversing with Hector for just a few moments, so he could burn into his memory the faces of these three men. Clive Osburne: age 66, 6 feet 2 inches tall, 185 lbs. His hair was once dark brown, now it was gray. Out of the three, he probably had the kindest face. In fact, when he was a young man, he studied to be a Jesuit priest. Jake Whitmore: age also 66, 5 feet 10 inches tall, 170 lbs, hair—none. He was as bald as a cue ball, but had once had a full head of red hair that must have matched his equally red face. He probably was the most evil of the bunch. His father taught him to hate anyone that was different; he taught him well. Harold Simmons: age 69, 5 feet 11 inches tall, 293 lbs of mostly fat. He still had a surprisingly full head of dark brown hair that his boyfriends loved. He was a homosexual who had once had a short romance with J. Edgar Hoover. He once gave old J. Edgar a blow job when he was a kid in Long Beach. He would service some of the older men in the area for extra money. It was just an accident that he happened to meet J. Edgar when he was out on the west coast doing some FBI work in the Long Beach area. His sexual preference was a secret; not even the other two members of the "Fearsome Threesome" had any idea that Harold would take it where the sun don't shine. Being homosexual is probably what had made Harold Simmons such a hateful man. He felt he was being punished by God for being queer. This is probably what made him strike out at anyone that was weaker than he was. He also had a large scar on his left cheek, which he had received in a knife fight in San Diego after not paying a male prostitute. So that was it, the three faces and histories of the men he was to eradicate were burned into Hector's mind.

Hector had been shone the face of each man as if he was seeing them on a movie screen.

Wyatt went on to say, “Now, Hector, you have two weeks until that game. Silas will unknowingly get the tickets for the both of you to go. Unknowingly, because he will not have any idea about the mission you will be on. Now, that’s it Hector. Just as before, I know you will be successful with that magical potion, Hector’s Juice. When you get rid of these scum, the death, starvation, and any of the other crimes committed by these men against the men, women, and children of the Dust Bowl will be avenged. Now, you take care, little fella, and don’t worry, when the time comes you’ll be knowin’ what to do.” With that, the dream with Wyatt ended. Hector had other dreams that night, but none that he would remember. He slept well the rest of the night.

The next day, while Hector and Silas were in town, Silas came up with the suggestion that they go to a 49er football game. He had already purchased the tickets.

Hector thought to himself, *That Wyatt sure is a good messenger. He sure would make somebody a great bookie.*

Silas said, “Me and you Hector got two tickets on the forty-yard line to see Brodie take on the ‘Fearsome Foursome’ of the LA Rams.”

Hector said, “Yeah, we’re going to see Deacon Jones chase down John Brodie and smash him flat.” Silas gently handed Hector his ticket, as if by wrinkling or bending it, it would somehow diminish its importance or value.

“That sounds good to me, Hector. I’ve been a Ram fan ever since I got out of the army in ’45, and Bob Waterfield was their quarterback. Back then, Waterfield wasn’t only scoring with the Rams, he was scoring ‘big time’ with the Hollywood starlet Jane Russell. Boy, would I have wanted to split her uprights.” For a moment, Silas was lost in the past, forgetting that Hector was still listening to him. It didn’t

matter, Hector had no idea what the hell Silas was mumbling about anyway.

They both then jumped into the work truck with smiles on their faces, each enjoying the smooth feel of the glossy tickets. Each had their own reasons for looking forward to the game. Silas had always wanted to go to a NFL football game, but had never gotten around to going to one. He had been compelled to buy the tickets, ever since he had a dream showing him and Hector enjoying a 49er game. Or, so he thought it was a 49er game. There were seagulls flying around in his dream, so he came to the conclusion that it was Kezar Stadium in San Francisco. As for Hector, he was looking forward to the game, not so much because he was any great football fan, but because this was his chance to once again become Gary Cooper and carry out some good old-fashioned justice.

For two weeks, both Silas and Hector looked forward to the football game with the same anticipation a child looks forward to Christmas morning. Silas pored over the statistics which both teams had compiled up to that point in the season. He especially liked to watch the defensive players. To him, Deacon Jones was the best defensive player in the game. Within two years, he would possibly even be an MVP candidate. One possible reason why Silas liked the defensive part of football so well was that with each hit that was made on an offensive star, he imagined that it was him slamming one of those goon guards that used to torment him and his family. That's also why he enjoyed boxing so much; he could let his imagination make that same conclusion with each solid knockout he saw.

That long-looked-forward-to Sunday finally came, only to find Silas sick with the flu. He had been sitting on the toilet for the better part of that Sunday morning before he told Hector that he wasn't going to be able to make it to the game.

"Hector . . . hey, Hector, bring me another roll of toilet paper, would you please?" Silas had been living in the spare

bedroom ever since Clint passed away, and so such a request had been given before.

“Uncle Silas, you mean you’re not going to be able to make it to the ballgame today?”

“That’s right, son, unless I can put a plug in these screaming shits, you’ll be going to the game alone.”

“But Silas, you’ve been looking forward to this game for so long . . . I’ll pick you up a game program, though, since it doesn’t look like you’re going to make it.” Hector stood there staring at the closed bathroom door for a few moments, before returning to his room to finish getting dressed. He had his Gary Cooper duds ready to take with him. He thought to himself, *Without Silas coming along, it’s going to be easy for me to make my transformation into Gary Cooper, and to find a place to get changed into my cowboy duds.*

So that was it, Hector was going to that game all by his lonesome. Victoria didn’t want to go. She hated football; it was too violent for her. Silas was still sitting on the toilet when Hector left. He had to leave at about 10:30 A.M. to get to the game by

1:00 P.M. So after reassuring Silas that if he could he would get Deacon Jones’ autograph, and would definitely get him a game program, Hector was on his way to the game.

It was about a seventy-five-mile drive to San Francisco, so it took him the better part of an hour and a half to get to Kezar Stadium from Lodi. He had stopped at a rest stop along the way to dress into his cowboy getup. So after dressing and getting back on Highway 4, Hector once again pointed that big Buick toward Frisco. He had not yet seen any evidence of his final transformation to the likeness of Gary Cooper. He had the top down and was just enjoying his first trip anywhere on his own since San Antonio, when he happened to glance at himself in the rearview mirror. A smile

instantly came to his face. He was now Gary Cooper. It was as if he was seeing an old friend.

By this stage in Hector's life, he was actually the exact same size Gary Cooper was as an adult, give or take a pound here or an inch there. So there he was, about to cross the San Francisco Bay Bridge, with the top down on that '49 Buick that was quickly becoming a classic. His black Stetson was atop his head, and dark sunglasses were protecting his eyes from a brilliant October morning, while the Rolling Stones played on the car radio. He felt ready to carry out some final justice.

When he arrived in the general Kezar Stadium area, parking was in the usual state it always is—non-existent. So he ended up parking three blocks from the stadium and walking through Golden Gate Park to get to the stadium. As he strolled through the park enjoying the bright early afternoon, he noticed the same phenomenon that had occurred to him in San Antonio starting: animals were following him.

Not just one stray dog or an over-curious cat, but many animals were following him. Dogs were straining on their leashes to get a good smell of this cowboy stranger as they passed him with their masters. And as for the lucky dogs that were off their leashes, they all left their masters wondering where the hell they ran off to. Stray cats would come out of nowhere to rub up against this stranger that had such a supernatural attraction. Squirrels, like before, were leaving their respective holes and trees to follow this stranger that had such a magnetic pull on them. But out of all the animals that were following him, the birds, namely the seagulls, were creating the most commotion.

So there Hector was, the spitting image of Gary Cooper in *High Noon* strolling through Golden Gate Park, as carefree as can be, with his spray tank in one hand and his other hand swinging loosely by his side. He had already mixed a small amount of Hector's Juice the night before. Most of the people

that were regular inhabitants of the park were either old beatniks or soon to be hippies, for the “Summer of Love” was just two years away.

Many of these people had come to San Francisco, like so many others before them, looking for something magical to happen in their lives. This was the mecca for misfits and castoffs. So when some of these laid-back folks laid their eyes on this spectacle of a lone figure of a cowboy walking through Golden Gate Park with all these beautiful critters of nature following him, they thought it must be some apocalyptic sign. Many of them also joined in the parade to the stadium.

When Hector did finally arrive at the main entrance of the stadium, the ticket taker stood and stared in total amazement at the sight he beheld.

When it came Hector’s turn to turn the turnstile, the ticket man said, “Looks like you have a few friends following you, fella.”

“Why, yes, sir, there are times when the little critters of the world take a likin’ to me. And this here is one of those times. You don’t have to worry, though, they won’t be followin’ me into the stadium.”

One of the beatnik-soon-to-be-hippie types caught Hector before he went through the gate and asked, “Man, that be the hippest thing that I’ve seen since I’ve been in Frisco. Where did you learn to train all those beautiful creatures of nature to follow you like that, man?”

“I just reckon I have a gift for animals to like me, I guess.”

And with that, the hipster said, “Man, that’s heavy, that’s real, real heavy.”

Hector said, “No, sir, there ain’t a bit of liftin’ involved in it.”

Hector then turned and went into the stadium, disappearing quickly into the crowd. But even at a distance,

you could still spot the black Stetson on top of Hector's head, bobbing through the crowd, taller than everyone else's head. None of the animals attempted to enter the stadium after Hector. They quickly turned and disappeared into the huge park they had left. The only creatures that continued to gather near the stadium were the seagulls. By the hundreds and possibly even thousands they were hovering over the stadium.

Hector found his seat, and no sooner than he took it, he had people telling him how much he looked like the now deceased Gary Cooper.

He would just say, "Thank you kindly. He was always one of my favorites. I especially liked him in *Sergeant York*." He had a harder time explaining why he was carrying a pesticide sprayer into a football stadium.

He could only come up with, "I carry this here sprayer in case the stadium has ants, and the stadium owner would like me to spray for them after the game. I carry it wherever I go, I wouldn't leave home without it, seein' as I have my own pest control business and all."

Hector then went to scouring the seats around him, looking for anyone that would match the images of the three evil men burned into his brain. The stadium was packed as usual for this interstate rivalry, so his chances of finding the men he was looking for was remote at best. He was not given the location as to where they would be seated. *How am I goin' to confront these men amongst this here huge crowd?* he thought. All he knew was that this was going to be their judgment day, and he was going to be their judge.

All Hector could do now was read his game program and wait for the starting lineups to be announced. After the lineups were announced, the game started right on time at 1:00 P.M. The 49ers won the toss; they would receive. On the second play from scrimmage, John Brodie went back to pass, when out of nowhere running like an escaped convict during a prison break, Deacon Jones crushed the pocket and Brodie,

without any 49er ever even touching him. Then it happened—the cue for Hector to go into action. Everything stopped; it was as if time itself stood still. And in reality, at least for the people in the stadium, it had. Even the players were frozen in the separate expressions of joy and dejection written on their faces. As for this particular play, the Rams looked like the ones celebrating and the 49ers were the dejected ones after Deacon Jones' sacking.

Then it dawned on him that amongst all these thousands of frozen people in the stadium, he, along with the three evil men he was lookin' for, would be the only ones still able to move around. That was the way it was goin' to happen; he would be able to locate them while the stadium was frozen in time. He quickly started looking for any movement in the crowd.

Within a few moments, he had spotted them. They were directly in front of him, about ten rows down and to the left of where he was sitting. They were slowly standing, looking around in utter amazement at the now frozen stadium. Hector just sat there still for a moment or two observing the confused men that all those years ago tormented, abused, and ultimately killed many people including some of his own relatives.

Then Hector stood and yelled down at them, “Harold Simmons, Jake Whitmore, and Clive Osburne, welcome to your judgment day.”

They all looked around in unison to see where the lone voice was coming from. At first, none of them could focus on Hector for the sun was straight up and shined brightly in their eyes; if Hector didn't move, it would be almost impossible for them to spot him among the unmoving throng. Hector did move, though. He moved into the aisle whose steps would take him straight to the “Fearsome Threesome.”

After zeroing in on the lone figure that could move in the still crowd, the three stood silently with their mouths agape

and in unknowing awe of the lone cowboy figure they beheld. Hector started to slowly move down the steps. One by one, he counted the steps, as if slowly counting the years backward to the time when these three men held so much sway over the destinies of so many.

By the time Hector arrived at the row of seats where the men were standing, they had gathered their senses enough to try to run from this unknown cowboy tormentor. But they couldn't leave the row of seats which they occupied.

"Who the hell are you? What's going on?" Jake Whitmore yelled as his red face showed the same fear that his victims in the past must have shown.

Harold Simmons said, "I know who you are, you're that cowboy from the old movies . . . Gary Cooper, that's who you are. But that's impossible. He's dead. Who the hell are you?"

Then Clive Osburne spoke up, the one who was going to be the Jesuit priest, "I know who he is, he's an avenging angel. I knew eventually we would all have to pay for the evil deeds we did to those poor people years ago. Is that who you are, an avenging angel here to make us pay for the way we treated those folks back in the '30s?"

Hector said, "Clive Osburne, the one man amongst you fellas that seems to have at least half a heart. You were actually goin' to be a Jesuit priest, weren't you? Well, Clive, you're pretty close to bein' right. I'm no avenging angel but I'll tell you here right now, after today, you fellers won't ever hurt anyone ever again." With that, Hector told Clive it would be a good idea to start prayin' and preparin' for what comes after this life. Hector also told the other two fellas to do likewise. And if they needed help praying, maybe Clive could give a quick lesson, seein' as he was going to be a priest and all at one time.

Then the three again tried in vain to escape the row of seats that held them captive. The only one of the three that had any sense of calmness or had resigned himself to the fact

that it was time to pay for their wrongs was Clive Osburne. He was the only one with some religious conscience or moral fortitude who knew what they had done decades ago was evil, and should not go unpunished. Hector had no power over sparing any one of them, but Clive Osburne was the only one of the three that was allowed to leave the row of seats that would soon be the death chamber for Harold Simmons and Jake Whitmore. As for Jake and Harold, they never had remorse for anything they ever did in their entire lives. Their motto in life was: “The only good *anything*, was a dead *anything*.” You fill in the blanks.

As Harold Simmons and Jake Whitmore hysterically tried to scratch their way through the invisible wall that held them, Clive Osburne was allowed to walk through the wall as if it wasn't there.

Hector said, “For some reason that's out of my control, you have been spared this final judgment, Clive Osburne. I'll be tellin' you that you best get out of here now and live the rest of your life in a good manner. As for your friends, they will soon be no bother to no one. Now get out!” With that, Clive Osburne turned and ran up the steps with a speed that defied his 66 years of age. He soon disappeared from view at the top of the stadium steps.

He could still hear the cries for mercy coming from the two men he called his friends for most of his life. Clive Osburne moved quickly through the crowd of frozen football fans. There were the fans that were frozen in line while waiting to get a hotdog and a beer. And there were also the frozen fans waiting desperately in line to use the restroom. But all were as still and stiff and frozen as an Eskimo's pecker at a nudist colony. I know, sometimes I still get overly descriptive.

Clive could finally see the light at the end of the tunnel, the exit to Kesar Stadium. He now moved more frantically through the masses, even knocking some of the stiffes down on their faces. Eventually, they would wake up with their face

in a puddle of beer, or another might wake up to realize that someone is about to step on their face.

Only a little further, he told himself, *and I'll be out of this nightmare. Just a little further.* His heart was pounding harder than a deer's on the first day of hunting season. Then it happened. With about twenty-five yards left, Clive Osburne became one of the stiffs himself. Only he would never wake up the way the others soon would. He fell face down in a puddle of beer, dead of a heart attack before he hit the floor. Clive's last thoughts before he dropped dead were: *I should have stayed in school and become a priest . . . I should have treated people better.* That was it. He never even smelled the floor his nose would soon come in contact with.

As for the other two, Harold and Jake, they had been frantically wearing themselves out trying to escape through the invisible wall that was holding them captive. They had long since knocked down all the other stiffs in their aisle of seats who were in the way of their frenzied attempt to escape. Harold had fallen over one of the bodies and had cut his mouth badly on the bleacher seat. Jake was so freaked out that he sounded as if he was talking in tongues. Both, though, were at the point where they were pleading for their lives.

Hector asked, "Now, boys it's time for you to go. Does either of you have anything to say?"

Jake said, "He forced us to do it," as he was pointing to Harold.

"He forced us into treating people like trash. Clive was a downright good man, and I wasn't all that bad until Harold put those evil thoughts into our heads."

Harold said, "You cocksucker, Jake! Shut the fuck up!"

"I'm not the cocksucker Harold, you are. I've always known you were a queer bastard. You goop-goblin' son-of-a-bitch."

At that point, Harold, inflamed with fury, had come over to Jake and was actually starting to choke the holy shit out of Jake. If this was allowed to go on much longer, there wouldn't have been any need for the use of Hector's Juice. They would have both killed each other with their bare hands. Either that or they would have expired in the same manner as Clive did, with a massive heart attack.

Then Hector walked over and pointed his sprayer tip at the two men and said one word, "Good-bye." He started spraying the two men, who, at this point, had relinquished themselves to pleading on their hands and knees. Hector's Juice had the same effect on them as it did on Hank Shotwad in San Antonio. They had begun cooking from the inside out, as if they were in a microwave oven. The only action that was going on in the stadium at this point was Jake and Harold melting away to nothing, and the constant bombardment from the sky by the seagulls. The seagulls had not been victims of the big time freeze and there were literally thousands of them hovering above the stadium crapping on everything and everyone below. They, like most other animals, sensed the specialness of Hector and knew he was somewhere in the stadium below.

Soon, the pleas for mercy ended, and all that was left was a quiet stadium full of motionless people, unknowingly waiting for the moment when they would instantly wake up and resume the action they were caught in before they became motionless. Hector stood there by himself in the still, quiet stadium as if he was at a funeral giving his last respects. Not to the two men that he had just carried out judgment on, but for all the victims of these evil men. And you know, if you had listened very carefully that day, you could have almost heard the thank you's given to Hector being whispered through the trees of Golden Gate Park . . . thank you's from all the men, women, and children of the Depression who weren't fortunate enough to live to see their respective futures, mainly because their destinies happened

to cross those of Harold Simmons, Jake Whitmore, and Clive Osburne.

Soon the period of judgment would be over and everything would resume back to normal. This realization woke Hector out of the sullen daze he was in. He looked out on the field that contained the frozen football players and looked down at the football program that was stuffed into his vest pocket. He remembered the request Silas had given him, that is, to see if he could get Deacon Jones' autograph. He thought to himself, *I'm goin' out there and see if I can get that there fella's autograph when they continue playin'.*

So Hector went down the steps and jumped the rail that separated the fans from the field and walked onto the field. He would wait there until time, once again, put the stadium in motion. He was only waiting a few moments when the quiet and still stadium roared back to life. Hector had been waiting right in the middle of the play that had just happened, and was nearly knocked down by a surprised Deacon Jones when everything sprang back to normal.

“Who the fuck are you, boy? Get your white little cowboy ass the hell off the field.” Then a quiet calm came over Deacon Jones, and he then asked Hector, “Can I sign an autograph for you or something? I like cowboys, except the ones from Dallas.”

Hector said, “I reckon you could, Mr. Jones. It would be for my uncle Silas.”

Hector then handed Mr. Jones a pen and the program; Deacon Jones signed it, “To my good friend Silas, Sorry I missed you. Your friend always, Deacon Jones.” Hector thanked him and then they both strangely turned and went away in separate directions. Deacon Jones went back to a huddle full of astonished football players, and Hector back to his life in Lodi.

Then just as strangely, Deacon Jones once again turned to look at Hector and said, “By the way, I sure liked you in *High Noon*.”

Then Hector tipped his hat in the direction of Deacon Jones, smiled widely and said, “Yup, I sure enjoyed that movie myself.”

Hector jumped over the rail leading back to the stadium seats, and went up the same stairs that had taken him to the field.

He walked by the aisle of seats where moments before, he saw Jake and Harold melt into nothingness. The two puddles that were once Harold Simmons and Jake Whitmore were now starting to attract ants. They actually melted into puddles of some type of sweet sticky substance, the same as Hank Shotwad did in San Antonio, and almost instantly attracted the attention of a scout ant passing by. One older woman nearly slipped and fell when she accidentally put her foot in one of the puddles. She said, “Those three assholes that were just here must have spilled something. Sometimes don’t you wish you could get even with people like that?” Little did she know that many people did “get even” that day.

Hector noticed that some of the people in the stands were looking at him as if he was some kind of alien. For the most part, though, they all were dazed and confused, not only over the fact that thirty-five minutes had passed and not one of them could remember what had transpired during that time, but also by the considerable amount of seagull shit that had fallen on them during the freeze. Their watches had kept running even during the freeze, which told them that thirty-five minutes had indeed passed since the freeze began.

As for the folks that Jake and Harold had knocked down in their attempt to escape their invisible tomb, they were getting to their feet brushing themselves off with no recollection of how they ended up on the floor. Hector was relieved to see that no one was hurt, just got dirty with some spilled beer and a couple of dropped hot dogs, and got a few

bumps and bruises. So Hector picked up his spray tank, which he had left on his seat while he went out and got Deacon Jones' autograph, gave one last look at the football game he would not stay and watch the rest of, and turned and walked up the steps leading out of Kezar Stadium.

Going through the now unfrozen crowd as he walked toward the stadium exit, Hector noticed a small group gathered around someone lying on the ground. It was the body of Clive Osburne. Upon realizing this, Hector found himself feeling a strange sadness for this man. Hector had felt from the very minute he first met Clive Osburne that he wasn't like the other two, Harold and Jake. It was a true tragedy that somehow, years ago, Clive had gotten involved with these two men. After stopping for a moment and looking at Clive's now lifeless body, Hector said a silent good-bye and then continued to walk toward the exit.

Hector left the stadium with the same satisfaction that he had after he completed his job in San Antonio. Hector walked back through the park, this time, alone with no strangers or animals following him. In the instant he left the stadium, he had changed back to Hector; he was no longer Gary Cooper. The mystique that had attracted the animals and strangers before was now gone. Hector didn't know it at the time, but it would be many years before he would be called upon again to perform his magic with Hector's Juice.

He walked past some of the beatnik/hippie types that had followed him to the stadium before the game.

Hector just tipped his hat to them and said, "Beautiful day, isn't it?"

One of the beat/hippies said, "It's a groovy day to be alive, cowboy." Now, I don't know for sure, but I think that was the dude that coined the word "groovy." Either it was him or Frank Sinatra, Hector couldn't decide.

Anyway, Hector walked the rest of the way to his car savoring the faint smell of ocean air that had rested among

the trees and flowers of Golden Gate Park. Before he got to his car, he picked some flowers to take home to his mother. They would put a smile on her face. As for Hector, the ride home proved to be free sailing, with very little traffic. He turned on the radio and listened to the rest of the game. A certain look of satisfaction could be seen on Hector's face as he made his way home in that great, big, wonderful old car.

CHAPTER 22 : A BIG VALLEY MIRACLE

When Hector arrived home in the early afternoon, both Silas and Victoria were surprised to see him home so early.

Hector told them, “I got bored with the game, but I got the autograph you wanted from Deacon Jones. Uncle Silas, he’s a right friendly fellow.”

“You got his autograph?” Silas asked with the surprised excitement of a kid getting his first bike.

“How’d you get it? Was it hard?”

Hector said, “Nope, not at all. I just walked up to him in the middle of the game and asked for it. He said, ‘Sure, young man. Who would you like me to sign it to?’”

“That’s it? That’s all you said to him?”

“Yes, Uncle Silas, that’s all I said to him. After that, I left the game.”

“You mean to tell me you just walked out onto the field and asked for his autograph during the game?”

“That’s right, Silas. That’s exactly right. Now, if you will excuse me for a minute, I have to take a whiz mighty bad!”

Both Victoria and Silas sat there silently staring at one another till Hector got back from the bathroom. Silas looked at the autographed program that read: “To my good friend Silas, Sorry I missed you. Your friend always, Deacon Jones.” To Silas, it looked like an authentic signature. It definitely wasn’t Hector’s handwriting. Silas knew that for all Hector’s special talents and abilities, Hector had never been able to develop an ability to use the written language. And his penmanship was terrible; he also couldn’t spell a lick. He barely could write well enough to get by. This part of his brain would lay dormant his entire life.

When Hector came back from the bathroom, Victoria and Silas were still sitting silently contemplating the autograph and how easily Hector had gotten it. They both decided to themselves that enough had been said on the subject. So after Hector returned to the living room and had flopped himself down on the couch, the subject of Hector's clothes came up.

"Where did you get those clothes? You didn't have them on when you left for the game," Victoria asked.

Hector said, "I've always had them. Don't you remember I had them when I came home from San Antonio? I only wear them for special occasions, and I thought the football game was one of those occasions. I changed on the way to the game."

Victoria said, "That's right, I remember now. You had that cowboy crap on when you came home from that San Antonio trip. Sorry, I forgot." Victoria had been drinking that afternoon. That always seemed to loosen her mouth up.

Silas said, "That sure is a nice Stetson hat. Do you think I could borrow it some time?"

"Sure, anytime you'd like."

Victoria said, "While Silas had the game on, there was some kind of damn commotion going on, something to do with animals and a large number of seagulls gathering above the stadium. And then the broadcast suddenly went off the air for around a half hour. You wouldn't know what all that commotion was about, would you Hector?"

"No, ma'am, I sure wouldn't."

"Sounds a lot like the time you went down to San Antonio, and all those animals were gathering around the downtown area. And there were a few car wrecks they caused."

Silas said, “Maybe it has somethin’ to do with Armageddon or the final judgment. Like that movie that came out a couple years back, *The Birds*.”

Hector said, “Maybe you’re right, Uncle Silas. Maybe it does have somethin’ to do with judgment day.” Hector would occasionally pick up some of Silas’ bad grammar, and in this case, he picked up the bad pronunciation Silas uses sometimes when he means to say “something,” and instead says “somethin’.” This poor grammar would always bother Victoria.

She would say, “Just because we’re common folk doesn’t mean we can’t master the proper pronunciation of simple words. Saying “somethin’” instead of “something,” which is the proper way to say it. Just because we work in the fields doesn’t mean we were born in the fields.” Then Victoria stopped for a moment and realized the stupidity of that statement. She knew, as well as Silas and Hector did, that many in the migrant community had indeed been born right out in the field amongst the planting and harvesting being done, with the mother having the baby, and hardly taking a break long enough to wipe the baby off and have a Coke. Of course, Hector and Silas didn’t try to correct her.

Then Hector said, “The only strange thing I saw at the game was some of those folks hanging out in the park. Some of the men wore their hair the same length as that of the women. And the women folk that hang out in the park dressed and talked just like the men. They all use strange words like “groovy” or “far out,” words that I never heard anywhere before.”

Silas said, “They call themselves ‘The Beat Generation,’ a whole generation of bums.”

Victoria said, “Maybe they’re not bums, maybe they just have a different way of looking at life. Besides, don’t forget Silas, once upon a time there were some folks that called us bums.”

This quieted Silas, and ended the conversation, for it is far easier to judge a situation and people from afar than if you're actually living the life of the person you're judging. Hector excused himself to go get cleaned up and take a shower, while Silas sat back in his easy chair thinking about what Victoria had just said. Another football game was on TV but wasn't really holding Silas' interest, so he dozed while Victoria went to the kitchen to start making an early supper.

After Silas dozed off, he found himself dreaming like many of you humans do, after your eyes close, of subjects recently talked about or events that have taken or will soon take place in your respective lives, much like what happened to Victoria during the snowstorm. In Silas' case, he was starting to dream about being a cop. Not just any cop, but the biggest, meanest, worstest cop in the whole city of San Francisco.

He had a big gun, a big club, and a big badge that said in big, bold letters: ONE BAD-ASS REDNECK SHERIFF, and a stereotypical big belly that went perfectly with the image of being a redneck cop. This is what was really absurd about the dream. Here was Silas, a Mexican man, dreaming of being a redneck cop. Oh, yes, in the dream, he put on a pair of dark sunglasses to finish off the image. The image actually reminded him of Rod Steiger in the movie *In the Heat of the Night*.

In fact, looking at himself in the dream, he was wearing exactly the same uniform the thugs used to wear back in the work camps. In his dream, he would make his way through any part of San Francisco that he desired, with people trembling at his feet. His mission: to seek out and find all of the Beat Generation and put them out to sea on slow-sinking rafts. He especially hated those in the generation who were now growing their hair long. They would soon be known as hippies. He had something special planned for all those long hairs; he would give them all a boot camp special haircut before he set them out to sea.

He searched all the places in San Francisco that were familiar to him. Fisherman's Wharf and Golden Gate Park were the only places Silas had ever visited in San Francisco, so these, naturally, were the only places in "The City" where he would look for those undesirable beatniks. Now, all of these beat folks knew about Silas' limited knowledge of San Francisco and would hide from Silas in places like the Castro District or Haight-Ashbury when they saw him coming. Your dreams tend to stick with known points of reference (places you've been, things you've seen, recent experiences). So, whenever they saw him coming, they would warn their friends and just hide out in one of those areas that were totally unknown to Silas.

Occasionally, though, Silas would have his way in his dream and gather a big mob of this wasted generation. He would gather the whole mob down at one of the piers at Fisherman's Wharf, and then tell them to wait in the rain. It would always be raining in his bizarre cop dreams.

When he came back, he would have his shaver ready to shave the long haired people, and the only thing he would be wearing at this point in his dreams would be his underwear. I guess that was so he would be ready to have his way with all the young maidens of the Beat Generation. Then he would line them all up in a straight line, like in boot camp, and then, one by one, shave the heads of the long hairs. The men that didn't have long hair would just get kicked off the pier and onto one of those slow-sinking rafts without him even touching their heads.

By now, in his dream, he would have all the rafts full of the men, and then he would turn his attention to the women. Now, he would tell them all to take their clothes off and then, one by one, he would go down the line and have sex with them. Everyone of them, mind you. However, the strange thing about it is, when it came time to penetrate them, he couldn't do it (for whatever reason), which only added to his frustration. When he reached the end of the line, the women

would all be laughing at him, calling him things like “queer” or “limp dick.” Then his dream would come to its conclusion with Silas becoming infuriated with all the females because of his total inability to screw at least one of them.

He would then kick all the beat bitches off the pier and into their very own slow-sinking rafts. He would then stand at the end of the pier with his limp excuse of a boner watching this loser generation slowly drift out to sea, until he could no longer see them. The men were always the first to go down, but his dream never lasted long enough to see if the women went down. He would usually wake suddenly sweaty and with sticky drawers. Upon awakening, he would usually feel a little embarrassed at the thought of dreaming such an obscene dream, roll over, and then go back to sleep.

This time, however, it was a little different. He hadn't completely awakened from his dream when Hector gently shook him awake. Silas had a habit of sometimes getting into his pajamas early on a Sunday evening. So, on this Sunday, as usual, he had taken his usual nap, in his usual chair, with his usual pajamas on. The only thing was, this time, his frustrated boner was sticking out of the pee-pee hole of his pajamas. Hector had come back to the living room after cleaning up just in time to get Silas squared away before Victoria came back into the room. This time, though, Hector couldn't reach Silas in time to wake him, and have him take care of his woody before Victoria walked in. Victoria had entered the room, and caught a fleeting glance at Silas' manhood.

“Uncle Silas, Uncle Silas,” Hector said as he gently shook Silas' shoulder, “why don't you go to your room and take your nap?” Silas awoke instantly, taking immediate care of his semi-erection by stuffing it back into his pajamas.

“How's everyone doing out here?” Victoria asked, as she came into the room with a smile on her face. “Or is that a ‘hard’ question to answer right now?” Right then and there,

both Hector and Silas realized that Silas hadn't covered up in time.

"There's a great Ed Sullivan show on tonight," Victoria said as she was trying to contain her laughter. Finally, she couldn't hold it in anymore and broke down in hysterics.

With that, Silas wrapped himself in his robe, which he probably should have been wrapped up in all along, popped himself out of the big chair, and headed to his room at the back of the house. He didn't say a word and was obviously embarrassed to death. It was starting to rain, so on top of being caught in such a humiliating situation, he was going to get soaked, too.

He had about thirty yards to dash to get to his room out back. With the rain coming down in buckets, and Silas wearing nothing on his feet but his bedroom slippers, he not only got soaked but fell twice on the stepping stones leading back to his room. Watching him run through the window, both Victoria and Hector couldn't contain their laughter. They laughed so hard tears were streaming down their faces. They both did confide to each other later that they felt bad about getting so much fun out of Silas' misfortune. After each of them confided this to the other, they couldn't look at each other again without breaking up.

Needless to say, Silas didn't say much at dinner that night, and it took every bit of self-restraint that Hector and Victoria could muster not to break up into laughter in his presence. Silas was a sensitive man, so little embarrassing things such as this tended to cling to his psyche longer than they should. This was an exception, however, and Silas quickly got over the humiliation of Victoria seeing "Silas Jr."

"Silas," Hector said tentatively, not knowing the current mood Silas would be in.

"We have a job tomorrow in Stockton. We're going to spray cockroaches at some old folk's home. I heard they

found a couple in the oatmeal yesterday, and they want us to clean up their kitchen.”

“Fine,” Silas said as he took another bite of his hotdog. Watching Silas biting these big old Polish dogs on a bun only added to the difficulty which Victoria and Hector had at restraining their laughter. After a while, Silas made the connection between what he was eating and the embarrassing situation that had happened to him earlier in the evening.

“Okay, you two, I know you’re both dying to laugh, so let it out!”

Hector and Victoria both looked surprised, and a little shocked to hear this admission. So when they did look at one another, they couldn’t laugh. In fact, they couldn’t say a word.

“You can’t laugh, can you? I thought for sure you both were dying to have a good laugh on me. Well, I’ve had enough wieners for one night. I’m going out and watching Ed Sullivan.” With that, Silas got up from the table, cleaned off his plate, and complimented Victoria on what a delicious dinner it was.

The next day, both Hector and Silas rose and went about their regular routines in preparation for another workday. Although this would prove to be anything but another normal workday. In fact, the events of this day would prove to be a mystery even to me.

That day, Hector decided to use the sprayer he had used in his San Antonio and Kezar Stadium jobs. Other than for those two jobs, this particular sprayer had never been used on any other job. This one vital change in routine would forever change the lives of quite a few people that day.

After mixing their chemicals and loading the truck with whatever else they might have needed, Hector and Silas headed out. It was a beautiful October morning with the colors changing on the local trees. Both Hector and Silas had

decided to once again break routine and grab a bite to eat at the local diner. They would usually eat at home before heading out in the morning. After sitting down, they both looked at their respective papers, both seeking out the sports page first.

Hector said, “Hey, the Rams won that game yesterday 23-0. It also talks about some strange goings-on during the game.”

Silas said, “Yeah, looky here, it says something about you, I think: ‘The game was momentarily interrupted by a man dressed in cowboy attire. The man who was a dead-ringer for Gary Cooper approached and got the autograph of a very surprised Deacon Jones.’ Did you go out in the middle of the game and get Deacon’s autograph?”

All Hector could say was, “I guess so. Yeah I was told at the game by a whole lot of folks that I looked a bunch like Gary Cooper.”

“It goes on to say here,” Silas said, “It took the stadium crew the rest of the day and all night to clean up all the seagull excrement that was on the field and in the stands.”

Hector asked, “What does that word excrement mean?”

Silas said, “It’s just a fancy word for shit. They can’t say shit in the newspapers, so they came up with the word excrement.” Silas then added, “That must have been some game yesterday, with all the weird stuff and everything going on.”

Hector just nodded in agreement with everything Silas was saying, and didn’t say a word the rest of breakfast. After breakfast, they headed directly to their job at the old folks’ home that was located on Pershing Avenue in Stockton. After being greeted at the rest home entrance by the head nurse, a middle-aged blond woman with big breasts, the tour of the kitchen and the places where most of the roaches could be found began. Now I’ve been on this planet for a damn long time, but those little cockroach bastards were already here

when I first arrived. Excuse my French. I still slip now and then.

Anyway, as she led Hector and Silas through the halls leading to the kitchen, Hector walked beside her and Silas walked behind to see if the rear view of the head nurse was as good as the front. In fact, Silas got so engrossed with studying the proportions of her behind that he walked right into a meal cart, knocking some of the poor old folk's breakfast all over the newly waxed floor. After he apologized to a custodian that obviously didn't speak much English, Silas, the head nurse, and Hector continued their short walk to the kitchen.

As they walked through the halls, all Hector could think of was, someday it could be me in here . . . lonely, forgotten, with nothing more to keep me company at times but my memories of years past. That is, if my memory isn't shot by then. Mixed with the smells of ammonia, piss, and cold oatmeal, Hector could hear some of the old folks screaming and yelling from different locations throughout the hospital, usually at nothing in particular. Maybe one of the screams was to tell a nurse's aide that it was time to change a bedpan. Or one of the distant cries might have been for a long-lost dog that's been gone for sixty years or more.

One thing was clear though, especially to Hector, all these cries generally went unheard by the staff working there. Each cry came from a lonely soul, mixing in mid-air with all the other lonely cries that came from the other forgotten souls. It would hang there just long enough with the others to create one long indistinguishable howl! Then after this great indistinguishable howl found its way to every corner of this skid row for used-up people, someone would open the back door, letting the final remnants of that great howl out, so it could rest with the other forgotten great howls from the past in the old folk's garden behind the rest home.

After reaching the kitchen, the head nurse introduced Hector and Silas to the head cook. This big woman looked as

if she could have cooked for the marines during WWII. She was in her late fifties, and to Hector, she bore a strange resemblance to Ernest Borgnine.

“You boys can start spraying behind the counters and inside them drains. They love to get up in them drain pipes, plenty of moisture, you know.”

Hector looked at Silas and said, “Okay, I’ll do behind the counters and you take the drains and drain pipes.” With that, the head cook gave both Hector and Silas a smile of approval and returned to her oatmeal and runny scrambled eggs.

Upon completion of the job, Hector assured the head cook, and later the head nurse, that they shouldn’t see any of the little critters again for a while. And if they did, they would come back and repeat the job for free. Both the head nurse and the head cook seemed pleased with the job. But it was Silas who seemed to have gotten the most out of the day. He would have some good dreams about that head nurse tonight.

That night, while Victoria watched the evening news, she saw a report of some strange goings-on at some old folks’ home in Stockton.

“Hey, Hector, Silas, get your sorry butts in here.” They were on the front porch each enjoying a root beer after a hard day’s work.

“What do you want, Mom?” Hector asked.

“Where was that job in Stockton you boys did today?”

Hector said, “On Pershing, you know that old folks’ home on the corner of Country Club and Pershing.”

“Well, according to the report I just heard, the old folks’ home you boys sprayed today ain’t got no more old folks, all they got there now is young folks.” Hector and Silas came into the living room and sat on the couch in stunned amazement.

Hector said, “What do mean just young folks?”

Victoria said, “Just listen and watch the report.”

In general, the report they watched told of a hoax, where all of the old folks in the home were replaced by young folks. The now young residents themselves were of no help to authorities, for they had no memories of anything. All of the residents of that home were now either, by best estimates, in their late twenties or early thirties, the prime of life.

What made the entire story even stranger was, the employees of the home could swear that these young people that seemingly now resided in the home, could in fact be the old folks that were now nowhere to be found. They would show the authorities pictures of the different missing old folks from many years ago, when they were in their respective primes. And to the surprise of everyone, the pictures and the now young persons standing in front of them matched perfectly. That is, of course, if you erased the wrinkles, saggy skin, arthritis, and everything else that goes with growing old.

This strange and bizarre story was the headline story for the entire week on not only the *Walter Cronkite Evening Report*, but *The Huntley & Brinkley Report* as well. After the authorities verified through fingerprint, dental, and other records that these were the same old folks that previously lived there, they then would be faced with the job of figuring out what to do with them. How would they be reunited with their families when they would now find themselves to be as young or younger than their very own children, or in some cases, as young or younger than their grandchildren?

You had Joe White, once the sparring partner of Jack Dempsey, who right now didn't look a day older than he did during those days when he helped Jack prepare to fight Jess Willard for the “Heavyweight Championship of the World”—and that was back in 1919. How could he, or anyone else for that matter, explain to his two daughters, who are now pushing fifty, and his six grandchildren, that the younger-than-they-are man standing before them with the thickly

muscled shoulders and the narrow, streamlined hips was their father and grandfather respectively?

Then, there was Judith Day, who was prettier now than the day she was a stand-in for Clara Bow at Paramount in the 'twenties. It wouldn't be as difficult for her to explain the situation she now found herself in—she never had any children. What made this whole situation more or less manageable for everyone was that these now young folks that were once old folks had no memory of anything. This gave the authorities a little more room to work on. The residents of the home were making no demands to see relatives and offspring they never knew they had, or would one day have, or whatever. With this fact a reality, the authorities locked and sealed up the Pershing Old Folks' Home tighter than Fort Knox.

This, however, didn't stop relatives from gathering outside the now prison-like compound, demanding to see their loved ones.

Authorities would give them explanations like: "The reason these premises are sealed off to the public is for national security and to protect the residents of the home inside. When we have any information pertinent to the situation, we will gladly pass it along to the press and to the relatives of the residents inside."

Inside, batteries of doctors and scientists as varied as gerontologists to astrophysicists studied the residents with the awe and care they would give to a just-come-back-to-life dinosaur or a dead-upon-arrival alien from the depths of outer space.

One explanation given by one of the gerontologists was: "This is a case of spontaneous age regression, experienced for the first time by a large group of people." This spontaneous age regression was obviously something he just made up because no one knew what the hell he was talking about, including himself.

One other reason given by the resident minister on the premises was: “This is a prelude to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, and the beginning of the resurrection.” Taking a quote from the Bible, he said, “For all things shall be made new again.”

Probably the funniest explanation came from an astrophysicist who said: “These folks were planted here by aliens to study how our species functions under extreme pressure.”

Two weeks went by without a clue as to the origin of this phenomenon. Even Hector and Silas were brought into the compound for questioning, for they had sprayed the home for roaches right before “The Miracle in Stockton,” as it came to be known, occurred. Both Silas and Hector claimed to have had nothing to do with the incident. Even their equipment and shop were examined by experts from as varied occupations as forensic medicine and military applications, but nothing showed up that would lead them to any concrete conclusions.

This miracle at first confused even me, for this, by no means, was a planned event. It didn’t take long, though, before both Hector and I figured it out. Hector had figured it out the night it was first announced on the news. As Hector was lying in bed looking at the different patterns plastered on his bedroom ceiling, he realized that he had used the one and only sprayer he had ever used to spray Hector’s Juice. This sprayer had never been used before except for the job in San Antonio and the job he had just done the day before at Kezar Stadium.

“That’s it! It’s Hectors Juice!” he yelled to himself as he quickly sat up in bed. Only his big black cat was present to hear his excited exclamation. He slowly lay back down and continued to once again study the patterns on the ceiling.

While he was studying the different faces and animals his mind drew on the ceiling, he reasoned that there must have been a little left in the spray tank after his Sunday job at

Kezar. He also remembered that he hadn't rinsed his tank as he usually does and it must have had just enough residue left in the bottom for a miracle. It just so happened that this was a miracle of joy and not of justice like the ones before it.

"These old folks regaining their youth, what greater miracle could there be?" Hector asked himself out loud as he discovered what looked like the face of a clown at a place on the ceiling he had never studied before.

"This miracle was not supposed to happen, though. It wasn't meant to be. What's going to happen now?" Hector silently asked himself as he drifted off to sleep.

"Good night," Victoria said as she opened Hector's bedroom door. She turned off his light and then went to bed herself.

The "The Miracle in Stockton" was now causing this part of California to quickly becoming a mecca for all those seeking a miracle in their own lives. Literally tens of thousands of people swarmed Stockton to just get a glimpse of the Pershing Old Folks' Home. To the people that came, it could either represent a holy place, a shrine, a hoax, or, for the news people, the biggest news story since the assassination of JFK. To think that Hector was intricately involved in both of these huge stories, and the world would never know it.

Inside the home, nothing had changed. The experts had come no closer to discovering the answer to the miracle than the first day they discovered it. They had even torn out the piping and sewage lines leading to the home, hoping to find some clue to the puzzle. The only thing they found they could put any importance on at all was some religious trinket stuck in the pipe just below a toilet. The religious experts on the scene agonized over the trinket, trying to discover its origin and the possible significance it could have.

Their conclusion was that it probably was from India (because it said "Made in India") and the only miracle you

could attach to it, as one religious expert put it when asked by a reporter: “The only miracle I see here as it applies to this trinket, is how, with the tons of shit that has passed by it over the years, it hasn’t been dislodged by now, or hasn’t caused the toilet to back up. It must have been stuck there for at least ten or fifteen years, just about all the engravings are worn away.”

It hurt Hector to watch the news at night, and see the family members of the old folks inside gather outside the compound, unable to see their loved ones. All the anguish and sorrow associated with this event would soon end, though, and with it, the answer to its origin would forever be a mystery to mankind. Like the assassination of JFK, Hector would be the only person on the planet with the answer to the puzzle. This made Hector a very lonely person, but there was no way he could reveal the answers to the miracles he had performed without revealing himself. And this he could never do.

One late October morning, in fact it was a Sunday morning, the world and Stockton would wake up to just as strange a story about the old folks’ home as the first story about the old folks’ home, if not more so. All of the old folks who had become young folks, were now . . . gone folks. They were all gone. Not a trace of them was left, except that in each room, there was a small puddle of some kind of sticky substance to serve as the last remains of each of these brave and noble persons. They were quickly attracting ants, and Hector and Silas would soon have another job to do at the Pershing Old Folks’ Home.

The experts put the substance through every kind of chemical test imaginable to try to identify it. The only thing they could come up with was it was probably a cross between blueberry syrup and honey. Speculation abounded as to what happened to the folks inside. Everything from alien abduction to kidnapping by the communists was thrown about in the news. All anyone knew for sure was that these

folks were now gone forever, and all that was left to do was let the lawyers deal with the mountains of lawsuits filed by the descendants of the Pershing Old Folks' Home on behalf of the now officially deceased.

The remains of each of the now gone old folks were handed over to their next of kin. In a few cases, there was no one to even notify—no family, friends, nothing. In these cases, the state buried the forgotten old folks in cheap jars, rather than the urns that are usually used to bury cremated remains in some lonely corner of the cemetery, usually with nothing being said before the dirt was thrown in the hole to cover them.

Many of the relatives refused to accept the fact that this pound or so of sticky substance was the last remains of their loved ones, but if that's all that was left of um, that's all that was left of um. There was nothing more anyone could do. Hector was baffled by this miracle. What was its purpose? Why couldn't these people have lived longer, after becoming young again? Why couldn't they have been once again reunited with their loved ones? He didn't even have to make his transformation into Gary Cooper to bring about this miracle.

Then Hector figured it out. He reasoned to himself, *It was a mistake of nature in the first place that I had sprayed that place with some of Hector's Juice still in the bottom of the tank. It was never meant to be, it was sort of destiny's way of correcting itself.*

Hector went on to reason, *Nature had been kind to these people. They had no memory of anything past, they must have had no idea why they were here in the present, let alone what the future would hold for them. They would have had no connection to anything. There was nothing to cause them any anxiety or stress.*

Hector paused for a moment in the middle of thinking about the whole ordeal at the old folks' home. He was just sitting at the kitchen table, watching the first good steady

rain of the season come down outside. He was drinking a cup of hot chocolate that Victoria had made for him when he again thought to himself, *So when things happen around that weren't meant to be, that's when nature usually steps in and takes care of them. This must have been one of those cases. These people had lived their lives, and weren't needed in this time and place anymore. It would have thrown off the balance of everything, so nature took care of its mistake.*

So Hector had figured it all out. He started feeling much better after that period of reasoning to himself. You know, though, I helped him out a little bit. I had to find out what happened for myself, and then just relayed it over to him through his subconscious. I let him know the old folks didn't suffer like Shotwad and the others during their transformation to sticky goo. Anyway, everyone was now feeling better. The Pershing Old Folks' Home called to let Hector know that his pest control services would never be needed again. They were going to tear down the home and erect a small park and monument as a tribute to the brave and noble folks that had once lived there.

The person on the phone said the plaque on the monument was going to read:

“THIS PLAQUE IS DEDICATED TO ALL THE BRAVE OLD FOLKS THAT ONCE LIVED HERE, WHO, FOR WHATEVER REASON, ONCE AGAIN BECAME YOUNG FOLKS, EVEN IF IT WAS ONLY FOR A SHORT TIME. YOU CAN REST ASSURED THEY WILL NEVER BECOME FORGOTTEN FOLKS.”

Then they said the plaque continued to say something like this: “This plaque was dedicated by the Stockton Chamber Of Commerce,” etc, etc, etc They also said it gave special thanks to certain businesses that gave money for the memorial. And then finally, the date when it would be dedicated, January 6, 1966, came. After hanging up the phone, Hector continued to drink the hot chocolate his

mother had made him, all the while looking out the window at the steady rain.

CHAPTER 23: A WISH LIST FOR THE AGES

The years that followed 1965 would keep Hector wondering when the call for the next miracle would come. By now, he was eager to don his cowboy Gary Cooper clothes and right all the wrongs in the world. He had no idea that call wouldn't come for many, many years.

With each year that passed, he would think to himself and wonder what he could have done to change things for the better around the world.

Nineteen Sixty-Six: I sure would like to have been down in the South with all those civil rights do-gooders, marching up and down those redneck states—Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and the like. I could be down there protecting all the brothers during those freedom marches.

Nineteen Sixty-Seven: I know our boys could use some of Hector's Juice in Vietnam. I could spray just a little in each corner of that hot, humid, godforsaken country. I would have them little gooks pouring out of their tunnels and out of the jungle and surrendering faster than Silas and I could clean out a roach-infested kitchen. If nothing else, it would have taken care of the mosquitoes over there.

Nineteen Sixty-Eight: I know who really was the one behind the assassination of King down in Memphis, and it wasn't just James Earl Ray. With one little spray of juice, I could take care of that fat little faggot J. Edgar Hoover. He was more Nazi than American anyway. I would have him spilling his guts about that assassination, with some help from Hector's Juice.

Nineteen Sixty-Nine: I could have taken care of Charles Manson and his family in less time than it takes Twiggy to get out of her bathing suit.

Nineteen Seventy: I would have loved to use Hector's Juice on the assholes that opened up on all those hippie

types at Kent State. That will teach them to mess with a National Guardsman with a loaded rifle. Hell, it's dangerous enough with the damn thing unloaded. By the way, we're still in Vietnam. I sure wish that Nixon knew how quick I could end all the fighting over there. I could sure get a lot of politicians out of some deep doo.doo.

Nineteen Seventy-One: I sure wish I could have helped them at the Attica State Prison riot in New York. With just a touch of Hector's Juice, I could have had all those inmates and guards thinking it was a beautiful day in May, where everyone loves one another, and no one wants to hurt anybody. Of course, the potion would wear off as soon as everyone was back in his cell safe and sound. Then everybody would commence to bein' rowdy again.

Nineteen Seventy-Two: Another assassination attempt, this time it was that redneck governor from Alabama, George Wallace. I probably wouldn't have done nothing for that old boy. I think I would have rather protected the Israeli athletes over at the Olympics in Munich.

Nineteen Seventy-Three: Vietnam is finally slowing down. If I would have gotten the call a few years earlier, I could have saved many lives on both sides. As for what I could have done to make that year better if it was up to me, I probably would have sprayed that Watergate hearing chamber with some juice. With a little squirt from the juice, I could have filled the chamber with smoke from what would have seemed like a thousand marijuana joints. With everyone breathing that, they would soon forget what the hell they were doing there in the first place. Then Sam Ervin would adjourn the hearings, as everyone would be gettin' mighty hungry, and then everyone would go out for a burger and fries, or pizza and beer, or maybe even both.

Nineteen Seventy-Four: With nineteen seventy-four, I probably wouldn't have changed nothing. I would have pardoned that dumb doo-doo head Nixon, just so no one would have to deal with the guy anymore. One thing I would

have changed also, I would have had rather seen Ford pardon “old Tricky Dick” on another day. He pardoned him the same day Evel tried to jump the Snake River in that hunk-of-junk rocket of his, and drew attention from that idiotic stunt.

Nineteen Seventy-Five: Would have found me in the corner of Chuck Webner, the biggest underdog in boxing history. His mission: to fight the greatest fighter in the history of the world, Mohammed Ali. Come to think of it, I don’t think even Hector’s Juice would have been enough to help out old Chuck, the guy who was the inspiration for *Rocky*. Besides, he would bleed to death if he stubbed his big toe.

Nineteen Seventy-Six: The best thing I could have done for myself that year is . . . I would have sought out Dorothy Hamill and I would have used some juice as a love potion to make her fall in love with me. Now, I know I was born a dumb chemical savant, and I was supposed to have absolutely no interest in girls, but I’ll tell you, when I watched that gal skate, all that savant crap went right out the window.

Nineteen Seventy-Seven: A repeat of ’76, only this time I would have had to seek out Farrah Fawcett and “juice” her.

Nineteen Seventy-Eight: Now, this year, I would have had to find a way down to South America, to save all those brothers and sisters from being snuffed out by that crazy white boy, Jim Jones. Besides, he gave Kool-Aid a bad name.

Nineteen Seventy-Nine: I would have used some of Hector’s Juice to change the mood over in Iran, and hopefully detour that episode at the embassy. Maybe if some B-52s had bombed Tehran with thousands of Jimmy Carter dolls, that would have been enough to sidetrack the ragheads to where they would have forgotten all about the evil Americans at the embassy.

Nineteen Eighty: A repeat of '79, only instead of throwing Jimmy Carter dolls out of B-52s, I would have just thrown Jimmy Carter himself out of the plane.

Nineteen Eighty-One: In the case of '81, I think I would have tried to protect that old cowboy, President Reagan and his press secretary, Brady. He may not have been in the same league as Gary Cooper, but he did make a pretty good monkey movie and a couple of pretty good Westerns in his time.

Nineteen Eighty-Two: Can't really remember much of anything about that year . . . maybe I wouldn't have done nothing. Oh, yeah, I remember! I did see *E.T.*

Nineteen Eighty-Three: I would have to say if I could have had the opportunity to use some of Hector's Juice in Beirut, those ragheads wouldn't have been delivering a monstrous bomb to the marine barracks, but instead they would have been delivering pizzas and beer.

Nineteen Eighty-Four: The best thing that could have been done that year would be to take a flight to Africa and spray some of Hector's Juice here and there, like in Ethiopia or anywhere else that was in the grip of drought. It would have helped the crops grow for a thousand years. After all, we should be treating Africa like it's our mother; that's where we all came from in the beginning, right? Y'all remember the beginning of this book, don't you?

Nineteen Eighty-Five: Again, trouble with ragheads. This time, they hijacked a TWA flight out of Athens. Let's just say that before the flight was over, if I had my way, those Arab folks would have been flying high with Allah.

Nineteen Eighty-Six: If only I could have helped those folks that died on that Challenger flight, maybe I could have used some juice on the crew that put the O-ring in. They might have looked at it somewhat different if it was their butts going up in the damn thing.

Nineteen Eighty-Seven: Again, like in '73, I would have sprayed the chamber where the testimony of Oliver North was being heard. I would have again treated the atmosphere, this time, with about the equivalent of 10,000 joints, which would have quickly gotten everyone wondering what the hell they were doing there. After that, everyone would go out for pizza and beer, and maybe a meatball sandwich and some artichoke hearts.

Nineteen Eighty-Eight: Now, without question, I would have headed directly south to head off the burning of the rain forest in Brazil. This burning has got to stop. It would be like burning down the house you grew up in. After all, we all originally came from the rain forest.

Nineteen Eighty-Nine: Wouldn't have changed a thing. One of the greatest years of our time, or any other time. Freedom sprang from the depths of human yearning all over the world, and the Cold War ended. I don't even think Hector's Juice could have created the miracles we saw that year.

Nineteen Ninety: Again, trouble with ragheads. I guess if you had to sleep with a camel every night, you'd be a pain-in-the-ass like those Arabs, too. This time, it was that asshole in Iraq, "So Damn Insane," or whatever his name is. I would have taken him up in that same B-52 that Jimmy Carter was thrown from, and save the world from listening to that pain-in-the-rear.

Nineteen Ninety-One: Again, guess who's in the news? That's right, ragheads. I would have gone over there and forced that country to give everyone in the world free oil for a thousand years, or till our national debt is paid off, whichever one comes first. I would have also forced them to pay for that war they started. Iraq would have been the world's largest free gas station.

Nineteen Ninety-Two: I would have had to go down to L.A. and try to calm everyone before the riots. Now, talk about stupid, burning down the grocery store where you buy

your milk and bread. Not even K-Mart was sacred to those idiots.

Nineteen Ninety-Three: Waco, and that cult that followed David Crapish, or whatever, would have been No. 1 on my agenda for that year. I would have gone in disguise as a pest control guy doing a call for roaches or ants or some such thing as that. And after spraying some of the juice around, everyone would feel real mellow and want to leave that David Dipshit or whatever his name was, and then they would all go out for pizza and beer, leaving that huge arsenal of weapons for the ATF and NRA guys to play with.

Nineteen Ninety-Four: This brings me up to the present, where I just heard on the news that Nixon just died. I'm sure going to miss that guy. Now, the only I thing I know for sure that I would have changed about this year, and it's only half over, would be: I would have sent Ron Goldman over to O.J.'s, packing a sawed-off shotgun. After that, Ron and Nicole could have gone out for pizza and beer or something like that, that is, if they hadn't already eaten.

Needless to say, Hector had picked up some of my language and pessimism over the years. It does mystify me, though, because I actually have gotten much better over the years, with the language problem that is. It must have been the pool hall that Hector used to follow Silas after work. Yeah! That's got to be it, the pool hall. Not only had Hector learned to extend his vocabulary over the years, but he had also acquired a taste for beer, which probably explains all his references to beer in all his year-end wish list.

After Silas died in '76 of liver failure, Hector started drinking way too much himself. He no longer went down to the pool hall, or anywhere else for that matter. He would just get off work, buy some beer, and most nights, drink himself to sleep. He had missed Silas deeply over the years, and felt he no longer had a close friend in the world.

Victoria was still around, even though she had a severe bout with dementia in the years between '66 and '94. She

actually got so bad once that Hector had to go all the way to Italy in '80 to retrieve his mother out of an Italian sanitarium. It just so happened that Victoria had been told she resembled Sophia Loren so often that somewhere along the line, and for reasons unknown to anyone, she started believing that she was the actual Sophia Loren, and that the one in Italy was an impostor.

She wandered the streets of Rome for two weeks claiming to be the true Sophia Loren, before authorities had heard enough complaints about her and threw her into a sanitarium. Only after she started talking about relatives in California did the authorities finally contact Hector. Upon returning to the United States, she immediately entered therapy, where even until today, she goes once a month. It seems the pressure of living with and raising a savant by herself had finally reached its pinnacle in 1980, the year she went off the deep end.

Juan and Gloria, Hector's grandparents, had long since moved back to Mexico, where Juan died in '82, and Gloria, till this day, still lives with relatives. She was too senile to even remember her name, let alone have the energy or desire to visit people she would no longer remember. As for Victoria and her parents, that one lone visit they had back in the early '60s would prove to be their one and only visit. They would never come in contact with one another again.

So Hector and Victoria now found themselves alone in a time and a year when loneliness and being alone was all too common. All their friends from the old field days were now gone. They were the only family they had; they had each other. Sure they knew many people in the community, but none of them could match the closeness and rich bond that was created in years past by working with folks in the fields, and following that endless road from season to season.

There was, however, one crusty old and weathered fruit tramp that still remembered the old days of the Depression, and even before. His name was Max, and no one really knew

just how old he was. He had no birth certificate. He was a slightly built Okie, who evidently came out to California even before the great Okie migration of the Dust Bowl era.

If you asked him when he exactly came West, he would just say with a thick Okie twang, "I reckon I came out this here ways sometime between the end of that there World War I, and the time all those hungry white folks started streamin' out here. Before that, it was always some kind of brown people pickin' the fruit in this region. Either they would come from Mexico or they came from some damn kind of island in the Pacific." He didn't even know his mother or father; he did, however, remember being raised by some Mexican folks that took him in. But even the place where they took him in was up to speculation. Max felt it was someplace between Modesto and Bakersfield (good goin', Max, that sure narrows it down). At least that is what he remembers being told by his adopted mother.

He would come over just about every Sunday night to visit Victoria and Hector. He must have felt a certain bond with them, especially Victoria, for she was one of the last links he had to his past also. He had the wisdom of a sage, and an aura about him that could even spook a guardian angel like me. Now I couldn't prove it, but I swear he knew that specialness about Hector that could never be revealed to anyone.

He would always say to Victoria, "Now, you don't fret none, young lady, those fellers that gave all us folks such a hard time back in that there Depression . . . well, all I got to say about them is that they had two judgment days comin' to um—one here on earth, and the other upstairs before the Good Lord." Then he would always look over at Hector to give him a knowing smile and a little wink.

It seemed, though, that old Max had come to visit on Sundays even more in this year of 1994. He hadn't missed but maybe two or three visits during the year, and the year was just half over. His visits were like clockwork, they were

so routine. This is how they would go: He would show up about 4:30 P.M. with something to share tucked under his arm . . . beer, potato chips, soda, just about anything to get his foot in the door. And then, with the timing of a staged play, he would start talking about the old days.

Hector especially liked his stories, stories that were filled with color and a certain vividness that could only be painted by a person who had actually been there; at least, for most of them, he was. Oh, boy! And was he there. He told stories about himself riding the rails with the other hobos, from Mexico all the way to Alaska, stopping only long enough to see if this town had anything in it that the one before it didn't.

He told of the time he hunted for gold with Jack London in the Klondike. This was one of those stories where everyone, including me, thought he stretched too far. He probably wasn't even born yet during the time when he claimed he had been hunting for gold with Jack London, but it was a good story just the same. A more believable story was the one he told about the time he worked with the boxer, Gene Tunney, in '27. He got paid five bucks a week to run with Gene in the morning and do chores around the gym. In fact, he even claimed to have known Joe White when he was a young man. Remember Joe White? He was one of the old folks that became a young folk and after a while became one of the gone folks at the Pershing Old Folks' Retirement Center in Stockton.

He would say about his time working with Tunney, "Hell, they liked my little Okie butt around there so much, they even gave me an extra five bucks for emptyin' the spit bucket the night in '27 when he won that there title in Yankee Stadium."

He even had a story of the time when he was hired to work on the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco during the 1930s.

“Yup! I was one of the first hired to carry rivets up to the fellers workin’ out there on them there long spans of steel. I wasn’t too big like the other fellers, I reckon they liked me because I was wiry and had no fear of heights. Now, I don’t know exactly what happened up there one day, but I was hustlin’ up and down that steel monster just like any other day, when suddenly I slipped and fell.”

He continued. “Now, I don’t know for sure what happened, no how, but I think I was the very first person to fall from that bridge—that includes the folks over the years that were feelin’ bad and wanted to kill themselves. Actually, all I remember is the moment I slipped, and as I was fallin’, all I could see was my life passin’ before my eyes. I saw those days of emptyin’ spit buckets and ridin’ the rails and such things as that. I don’t reckon I even remember hittin’ the water. The next thing I knew I was lookin’ up at that there big fort that’s near the start of the bridge, with all these folks standin’ around lookin’ down at me. When they realized I wernt about to die, they gave me my last paycheck, and sent my sorry Okie butt down the road. I guess they figured I had enough of rivet runnin’.”

Max then headed back to the fields from which he originally came, never again to be in another line of work. There, he would toil his entire life among the cotton, cherries, peas, apples, lettuce, tomatoes, and anything else that could be cut, pulled or picked from the earth. It’s here where many people felt Max received his wisdom from Mother Nature. His year after year of living, feeling, touching, and ultimately becoming not only an observer of nature, but an intricate part of it—this is where Max was grafted to the loving arms of Mother Nature. He never married, or owned any property other than the tent he slept in. He never owned a radio, television or anything else that in his words, “would foul or mess up his reception with nature.”

He would always live alone, never in the migrant camps with all the others, and would rarely, if ever, go into town. So this was what he did year in and year out—pitch his tent in, near, or around the next crop to be harvested. He associated with the others during work hours, then headed back to his tent to spend the remaining hours of the day alone. He would, however, on occasion, come out when the camp or town had a dance or party, but this was only to show the folks that he wasn't a complete weirdo or hermit.

Now, even though Max was a hermit, he didn't live his entire life alone. He once let an Indian hobo live with him for a while. She—yes it was a she—lived with him for about two years. It was unusual for a woman to be roaming the countryside alone back then, but there was something about her that seemed to keep her safe. It was that because of that “something,” and the two-year period she lived with Max that many people think he gained some kind of supernatural powers.

Now, no one, including me, will ever know for sure what was the source of Max's powers. He must have had a guardian angel to help him, in much the same way I help Hector. This I could not verify, for I knew nothing of Max's life or the possibility that he was being guided by other forces . . . these, of course, being good forces I'm talking about.

Now, there are people that have powers that I don't even understand. But they are totally different case studies which I'm not involved with. I don't even understand everything in this spirit realm, in which I dwell, myself. There are the different holy men, and magic men, priests and gurus, witches, spiritualists and any number of other such people that claim to have powers. Some are for real and some are not. It seems that in the case of Max, he was of the former.

This woman who had lived with Max, it turned out, had been the daughter of an Indian high priest. She had lived on a reservation in South Dakota, and had hit the road at age 16

after finding out that she was pregnant. There was no way she could have faced her father with the truth about that. She had the child on her own, and left it on the doorstep of the police station in Wichita, Kansas. After that, she headed west, where she eventually met up with Max.

Now, Max was already somewhat of a self-made mystic by the time he met his Indian friend, so he didn't need much coaching to reach another level of spiritual power. He had already tuned himself in with nature and the change of the seasons; this she could tell about him right away. The one important thing she did teach him, which he could never have learned on his own (and this is something she had learned from her father), was season skipping and looking into the future. This explains how he knew there was a specialness about Hector; he had already experienced that same specialness years ago, with his Indian maiden.

That also explains the fact that he knew of Hector's connection with some of the unexplained events that had occurred in years past. Max also knew that Hector's greatest miracle of justice was yet to come, and this was before I had even told Hector about it. Now, Max's ability to skip seasons and see into the future was never one hundred percent accurate, but it was pretty damn close.

One particular Sunday in the summer of '94, Max, as usual, made one of his routine visits to see Victoria and Hector. He had brought a six-pack of tall boys to share with whoever wanted one. Max usually drank so fast that if you didn't grab one right away, you weren't going to get one. Hector was always fast enough to get at least one, though. This day Hector thought to himself that Max had that funny smell about him. That smell was marijuana, and although Hector had no knowledge of the stuff, Hector had smelled it on Max before, and occasionally amongst some of the male workers in the fields.

On these occasions when Max smelled funny, Hector did notice how Max would always jump at any offer Victoria

extended for treats. Potato chips, homemade cookies, crackers and cheese, it didn't matter; if it was edible, he liked it. One day (and I swear to God, he really did this) when he was left alone in the room by himself, and didn't think anyone would see him, he actually snuck out to the garage and stole the cat food. This, so he had something to eat with the last few crackers that were left.

On these Sundays, when Max's appetite was being driven by the funny smoke, Victoria would never invite him to stay for dinner. She knew that for whatever reason, on these visits when Max's appetite was in overdrive and he smelled funny, she couldn't cook enough food to keep him satisfied. So she politely didn't invite him, whereupon he would leave, like a puppy with his tail between his legs.

One more thing that Hector noticed about Max whenever he came around smelling funny was that he would laugh at anything, and everything. He would laugh hysterically at the commercials on television, even if they weren't funny. He would laugh at the simplest of comments that were exchanged between Hector and Victoria. He would laugh at the tragic stories on the evening news. But what Hector noticed would get Max going, more than anything else on these visits when he smelled funny, was nothing. Yes, nothing. He would sit there laughing at empty space. This led Victoria to believe that Max was going off the deep end. Yet, on his next visit, when he hadn't been smoking the funny stuff, he would show up and be just normal old Max, with no signs of insanity brewing within him. That is, if you call living most of your adult life in a tent on the edge of a tomato patch with your Indian squaw normal.

This particular Sunday was one of those when Max smelled funny, and, of course, he would be laughing at a funeral procession, if there was one to laugh at. He had just come back to the living room from the backyard, where he had just laughed, for twenty minutes, at the sight of watching Hector breaking up a fight between the dog and the cat. Max

had just sat down on the couch, still giggling over the incident, when suddenly, he became quiet.

“Did you see that?” Max asked.

“See what?” an out-of-breath Hector asked.

“That picture, or whatever it might be, that just appeared on that there wall.”

Hector said, “That wall?” Hector pointed to the wall in the living room that had nothing on it but a picture of Jesus and the Last Supper, the one Da Vinci painted. It was Hector’s favorite picture because it had all the apostles gathered around the dinner table waiting for Jesus to dish out the grub.

Max said, “Yes, that wall.” He, too, pointed at the wall with the picture of the Last Supper.

“It looked like it was a picture of some buildin’ or somethin’, and it looked like it was right close to some water,” Max said.

“It must have been shadows or something like that, Max. This time of the day, you can get some strange shadows on the wall. It could have been a car going by or a cloud overhead, or something like that.”

“Yeah, sure, young feller, that’s what I reckon it was, somethin’ like that.” Max took a deep breath, and settled further back on the couch.

Hector and Max both sat silently for nearly ten minutes, watching a meaningless travel log, when Max happened again to glance at the wall that had the picture of Jesus and the Last Supper on it. There again, only clearer now, was the vision of what seemed like a huge white building on the edge of a body of water. This time though, Max didn’t say anything, he just sat there for a moment or so to try and get a revelation from this vision.

The vision Max was seeing, and he soon realized this, was the same scene depicted in one of his season skips several

years ago. This excited Max, inwardly, because he was certain it had a connection with Hector.

“Max. Hey, Max, are you there?” Hector asked as he waved his hand in front of Max’s face.

“Yes, sir, young feller, I’m here, must of been daydreamin’ or somethin’.”

Hector said, “You saw whatever it was you saw again, didn’t you, Max?”

“Yes, Heck, I truly did see that sight again. The strangest thing I ever did see. It’s like I’ve seen it before, but I reckon I can’t remember when.”

“Can you describe it again for me, Max?”

“Sure. All I see is a great, big, old white buildin’, snuggin’ right up close to the edge of some water . . . a lake, or river, or the like. Oh, yeah, I almost forgot, I think that there buildin’ had some big walls or fences around it, somethin’ like a castle.”

This sent a chilly wave of nerves down the spine of Hector, for just two nights before, I sent a dream to Hector revealing to him his next mission. After over twenty years, Hector would once again be able to put his cowboy attire on and split into the double of Gary Cooper. In the dream, I showed him the site where his next miracle would take place. That site I showed him matched perfectly with the vision Max was seeing that afternoon on the wall next to the picture of Jesus and the Last Supper. The tall white building they both saw kissing the northern edge of the San Francisco Bay in Marin County was San Quentin State Penitentiary, and I was going to send Hector there to do a small spray job.

For now, anyway, Max wouldn’t know that the building he was seeing in his vision was San Quentin. But within a couple of days, the whole world would know. Max did, however, in his own mysterious way, know that Hector knew the identity of the building in his vision. Nothing was said, only a feeling he had. Hector also knew that Max knew that

he knew the identity of his vision. So they both just sat there and watched the rest of *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*. Max didn't say much the rest of that afternoon. He would, however, occasionally break up at the scenes (in the travel log) of some poor animal being eaten by another, or when that fella got down and wrestled with an alligator or tiger or with some other animal that would have devoured most mortals. But before he left that night, he did give Hector a wink, along with that old familiar smile.

CHAPTER 24: JUSTICE ON THE WATERFRONT

The next morning, Hector got the box containing his cowboy attire out of his closet. It had been years since he last wore the stuff, and although he would, over the years, occasionally get the stuff out and hold and touch it like a sacred gem or some other treasured personal article that you would keep safe and in a secret place, he never once put the stuff on over that period of time.

The years had been good to Hector, but like most men over the age of forty (and Hector was nearly fifty now), he had gained a few pounds, so he was in for a big surprise when he tried his treasured outfit on. He laid out everything on his bed piece by piece, in an almost ritualistic fashion, studying intently the trousers, vest, and satin shirt, before laying them out separately on the bed.

He first tried on his pants, and after suffering the pain of pinching one of his balls in the zipper, mainly because they were too tight, he quickly realized that the zipper wasn't going to go up all the way. Next, he tried on his shirt. Same problem there except he had about four buttons that he had to leave unbuttoned. As for the vest, it looked like a bad-fitting lifejacket. The only thing that still fit him at all were his boots, and even they seemed to tell him that his feet had filled out over the years. They were tight, especially if he had a pair of socks on.

So there he stood in front of the mirror on the eve of another judgment day . . . stomach hanging out over unzipped pants, wearing boots without socks because wearing them would make them too tight, and wearing a cowboy vest that made him look like he was about to go down with the Titanic. Then and there, he realized where all the years had gone. They had gone to his stomach, butt, feet, and last but not least, his head. Yes, even his hat didn't seem to fit him the way it used to.

All this, he realized, was no reason to worry. He knew he would shed this weight the moment he turned back into the double of Gary Cooper. So after a couple more prolonged looks at himself in the mirror, he undressed. After encountering some resistance from his tight-fitting clothing, he neatly put them back into the box, where they would be ready the following day.

That night, Hector sat with his mother Victoria and watched the news. The years had also been good to Victoria, although Hector knew to avoid any Sophia Loren movies on TV. Doctors told him that if she ever so much as saw a picture of Sophia Loren again, that in itself might be enough to trigger another breakdown. Needless to say, Hector was always in charge of the remote when they watched TV.

The news that night was interrupted by a fast breaking story,

O. J. Simpson was fleeing from the police in his white Ford Bronco. They both sat there quietly, amazed at this sight, neither one of them offering an opinion on why he was running, but just sitting there taking it all in, not saying a word. Both Victoria and Hector were more quiet than usual that night, as if they were on the eve of some great impending event. In fact, they were. Tomorrow would bring the single greatest stroke of justice mankind has seen in modern times.

The next morning was a Saturday, so Hector was able to get up and get out of the house without even talking to Victoria. She would always sleep a little late on the weekends. All he needed to do was load his box of clothes into that great, big, wonderful old car and head toward the destination I chose for him. The route to his destination that day would almost be identical to the route he took many years earlier to Kezar Stadium. He would take Highway 4 west of Stockton all the way to Highway 80, then go south till he hit the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge and then take that

west. That would take him directly to San Quentin State Prison.

So Hector headed out at about seven o'clock in the morning. That great, big, wonderful car was now considered a classic, and already had three rebuilt engines put in it. And although Hector had received many offers from car buffs to buy it over the years, he felt he could never part with it. It had become a part of the family, a link to his past, a "portal to remembrance."

So there he was on that warm Saturday summer morning. It was already warm enough to have the top down and let the wind blow through his hair. Hector was hungry on this particular morning, so he stopped at a roadside cafe to not only get some breakfast, but also, to take advantage of a good opportunity to change into his cowboy clothes. The cafe was in a small town called Brentwood, a crossroads town that could either be on the way to the greater San Francisco Bay area or the great San Joaquin Valley, depending on the direction you were heading.

Hector went in, ordered and ate ham and eggs, their breakfast special. After he ate, he went to their restroom and changed. That's where he made his transformation into the likeness of Gary Cooper, in a bathroom stall, in a town called Brentwood, somewhere west of Stockton but east of San Francisco. When he looked at himself in the restroom mirror, he was happy to see that old friend staring back at him. As the likeness of Gary Cooper, he hadn't aged one day in all those years. But as Hector, he had been growing old with the rest of the world.

After leaving the restroom, he paid for Hector's breakfast and headed down the road. This gave the waitresses and a few of the patrons a topic of conversation for the day—seeing the perfect double of Gary Cooper come out of their restroom, when no one saw him even go in, and then paying the bill of a man everyone saw go in that same restroom, but

no one ever saw come out. It would be the topic of much conversation that day and for many days to come.

Everything felt fine to Hector. He had a full stomach, his old familiar cowboy clothes on, and last but not least, he once again felt he had a purpose in life. That's what each and every one of these times when he was allowed to change into the double of Gary Cooper made him feel like—as if he truly had a purpose in life.

As Hector jumped into the '49 Buick, he noticed two dogs tied up in front of the gas station next door to the cafe. They were German Shepherds, so they were pretty good-sized dogs. What Hector noticed about these dogs is they were going ape shit, they wanted to get to Hector, and bad! Animals were once again attracted to Hector after he had made his transformation. Hector also noticed, as he was pulling out of the parking lot, a mother cat was in the process of delivering her kittens in the backseat of his car. She must have jumped up there while Hector was in the cafe and felt that this would be a good place to have her kittens.

As Hector slowly moved down the road, looking periodically over his shoulder at the cat having her kittens, he happened to glance in the rearview mirror and noticed that the two big German Shepherds had broken their bonds and were chasing his car. The chase quickly came to an end, as both dogs were hit by a large truck. Hector saw the whole episode happen in his rearview mirror, and actually pulled over for a moment so he could regain his composure. After settling down and realizing nothing could be done about the dogs, Hector glanced in the back seat and saw mom and her kittens were doing just fine. It didn't take her long to have them. After that, Hector was once again on his way.

There was hardly any traffic on the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge that summer morning. This morning the usually busy bridge had a strange calmness about it, though. As Hector got to the midspan of the bridge, he noticed a dark cloud off to his left in the distance. As he got closer, Hector noticed

that the cloud was composed of seagulls, tens of thousands of seagulls . . . so many seagulls they showed up on the local airport radar. They were circling over San Quentin; they were waiting for Hector.

This Saturday summer morning also brought a strange calmness to me. I've learned over the years to rarely think of the possibility of ever seeing Hugo, my brother, again. Too much time has passed, and I feel it's my destiny to forever be confined to the earthly gravitational pull of this planet.

My thoughts this particular morning were especially centered on Hector, and the great service he has done for all of mankind. He had done his role without question, and in the meantime, went from being a withdrawn savant to a self-supportive, productive member of society. I found myself feeling so proud of Hector. I felt that pride only once before, and that was millions of years ago when Hugo and I helped mankind get up and running. It's that parental kind of pride, when you see your kid growing up.

Sure, over the years I've helped so many folks I can't even begin to count them all, but Hector, yep! He has got to be my favorite. His family went through the Depression, fought and won World War II, and helped build the country you all enjoy living in today. Now, Hector is doing his part to help carry out justice for folks that cry out from their graves for it.

As Hector left the bridge and approached the prison, it was as if he was reliving the dream in which I showed him the vision of San Quentin. The only difference was the thousands upon thousands of seagulls that lined the white walls of this now strangely quiet prison. There were not only seagulls there to greet Hector as he got out of that great, big, wonderful old car; it seemed that from the hills surrounding the prison all sorts of other critters came out to see what was disturbing the senses that only animals such as they have. There were jackrabbits, gophers, tree and ground squirrels, foxes and coyotes, bob cats and mountain lions; even stray dogs and house cats found their way to the prison to greet

Hector. Hell! There was even a monkey hanging from the gate where they bring in all the prisoners.

Hector stood there for a moment, in front of these legions of different critters. It was as if they were there to just see, hear, and smell this strange human that gave off these—at least to them—irresistible vibrations. Hector also had the feeling as he stood there, alone in front of all those animals, that he should be giving a speech or something; they seemed rapt with attention at the mere presence of this strange human being. He felt powerful for the first time in his life, as if he was a military general or something. And he, if he so desired, could actually order this army of animals to do battle for him. And strangely, just for a moment, this whole scene that was laid out before Hector, made him compare his situation with the beginning of the movie *Patton Hell!* There was even an English bulldog there to sniff him as he walked by, the same kind of dog Patton had in the movie, and in his real life.

But, instead of going to war for him, they merely moved aside, as he approached them after getting his spray tank from the car, to make a path that led to the prison entrance. Except for an occasional sniff from an overcurious critter, or a visit on Hector's shoulder by one of the many different bird types that gathered, none of the animals touched him.

As Hector approached the gate, he noticed that it was wide open.

“Stop right there, cowboy, or you might just be joinin’ us in hell this day,” a voice from the other side of the gate yelled. Hector stopped short of the gate, unable to get a view of who or what was on the other side.

The voice again yelled, “Keep comin’, cowboy, and let us see if you’re the one we were expecting today. They said he would look a might like Gary Cooper.” Hector moved more slowly this time, wary of what he might see on the other side of the gate. As he went through the threshold of the main gate, he saw a huge group of men gathered. These men

obviously were inmates, but something was different about them, something that Hector couldn't quite put his finger on.

The man who had been doing the talking stepped up to the front of the group.

He said, "I haven't had the privilege of takin' a breath of air since May 2, 1960." Then it suddenly dawned on Hector, having been a prison history buff all his life and knowing most of the important execution dates from years past, that the man he was talking to was Caryl Chessman, a man who had been dead for over thirty years.

Then Caryl said, "They sure weren't lyin' when they said you would look like old Gary Cooper. Damn! You could have screwed his old lady and she wouldn't have known the difference. That is, if you also had the same size pecker he had down below. And seein' that everything else about you matches old Gary Cooper perfectly, I reckon what you got in your britches would be the same, too." The group behind him broke out in laughter.

Then from the crowd gathered, came one of the four women that were in the group.

"Oh, baby! I haven't seen a cowboy with a butt as tight as yours since they brought me to this joint October 14, 1953."

Hector thought to himself, *Now, who could this be?* Then he realized that this woman was the foulmouthed tramp that was executed on June 3, 1955 . . . Barbara Graham. They later made a movie about her, *I Want to Live*, starring Susan Hayward in the main role. It was one of Hector's favorites.

Hector then took a step backward, and took a long look at the group. *That explains the difference in the prison clothing they all had on*, Hector thought. All these people are dead, but they all come from different eras of the prison's history. Hector was right, what was gathered before him was the over four hundred people that had been executed behind the walls of San Quentin since the first execution occurred there on March 3, 1893.

Hector looked at Barbara Graham and said, “You know, Miss Graham, they made a movie about you shortly after you were executed.”

All the filthy mouth Miss Graham could say to Hector, in reply, was, “Baby boy, if I could be in a movie with you, well, let’s just say the things I would do to you couldn’t be seen by the general public.”

Caryl Chessman spoke, “She’s just one of the four bitches that died here over the years. So you figured it out, didn’t you, cowboy?”

I hadn’t explained to Hector exactly what his mission would be that day at San Quentin, but in just a moment, Caryl Chessman was going to.

Caryl said, “You have been sent here to finish a job the judicial system in this state can’t seem to do, and that is to get rid of all the backlog on death row. This death row is like one big backed-up bowel movement; it needs to take a shit but can’t. Everyone here did the crime [Caryl points to the group behind him] and we paid the price. We’re dead, and we’re never goin’ nowhere again.” Hector stood spellbound listening to this man, who, in life, had the IQ of a genius and the morals of a degenerate.

“Look at little Jose there,” Caryl pointed at Jose Gabriel, the first man ever executed at San Quentin. “That little bastard killed a man in San Diego in October 1892, and in March 1893, the little cocksucker was hangin’ by the end of a rope. Now, look at that little prick over there,” Caryl pointed to William Edward Hickman, a young man who must have been around twenty on the date of his execution. “That worthless scumbag kidnapped, fucked, and chopped up a twelve-year-old girl. He was sent here March 17, 1928, and on October 19, 1928, the world had one less turd stinkin’ it up. By the way, the day they brought him in here [St. Patrick’s Day], he didn’t get no corned beef, but he sure as hell got corn-holed.” Caryl was the only one that laughed at

that. Probably because it brought back some painful memories for everyone gathered.

“Then, there was that old boy over there,” Caryl pointed at Gordon Stewart Northcott. “He liked makin’ boys do perverted things with him, then after he was through with them, he did a real messy thing—he chopped their heads off. That white trash was brought in here February 1929. On October 2, 1930, the last perverted thought went through that boy’s head.”

Hector looked over at Barbara Graham who was licking her lips and looking him up and down. Hector felt an odd attraction to this woman, and actually felt embarrassed at the thought that this was the first woman in his life he felt he probably could actually have sex with . . . and she was dead. You see, Hector, as I said before, never developed the normal sex drive, and stayed a virgin all his life.

Hector’s attraction to her was becoming obvious to Caryl, because he said, much to Hector’s embarrassment, “Boy, I think she’s wise to that there rise in your Levis.” Hector then put both of his hands in front of his crotch, to block the view of the obvious source of his embarrassment. Caryl then said while chuckling to himself, “Don’t worry, boy, it happens to the best of us. At least, you like women. I can’t say that about the rest of the idiots standing around here.”

Then Chessman said, “Now, my fine cowboy, by now you might be wonderin’ what I’m gettin’ at?” Hector didn’t say a word, he just stared at Chessman. For the first time on one of these missions, he really didn’t feel comfortable. Being amongst all these dead criminals, and that Barbara Graham. He didn’t know what to make of her.

“Do you have any idea what I’m gettin’ at, boy?” Chessman said with a suddenly more forceful voice. Hector gave a slow, careful nod yes. “Good,” Chessman said. “The point is this: in our day, especially in the beginning, when they put us behind these walls and slid us down here on death row, we knew that within one year, two at tops, justice

was going to be done, and the poor taxpayers wouldn't have to give us three squares and a place for us to sleep no more. Me—I'm one of the exceptions. It took them twelve years to finally gas me. I guess it was because I'm so goddamned good-looking. At least, they didn't stretch my neck out. They did away with hangin' in '38; they gassed my sorry ass."

Chessman went on, "Now, as you can see, cowboy, we have a small window here that has been made for us. All the guards are sound asleep, and the rest of the general prison population is off fucking each other, I guess. Just kidding. They're fast asleep in their cells, unaware of anything and everything that's goin' on. The general population is not what we're after today, just the death row scum. Although that Charlie Manson should be down there, along with that little raghead Sirhan Sirhan. They're both

fast asleep, too."

Hector said, "Well, Caryl, what do you want from me?"

"What we want from you, cowboy, is that sprayer with Hector's Juice in it. We're all goin' to march down there, all four hundred and some odd number of us, and spray them sons-of.bitches with that shit, and get rid of them forever, just like the world once did to us."

"But Caryl, I'm the one who needs to spray the stuff, or it won't work," Hector said with an almost frantic edge to his voice.

It was true, though, I wanted Hector to allow these long-dead condemned souls be the judge, jury and executioner of their peers, most of whom should have joined them in death years ago.

Hector felt a real hesitancy to give Caryl the sprayer, but when Caryl said, "Look, cowboy, you either turn that sprayer over to us right now, and let us go down to that death row and take care of business, or I'll sick Barbara on you, and she's been known to fuck better men than you to death. Now, give it over." Caryl didn't have to say another thing, just

bringing up the name of Barbara Graham convinced Hector to turn over the sprayer.

So Hector turned the sprayer filled with Hector's Juice over to Caryl Chessman.

"That's a good cowboy," Caryl said. "Now, you can just sit down there and wait for us, or you can come along, but just stay out of the way. The choice is up to you." Hector decided to just sit and wait. Hector just sat there and watched the procession that represented over one hundred years of executions go by, following Caryl Chessman, one of the few men ever executed but never killed anyone. As they passed, Hector did notice something that each and every face had in common. It was a look of quiet thankfulness. A look that said, "I didn't die in vain, that by me dying, the world is a better and safer place. That in order for my death to have meant anything, we must continue to take out the garbage." Hector saw that look on each and every one of their faces. It was as if only in death did their lives have any meaning, and this was their time to pay back society.

The whole prison was in a sort of state of suspended animation. Nothing moved, everything and everyone were fast asleep, unaware of the great deed of justice that was about to take place. Guards were asleep at their posts, and all but the prisoners on death row were sound sleep. I guess most were dreaming of their crimes past or great and wonderful crimes yet to be committed. After today, though, most of the general prison population will more than likely be considering another line of work, once they leave the walls of San Quentin behind them.

Each gate and door they passed through had no need for a key; all were wide open for the avenging ghosts that once walked these same halls as living souls. Walking across the exercise yard leading to the cells on death row, the inmates that were confined to death row knew something was up. They had been yelling for the guards or anyone for more than an hour, with no response. They had been talking through

the bars to one another about the possibility of a prison break or riot in progress.

Why was it so quiet? they thought.

Where are the guards?

Why won't they answer?

One guy, who was a born-again Christian, thought to himself, *Maybe it's the end of the world. Maybe Jesus is coming back today.* He was right in a way; it was judgment day for these guys.

Then one of the guys on death row said, "Shut the fuck up and listen." Silence fell over the cell block.

One guy said, "Listen, listen to that. What is it?"

Another guy said, "It sounds like the sound of footsteps, lots of um." He was right. The avenging ghosts would soon be at the last spot they were at before they died.

The door that led to death row swung open with a bang. Caryl yelled, "Let go of your cocks, and grab your socks! It's time to meet your maker, boys." As Chessman yelled, he violently shook the spray can containing the magical Hector's Juice.

"Who the fuck are you?" was asked by one of the voices behind the bars.

Chessman said, "No, dumb fuck, the question should be, who the fuck are we? The rest of the boys and girls are right behind me. You got to excuse them, they're a little slow. You see the joints don't move so good after you've been dead awhile."

"All right then," the same voice said, "who the fuck are all of you?"

"My name is Caryl Chessman," just then the rest of the huge crowd of dead people started to emerge behind Caryl, "and we are here to finish what the state of California

obviously doesn't have the balls to do, and that's to get rid of filth like you once and for all."

"You say you're Caryl Chessman?" the same lone voice from behind the bars asked. "If you're Caryl Chessman, then you're dead. I still hear the old timers talk about you."

Caryl says, "Boy, it's a damn shame how such a bright young man like yourself has to end up like this. Of course, I'm dead! I've been dead for thirty-four mother fucking years! And all these boys and girls behind me are fucking dead, too, just like you're goin' to be in a few fucking minutes."

Then several other voices yelled from further down the row and from behind the bars, "You can't do that, my case is up for an appeal," said one voice.

Another said, "You won't get away with this, the warden here is one tough sum-bitch." This brought a huge roar of laughter from the now gathered group of death rowers behind Caryl.

Caryl said, "Now boy, think about it. What can they do to a dead man? They executed me here, right goddamned here, before you were so much as a wet spot in your daddy's trousers. Now, you all have chosen the life you have wished to lead, and with choices come consequences. All of the boys and girls behind me have paid the price for their evil deeds, now it's your turn." After that, it was surprisingly quiet throughout death row. No one said anything in response to what Chessman had just said. It was if all the condemned men there had come to terms with the reality that it was their time to pay for the bill they rang up on society. And not only the bills they rang up on the taxpayers of the state, but the terrible price to be paid for the ravaged lives of their victims. It, in many ways, might have been truly the first and only real peaceful moment in their tormented lives . . . to finally be able to turn off the lights on these dark rooms that had been their lives.

Now, as Caryl started down the long stretch that was death row, it still remained quiet. It was if they were individually taking communion from a priest. It was so quiet. As many of the dead souls that could follow Caryl down the small corridor of death row did. They wanted to be witnesses to the executions. The only noise that broke the eerie silence was the occasional guttural screams coming from one of the criminals being executed. I mean, they were all dying in the same manner as the other victims of Hector's Juice. They were being cooked from the inside out, and melted down to a puddle of sweet sticky goo.

Within minutes, nearly all the cells had been sprayed, only a few remained. And then, it happened. The spray tank that contained Hector's Juice started the inevitable, it was starting to spit air; the tank was almost empty.

"That's the last of the shit, and we still have four of these shit-for-brains to do," Caryl said, as he shook the now empty tank. "Here, let those last sorry fucks out of their cells, I know what to do with um." Caryl threw the keys to Barbara the whore. Caryl said, "We're goin' to test out the gas chamber. After all, it's not fair that we got to take a ride in it, and they don't." Barbara Graham opened the last four remaining cells containing the condemned inmates. All four of the men, almost in unison, started bawling like babies.

Caryl said, "Well, now, doesn't that just break your heart? Now, you will know what your victims felt like the moment you pulled the plug on their lives." None of the remaining men would leave their cells voluntarily. They each had to be yanked out of their cells, and dragged down to the gas chamber.

One of the dead souls said, "Caryl, we got a problem here. There's only two seats in this here gas chamber."

Caryl said, "You limp dicks, you're as dumb in death as you were in life, just throw all four of their sorry asses in there at once. We'll just make up the difference with more gas."

As the four men were being brought up to the chamber entrance, Caryl stopped them and said, "Now, I'm very sorry boys, but there's only enough seats in there to accommodate two of you. Now, you be good fellows now and don't fight over them."

With that, Caryl gave them each a swift kick in the butt as they were being thrown into the chamber with the door slamming behind them.

Caryl said, "Now, does anyone here know how to operate this thing? I know we all know how to die in it, but does anyone know how to operate it?" Just then, a small man that went by the name Robert Wells stepped from the group of dead souls. "I know how to operate it," Wells said, "I helped build it." And in reality, he actually did. He was only four feet ten inches and had been an expert at precise mechanical assembly. So he was the right man to connect the complex rods, pipes, tubes and set the gauges for the chamber.

"Just get me these things." Wells handed Chessman a list of things he would need. "And leave me the hell alone. I work best alone."

Caryl said to himself, "Bossy little prick, isn't he?"

Caryl got him the sulfuric acid and cyanide he would need for the job. And then went out with the other death rowers to the exercise yard to wait for Robert to finish the job.

Within about a half hour, out walked the bossy little prick otherwise known as Robert Wells.

"Well, is the job done? Have they all paid for their crimes?" Caryl asked.

Wells said, "They're all dead. Those four guys were flopping around in that chamber like fish thrown out on the deck of a deep-sea fishing boat. They, for sure, won't be causing anybody no more grief here on this planet."

“What do you want to do now?” a voice asked from the crowd of dead souls that were now gathered in the exercise yard.

Caryl said, “We’ll wait for them, they will be out in a minute or two.” Just then the door that led to death row swung open and out came the unspecified amount of just executed men.

“Well, get your sorry dead asses out here, and join the ranks of dead ex-cons who finally got what was comin’ to ‘um,” Caryl said. They all wandered out, slowly and cautiously like kids on their first day of school. When the last of the new dead finally came out, Caryl turned and led the group out of the exercise yard, and back to where Hector had been waiting.

As the now much larger group approached Hector, who had been waiting patiently, Caryl said, “Well, cowboy, justice has been served, but I guess it won’t take long for them to fill death row up again. Shit, cowboy, next time mix more of that shit, I ran out and had to gas the last four in the chamber. I know I can’t speak for everyone here, but I sure as hell can speak for myself, and I just want to say thanks.”

Hector said, “Thanks for what?”

“I’m just sayin’ thanks for the opportunity to walk the grounds of San Quentin again. In a way, I feel like I’ve finally done some good for society. I think the rest of this sorry group feels the same.” The whole group seemed to nod their heads “yes” in unison. Hector turned around to look through the gate and see if his car was still where he had parked it. When he turned back around, the huge group of San Quentin executed were gone. Back to wherever they came from, and never to be back here again.

Hector just stood there for a moment, listening to the wind bounce off the cold, lonely walls, just listening and trying to comprehend the enormity of the event that had just taken place. Just then he heard a groan. It was one of the

Department of Corrections officers coming to. That was it, all the guards and the regular prison population would soon be awake, and things would be back to normal. Except for the guys that had been on death row, that is.

So Hector turned and walked through the main entrance that led out of the prison. And even though he was still in the image of Gary Cooper, all the animals that had greeted him when he first arrived, were now gone. Hector jumped into that great, big, wonderful old car and headed home. For some reason, though, Hector had the strange feeling that this would be the last time he would ever wear his cowboy stuff.

Hector was no more than a quarter mile past the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge when he looked at himself in the rearview mirror and discovered he had changed back to Hector. Suddenly, Hector had this overwhelming compulsion to get his cowboy stuff off, so he immediately pulled off to the side of the freeway and stripped. This obviously attracted some attention from passersby. It's not everyday you see a naked cowboy driving down the interstate.

This was the first time Hector had actually hated the job I sent him out to do. He didn't like himself, he felt dirty, and had to get those clothes off. He felt exposed and ashamed with those clothes on, so he took them off, so he could really expose himself. You figure it out. I wished, in the worst way, that I could console Hector, but there are times when the right thing to do isn't the easiest to stomach.

Hector drove the rest of the way home buck naked, and on the way, had gotten terribly burnt, especially on his privates. Hector parked at the back of the house and went in through the back door.

Victoria yelled from the front room, "Is that you, Heck? You should hear this news report that's just coming out from San Quentin."

Hector didn't say a word. He just walked directly to his room, jumped into bed and promptly went to sleep. The

trauma of the whole event had taken its toll on him. Victoria came into his room to see if everything was all right.

“Honey, is everything okay? You were on that side of the bay today, did you notice anything going on in the San Quentin area?” Victoria walked closer to Hector’s bed and then realized that he was sound asleep. It was only four in the afternoon. *He must not be feeling too well*, she thought. She felt his head with the back of her hand. *He felt pretty warm, she thought, he seems to have gotten a lot of sun.* With that, Victoria left the room, although before leaving she opened his window, to let some cool air in, and closed the shades slightly to darken the room.

Victoria eagerly went back to the television to hear the latest about this bizarre story. Virtually all the regularly scheduled programming had been interrupted to bring the story to the public. For the next week, every major network had its main news anchor person on site at San Quentin, giving up-to-date reports about this weird happening. However, unlike in years past, this event would not be covered by Huntley and Brinkley, or Walter Cronkite. Huntley had died years ago, and Brinkley and Cronkite were years past their primes as anchor men. That left it up to the likes of Dan Rather for CBS, Tom Brokaw for NBC, and Peter Jennings for ABC, along with CNN, to cover one of the biggest stories of the second half of the twentieth century.

What made unraveling this mystery even all the more difficult was the absolute non-existence of a single eyewitness. None of the guards or members of the general prison population had any memory of anything. The only thing reported that was out of the ordinary that day by any person that lived in the area was the strange gathering of seagulls around San Quentin. So “The Great Mystery of ’94,” remained just that . . . the great mystery of ’94.

What was reported was how every man, except for the four who died in the gas chamber, had disappeared, leaving only a puddle of sticky substance in each of their cells as

their only remains. Even this could not be confirmed as human remains, for not even a trace of human DNA could be found in the separate globs. What they did end up having was one of the biggest ant problems anyone could imagine or remember. Virtually every kind of ant that was from that area could be found trying to gobble up the gooey substance. There were argentine ants, carpenter ants, odorous house ants, crazy ants, pharaoh ants and little black ants. There were pavement ants, and last but not least, fire ants. The fire ants ended up spreading to other areas of the prison, stinging and raising hell with the other prisoners. Just about every pest control outfit in Marin County was kept busy for a month, trying to get rid of the ant problem.

So, except for the old sage Max who would occasionally give Hector a knowing smile, as if he knew something the rest of the world didn't, the world would never have so much as a clue as to what happened that Saturday in the summer of '94. Again, many religious people thought it was the beginning of Armageddon or the prelude to the final judgment. Others thought they had been killed by a citizen militia group, who wanted to get the ball rolling on death row. Some even thought it was a conspiracy by segments of the Department of Corrections to get rid of some of their most vile inmates. Even the theory that they had been abducted by aliens came up. This theory, though, always seemed to come up when no other good explanation could be found. The effect, however, on the general prison population was a positive one. Sexual assaults, fighting, drug use, and the other popular pastimes of some of the worst inmates fell off drastically. A full eighty-five percent of the prison population found some kind of religion, figuring they better make their peace with the Almighty before whoever or whatever that got those other fellers decides to come back for them. Even Charles Manson could be found on Sunday mornings in the church chapel singing "Amazing Grace" out loud.

Weeks past, and just as Caryl Chessman had predicted, the cells on death row once again started filling up. The mystery of the “Death Row Massacre,” as it came to be known, faded to the back pages of the newspapers. Within weeks, it was nothing more than the topic of those sorry jokes you hear at work, or on late night TV. Hector, though, never really got over the funk the event had put him in. He had even started drinking again, and playing pool at the hangout he and Silas used to haunt. As for me, it was the first time since I started working with Hector that I really couldn’t communicate with him. This only put me in a funk, which made things worse for the two of us.

I had even given up all hope of ever becoming an escort angel.

I suppose I’ve been here on this earth too long and was considered too tarnished by now to ever move on to anything else. All I did in the weeks that followed the San Quentin incident was watch Hector get up, do his work out in the shop, then go down to the pool hall, get drunk, then go home and pass out. Then he would get up the next morning and start the routine all over again. The both of us were in a rut, and a guardian angel isn’t supposed to get in a rut.

Even Victoria could see a profound difference in Hector, which dated back exactly to the San Quentin incident. Victoria, though, was too old and senile to make any connection. Victoria was well into her seventies by now, and would always be nagged by the dementia that originally led to her breakdown in the first place. So this made her of little help to Hector. She would, however, ask him, “What’s wrong, Heck? I can tell you’re not yourself, even an old demented old lady like me can see that.”

All Hector would say is, “Everything is fine, Mom. I’m just doing fine.” And then she would just stare off into space.

Mostly, Hector just thought about the old days. He would think of Clint and Silas, and the trips Clint, his mom, and he would take together in that great, big, wonderful old Buick.

He would think back on the trip to Tombstone, when he first met Wyatt Earp and discovered his purpose in life. He also thought about Hank Shotwad and his trip to San Antonio to avenge the death of JFK, and his encounter with his relatives' tormentors at Kezar Stadium: Harold Simmons, Jake Whitmore and Clive Osburne. He thought also of Caryl Chessman and the empty dead faces of the rest of those dead inmates that followed him through San Quentin. The one that really got to him though was Barbara Graham and the way she came on to him. No woman had ever given Hector that much attention in his life as she had in the brief encounter they had that day, and she was dead. I mean there's not much of a future for a relationship when one of the persons involved is dead. But what had really staled Hector, and had put him in this funk that he now found himself in, was the eradication of so many people at San Quentin. Even though it was the right thing to do, it was just too much for Hector to handle. They were cleaned off the planet like some bad pests, never to bother anyone again. To be exact, there were 438 inmates that joined Caryl Chessman in death that day. That was at press time.

So Hector felt used up as a human being; he knew his purpose in life was over. He felt as lonely as an unused ticket, yearning to once again see friends and family that long ago passed on. One late summer night, in that same year of '94, Hector was following his normal routine. He had finished work, ate a little supper with Victoria, and then headed down to the pool hall to drink beer and watch the locals argue. Although tonight, before leaving, he uncharacteristically came over to his mother and gave her a kiss and said, "I love you, and you know, Victoria," he rarely called his mother Victoria, "you've been one great Mom, and I love you a bunch. Don't wait up for me, I'll see you later."

Victoria said, "Good night honey, have fun." It was as if she really didn't hear the subtle finality in his voice. Even I didn't understand the simple and uncharacteristic sense of

peace that Hector displayed. It was as if Hector had made peace with himself, and knew he would soon rest.

So off he went. He hiked the four blocks to the pool hall, looking at every house, tree, and place he would want to remember, as if this would be the last time he would see them. And in reality, it was. People he would have otherwise ignored, out of shyness, not cold-heartedness, he said a warm hello to. And every familiar and unfamiliar dog and cat he passed by, he gave a pat on the head. Even the ones that wouldn't let him pet them, stood there and listened to him talk to them in his friendly cooing voice.

He himself walked with a light crispness that days before, would have been unheard of. This new, gentle, cool feeling could not be explained by even Hector himself. Even he couldn't explain this overwhelming feeling of finality that filled him. He was at peace, and that was all that mattered.

He walked on till he saw the sign that held the name of the pool hall, "Joe's Pool Hall." Hector entered and sat in his usual place in the far end of the establishment, at a lone table in a corner that caught little light. It was near a pool table, though, so Hector would see and feel some of the action the place would usually generate. Although Hector had been and was now a regular, he never had much to say to the other regulars that hung out there. He was content to sit back, eavesdrop on conversations around him, and then drink himself into a pleasant stupor. This night was different, however. Upon entering, he had a hardy hello for everyone. He bought a round for the house, which consisted of four losers at the bar, and a couple of chicks in tight jeans that were playing a game of pool at the other end of the pool hall.

Everyone tipped their glasses in Hector's direction to show their appreciation for the drinks, and then went back to whatever was occupying them before the drinks came.

The bartender said to one of the losers at the bar, "Hector's acting a little strange tonight, don't you think?"

The loser replied, “Any guy that buys me a drink can’t be all bad, besides . . . who’s Hector?” The bartender gave the loser a disgusted look. He knew this guy knew Hector, this guy had worked for Hector several times in the past. The bartender, though, was used to conversing with people that could hardly remember their own names at certain times of the day. The bartender just stood there drying off beer mugs and studying Hector from a distance, trying to see any hint in his behavior that would give him a clue as to what was different about him this night.

An hour passed and more of the usual crowd started passing through the door of “Joe’s Pool Hall.” Some of them were regular losers that hung out there, others just normal folks that just thought a game of pool would break the routine of everyday living. Whatever their motives were for being there, they were starting to fill the place up. This night, however, saw four men that were strangers to everyone take up occupancy at the pool table that was closest to Hector’s table. The group consisted of two Mexicans and two white men; all four looked as if they just had been dug out of one of the many irrigation ditches that could be found in the area. They looked rough and dirty, and boy, did they stink!

They started drinking and cussing. They even farted enough to cause the people that were in that end of the pool hall to move to where it didn’t stink so bad. That just left Hector and the four pigs as the only occupants of that end of the pool hall. Nobody in the establishment wanted to confront the four slobs, so they just continued their offensive behavior. They did not so much as even noticed Hector sitting there, but then one of them looked over and saw Hector eyeballing them.

“What are you looking at, you Mexican dickhead?” This comment came from one of the white trash. Hector said nothing.

“Well, dickhead,” he said again, “don’t you have anything to say for yourself?”

Hector finally said, “I don’t talk to turds, I make them.” The three other slobbs looked at each other with stunned amazement, and then after a few seconds, broke out with uncontrollable laughter. The guy that was insulted just stood there with his mouth open wide enough that it would have caught a fly or anything else that would have passed by.

After a moment, the guy broke his silence, “I like this Mexican asshole.” And then he went over and patted Hector on the back. The white slob bought Hector a beer, and then everything settled down and went back to normal.

Then after the alcohol started taking effect, the four creeps started arguing about anything and everything. They argued about who could belch the loudest, or whose fart stunk the worst.

They even started wrestling around on the floor. This finally brought a warning from Joe, the owner, “You fellers best knock that roughhousing off before somebody gets hurt.” They stopped, but when Joe turned to walk back to the bar, they just gave him the finger and laughed.

Then things calmed down a bit. Then out of nowhere, the four slobbs brought up a subject that immediately perked Hector’s attention—the Alamo. The white guys would say how Santa Anna and all his men were nothing but a bunch of pussies, and how it took 6,000 of those taco benders thirteen days to finally whip the gringos’ asses. Then the Mexican fellas would say how dumb those gringos must have been to fight to the death for some old falling-apart-piece-of-shit church like the Alamo in the first place.

Then one of the Mexican fellas looked over at Hector and said, “Hey, homeboy, you’re a brother Mexican, what do you think about the Alamo?” All Hector could think of to say, after listening to what had to be the four dumbest, most vulgar, most un-human people he had ever met in his entire life, was (and that includes Hank Shotwad from San Antonio, and Harold Simmons, Jake Whitmore and Clive Osburne from the Imperial Valley Associated Farmers Group, and all

the long-ago executed people he met at San Quentin), “You four worthless turds couldn’t shovel the horse shit for the lowest private in either one of those proud armies.”

What happened after those words of truth was something I wasn’t ready for. Without any warning or provocation, other than the fact Hector told those worthless slobs the truth, one of the four slobs, I think it was one of the white guys, came over and slammed a pool cue right across Hector’s right temple, or was it his left? Anyway, it doesn’t matter. The incident caused instant chaos. The three other slobs jumped on their friend to try and calm the situation. As for the other patrons, they immediately turned on the four lowlifes, roughing them up pretty good before the police arrived. And as for Hector, a couple of people in the pool hall that knew something about first aid tried to help him, but to no avail. Hector’s skull was smashed like a ripe watermelon. The only thing anyone could do was close his eyes and cover him until the ambulance arrived.

Something else happened in all that commotion which I wasn’t ready for, something I had been waiting three and a half million years for. Amidst all the commotion, I didn’t even realize that there was someone else standing right next to me looking down on that tragic scene, someone needing some help. That

person needing that help happened to be Hector.

“Can you help me, sir?” Hector asked.

I looked at him with stunned amazement, then I said with a tear in my eye, “You bet I can.”

Then Hector heard a voice that was familiar, but one he hadn’t heard in many years. It was Clint. And his uncles Silas and Victor were there, too, along with the father he never knew, Samson. They were all there to greet him and help take him past the next boundary that leads to that starry path. But what surprised the hell out of me, if you could excuse my language, was that out of nowhere came someone

I hadn't seen in nearly a million years. It was Wilma, and she looked just fine. She was jumping around with joy, and with more athleticism than any athlete you would see today. And then I heard a voice that was familiar, a voice I hadn't heard since the last time I saw Wilma.

It was my brother Hugo. He said, "I just about gave up on you, brother, but I knew, in the end, you would make it. Those screwy little hairy guys have sure come a long way since the last time I saw you."

With that, I chuckled and said with more tears welling in my eyes (sorry I get emotional), "They sure have, Hugo, they sure have." We all then took each other's hands (most everyone did this reluctantly, seeing as big tough men don't hold hands) and walked. It wasn't as if we were walking in any one direction in particular, but rather it was more like we were walking from what "once was." As for the light, it just showed us the way that led from "once was," to where the used energy, and the folks that contained that energy, are needed in the future.

Then out from behind us came two separate voices. One yelled, "Hey, aren't you gonna wait for us two old cowboys?"

And the other yelled, "I do reckon it's time I'll be meetin' that there Hector fella face to face. Ain't he the young feller that was walkin' around down there as my double after I passed on?"

Both voices respectively belonged to Wyatt Earp and Gary Cooper. They were both there to greet Hector, and had been looking forward to this moment for some time. They both greeted Hector with the same enthusiasm they had in life. And after a short visit, they, too, joined the others on their walk to eternity.

So that was it. My journey down the evolutionary river that is man's history was complete. I had followed man from the Great Rift Valley of Africa, to the Great Central Valley of California, only in the end to become more fond of him as

time went by. The one thing, though, I most admired and envied about mankind were the families they had. You see, I went through the eons alone. With a family, you have people to go through time with. Then it dawned on me, as we were all walking along hand in hand, that I had a family, that they were there all the time; it was just this was the first time we were all together. From Wilma to Hector, they had been my family. Then I noticed Hector had turned to look back at the place he had just left, I knew he was concerned for the mother he left behind.

I said, "Don't worry, someone will watch over her." Hector then looked over at me and smiled.

The End