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“Yea...uh...yes, they are,” Frank answered, hardly aware that he was even speaking as he stared out the window. For some reason he couldn’t remember what the actual question had been. *Something about his shoes* he thought, but at that particular moment he really wasn’t sure.

“Had a pair once me self,” came the bulleted response. “Just like those, actually.” The man continued speaking to him as he looked down and pointed in the direction of Frank’s feet. “Loved ‘em dearly, very comfortable.” The statements were delivered in short, staccato spurts and Frank watched out of the corner of his eye as the man punctuated his remarks with a smart nod.

He was lost. Pulling his gaze from the distant stare out the window, Frank turned to face the man directly. He turned to face the man that had just spoken to him—or more accurately—had *been* talking to him. Frank felt a tinge of discomfort as the slight and tidy man looked earnestly at him, wagging his finger in the direction of his shoes.

He had absolutely no idea who this guy was or why he was talking to him in the first place. But right now this guy’s identity and motivation were the least of his worries. What was playing heavily in the foreground of his consciousness was the realization that, besides not knowing how or why he’d started talking to this complete stranger, he had no idea *where* he was either.

“Don’t know what ever became of them,” the stranger spoke comfortably as if they’d been old friends just passing the time together. “Just *not there* one day.” The man cupped

his hand and made a flapping motion like pigeons taking flight from a crowded sidewalk.

“Probably thrown out by the missus, I’d imagine. She never seemed to care much for them.”

As he finished flapping his hand through the air he drew his arm toward his face, pulling back his sleeve to reveal a large gold wristwatch. The man squinted as he studied the timepiece and then began tapping the crystal face gently with his index finger as if he’d been waiting for some important event or activity.

Frank watched as the man finished his tapping and then returned his attention back to him. The man was older than he was. Judging by the amount of gray at his temples and the wrinkles around his dark eyes, he figured he must’ve been in his mid fifties—maybe even sixty or so.

Where the hell am I? With the man staring straight at him, Frank took a quick look around trying to appear as natural as he could and not let too much of his confusion show. He had that dazed feeling you’ve got right after waking up from a really, really sound nap. That—*oh God, was that a coma?*—kind of feeling. And stuck there in that waking instant kind of feeling he felt as if, any second now, it was all going to come flooding back to him. The strange cloud would be lifted and he’d remember everything—just any second now. But, for the moment, he couldn’t remember anything.

“You know how they can be,” the man continued, “when they get into one of their *cleaning* moods.” An artificial chuckle trailed the end of the statement and the man’s thick English accent clipped at his words as his head bobbed gently back and forth as if to

some inaudible melody. His eyes drifted upward, momentarily fixing on some invisible object in midair. Then he dropped his head and focused his gaze neatly onto the folded newspaper sitting in his lap.

Man this is weird. Frank shook his head and blinked hard. He was more than just a little bit confused. He was what you'd have to call *completely* confused. He didn't know where he was. He didn't know what time it was. He had no recollection of striking up a conversation with this man. He didn't even know how he could've started a conversation. You see, Frank wasn't what you'd call a connoisseur of idle chitchat. He didn't particularly like conversing with total strangers and was always more than just a little uncomfortable when they chose to do so with him. He was, more often than not, the one that sat quietly in the corner minding his own business—which is exactly what he wished this old guy would do.

Still consciously trying to hide his growing confusion, he snuck another quick look around. He could tell that he was on a train—or a subway car to be more accurate. It was easy enough to spot since he'd spent nearly his entire adult life commuting to and from hell on cars just like this one. But, as hard as he tried, he just couldn't remember boarding this train.

Although the sounds and the smells were familiar sensations—the whooshing, humming of the car's movement along the tracks and the feel of the cool musty air as he drew it in through his nose. But the car itself definitely felt unfamiliar. It wasn't that he

felt out of place there. He didn't feel like he wasn't supposed to be there. He just couldn't remember getting on the damn thing in the first place.

Just find something familiar, something that'll jog it loose. Frank tried to focus on something outside the window. If he could just catch a station sign or a terminal stop... but it was too dark outside to see anything at all. The inside of the car the was lit from a row of cream-colored plastic squares across the ceiling. Between the ceiling and the top of the windows there were advertisements anchored inside shiny metal frames. In one of them, a woman smiled while her hair blew in strands as if she'd been standing in the middle of a huge wind tunnel. While another showed a lone couple in bathing suites as they walked serenely down a seemingly deserted stretch of pristine sandy beach. A single palm tree in the foreground had writing across its trunk that said, *your day; come feel the magic...*

At random intervals, the overhead lights flickered as the car jostled and rocked from side to side. Teardrop shaped handles swayed from the ceiling as the car bounced in unison with the rhythmic clanking of the steel rails beneath. Frank was sitting on an inward facing row of cracked, vinyl bench seats. The man, now intently reading his newspaper, was seated across from him on the other side of the aisle. An aisle neatly divided into sections by several vertical chrome poles running from the floor to the ceiling.

A wave of fatigue tugged at him and almost pulled him under. It was that kind of yearning tiredness that went way past just being sleepy. His arms were heavy and it was

surprising to him just how comfortable the seats were. Like a feather pillow coaxing him to lie down and drift into a deep, deep slumber.

Am I loaded or something? Frank held his hand up in front of his mouth in an effort to smell his own breath. Because if he had been drinking, that might've done something to help explain the awful feeling of disorientation. Drinking or...or worse... But it had been years since he'd done anything more serious than alcohol—back in college, actually. And even then it was only pot. He'd never quite gotten into that whole drug thing. At that time in his life it'd just seemed far too counter productive to him. There were things he wanted to accomplish. A 100k a year just wasn't going to jump into his lap. And he knew that VP positions at Fortune 500 companies weren't routinely handed out to pot-heads. He had big things to do and all that other stuff just slowed him down. Back then his dreams were as big as life itself; a big house in the right neighborhood, a big stable and successful income, a Mercedes Benz 350SL (leather of course)...his was the true American dream, the dream of every upwardly mobile young American male—to make his first million by thirty and to retire by forty-five. Yea...his dreams. What a funny thought was now.

But Frank couldn't shake that post-pot-high kind of feeling that had made itself perfectly at home inside of his head. That's what it felt like. That lost, disjointed feeling you'd have right after coming down from a particularly intense marijuana buzz. But there was no sign of the lingering smell that always permeates your clothes and skin. No cotton mouth, either. No desire to eat everything in sight.

Again Frank looked over the car, trying to get his bearings. He was alone except for the elderly gentleman across the aisle. The guy was dressed in a dark gray suite and was wearing, what looked like, a camelhair raincoat. As he studied the man, Frank figured he was a little bit on the bohemian side because, although creeping back from his forehead in front, his hair was just long enough to hit the collar in back.

Again, Frank shook his head and blinked deliberately. Again, he tried in vain to clear the sludge from his brain. And, again—nothing came to him.

Did I stop at Rudy's after work? Sometimes he did that. Billy T. was always the instigator. He'd show up in his office with Scooter around 4:30 and tell him how important it was that they have an 'off-site' meeting. He'd known Billy Thompson since high school and although his brand of reckless abandon had always gone against Frank's own even sensibilities that sort of rebellious behavior was becoming more appealing to him with each passing year.

But lately those 'off-site' meetings had been few and far between. He didn't have any trouble remembering that was true enough. In fact, he didn't seem to have any trouble remembering certain aspects of his life. He had no trouble recalling just how disapproving his wife was of the Rudy's nights out with the guys. He knew that she didn't like that at all. But he just couldn't remember getting onto this train car.

It had to be a nap—a really hard nap—but it felt more like he'd just come out of a damn *coma* than a nap.

“That’s it,” Franked mumbled half out loud as he rubbed his eyes with the back of his balled up fists. *I was just having a little nap and now I’m still half asleep.*

“Uhhh?” the man raised his head in response to Frank’s mumbling.

Frank shook his head quickly back and forth while waving his hand to indicate that he wasn’t actually talking to him. Then he broke eye contact and looked down at his lap. He felt silly and didn’t want the old man to know just how loose his grip on reality really was.

All I’ve got to do is finish waking up. And then it’ll all come back to me—any second now... Sneaking a quick peak up, Frank saw the man smiling at him. *How embarrassing.* He felt like an idiot and didn’t particularly like it. Again, he diverted his gaze back to the couple on the white sandy beach, pretending to read each word of the ad with profound interest.

“Is this your normal tube?” the British gentleman asked deliberately to ease the unspoken tension. “The train I mean...is this your regular route?”

“Yes,” Frank replied without thinking. “I mean, no...I’m...not sure.”

Damn it, good cover! Frank’s own realization of just how stupid he sounded only added to the flush of embarrassment now warming across his cheeks. Without being able to stop himself, he locked stares with the man, this time unable to break eye contact. He wished that he could somehow just sink out of sight. Melt down into the seat and disappear. Truth was that he didn’t know *what* route this was. It might’ve been his

normal one. He hoped it was. But it seemed nicer. And it was certainly less crowded than he was used to.

The man studied Frank's face with intent, looking from eye to eye and then back again. He nodded at Frank and smiled a little smile as if to say, "I know exactly what you mean. I often feel *confused* myself."

Again, the man's attention returned to the paper in his lap and again, Frank was thankful for the way he'd stopped talking without any kind of cross examination. As if he was signifying that Frank's answer was really not as important as the simple act of exchange itself. By not speaking he seemed to be saying, that the words were really insignificant when compared to the subtle communication that occurs outside the bounds of spoken dialog. And that, right there, might've been what Frank disliked the most about idle conversation. All that...blah, blah, blah stuff without saying a damn thing. It all seemed like more of an excuse just to hear yourself talk than anything else.

Frank found himself wondering if the man was actually able to sense how he felt. And that made him wonder just how outwardly bewildered he did look. *Can he tell that I can't remember a damn thing?* Or was this feeling just a product of his own overactive paranoia? He allowed his eyes to study the man while he was reading his paper. He had, what Frank would call, a *good* face. He seemed...honest...even empathetic.

I think he does know. And inside, it did feel like the stranger had picked up on his sense of confusion. That remark about 'your normal route'—that was more than just a question, wasn't it? He knew something, Frank was sure of it.

The man looked up from his paper, catching Frank's eyes briefly before returning his attention to his wristwatch. *Again with the wristwatch?* Frank tried to appear uninterested, but for some reason, the man's preoccupation with his watch made Frank uneasy. Maybe it was because he himself didn't know what time it was. Or maybe it was something about the way the guy studied it so intently—so seriously. All he knew was that the wristwatch thing creeped him out. And that, along with the other feeling—the not knowing where or what—was making Frank edgier by the minute.

In the distance, he heard the sound of a train whistle. He heard the clatter of the tracks beneath him and he allowed himself to be comforted by the gentle and erratic sway of the car. Frank closed his eyes for a moment and took a long slow breath. Drawing the moist, stale air in through his nose he could almost taste his surroundings. Occasionally the lights blinked on and off, ever so briefly leaving the car in absolute darkness, like a negative flash bulb going off and pulling the light from its surroundings. Frank didn't mind the momentary darkness as the lights flicked on and off but, for some reason, he was filled with an icy chill every time the lights went *completely* out—leaving the car in pitch blackness. The absolute darkness made him feel way more than nervous. It was a sensation that bordered on a kind of all encompassing panic.

"I find that simple breathing exercises work best for me," the man spoke freely as if he'd been right there inside Frank's thoughts the whole time. "It's remarkable to me how they do help to take the *edge* off." The man followed the comment with a deep penetrating stare into the Frank's eyes.

He was startled by this intrusion into his daydream. Adjusting uncomfortably on the bench seat, he turned away from the man in order to avoid responding to the eerily psychic comment.

“Three quick breathes in through the nose,” the man demonstrated by closing his mouth, flaring his nostrils and making three loud breathing sounds. “Then I release slowly through the mouth.” Again, the man demonstrated by shaping his lips into an “O” and blowing the air out slowly from his mouth. Frank found his gaze fixed on the man and he could feel the look of dumbfounded amazement creeping across his face. But, hard as he tried, it was too late to keep it from showing.

At the end of his overly exaggerated exhale, the man held still for several seconds, frozen perfectly in time like a wax statue. Then he snapped, “Yup! Oxygen to the brain...nothing better to clear the fog from the old noggin.”

Whether urged on by the overwhelming disorientation or by the growing feeling of panic churning in his stomach, Frank was compelled to seek answers—from anywhere he could. Even if it meant looking stupid in front of a total stranger, it had to be done. The answers were just not coming to him on his own. Besides, he figured he’d never see this guy again anyway so what the heck?

He looked the car over one more time in a last ditch effort to find some kind of marking or indication of its destination or origin. Something—anything—to shake his memory loose. Left, right, top, bottom...nothing.

“I’m sorry,” Frank said, trying to relax the contorted look he felt growing on his face, “ah, can you tell me exactly which train this is?”

In response to the seemingly absurd question, the man looked directly into Frank’s eyes, but this time his gaze dug down to another level. There was something in the man’s eyes, something soothing and yet at the same time, something painfully invasive. Frank found himself terribly uncomfortable with the stare, but was unable to turn away. As if there were a secret hidden in the man’s eyes, a secret Frank didn’t want to know. Then, just before the look became too painful to bear, a smile softened the man’s lips.

“Nigel Peterson,” he announced formally and then leaned forward slightly, extending his hand in the process. “What’s your name, sir?”

As quickly as it had built, the tension vanished. Like a puff of smoke wisped away by the man’s warmth and charm, Frank felt oddly at ease with the abrupt introduction.

“Frank.” Frank leaned forward just enough to grab the man’s outstretched hand. “Frank Shannon. I sell industrial hydraulics for a small company down—”

Frank sat back down without finishing his sentence and began rubbing his forehead with his index finger. “Look, I’m sorry. This is a little weird, but I must’ve dozed off pretty hard there for a minute and now—”

“I understand,” Nigel broke in empathetically. “I understand completely.”

Frank was starting to feel uncomfortable again. How could this guy “understand completely?”

“At times we all feel a little confused about where we’re going.”

That's a strange way of putting it. Frank couldn't figure out what this guy was thinking about. Maybe he was just trying to pacify him. Whatever it was, his statement didn't do anything to answer Frank's question. It was just making things worse.

"Look, it's not like that," Frank said, distinctly recalling why he didn't like to engage in conversations with strangers. "I just meant that I...well, I mean..."

It was a real struggle for Frank to gather his thoughts. The problem was that he didn't know what he was even trying to ask. It's hard to just come out and tell a total stranger that you can't remember how you got there or that you don't know where *there* is.

"Take this train for instance," Nigel continued without any acknowledgement of Frank's internal struggle. "Or, let's say trains in general. They're a wonderful way to travel, don't you think?" Nigel paused as if patiently waiting for a response. When he didn't get one he continued, "Whether you're traveling on holiday or just returning home. There's something uniquely comforting in the journey itself. Don't you think, Mr. Shannon? May I call you Frank?"

Nigel watched as the turmoil built on Frank's face. He watched as Frank struggled—as if he'd been a fish on the bank trying to flop back into the water. But at this moment, it seemed as though it was Nigel that knew more about Frank than Frank did about himself.

"Any journey is a transition, Frank. It's always about leaving *here* and moving *there*," Nigel motioned from left to right, "but during the journey—the travel time—you're really in *neither* place. Does that make sense, Frank?"

Again there was a pause—again the opportunity arose for Frank to respond. But he was only interested in the answers to two questions at that moment; *where was he* and *how the hell did he get there*. He had no idea where all this talk about *the journey* was leading, but it really seemed to be irrelevant. Now the urgency that had begun snapping at Frank's heels was reinforcing his distaste for idle chitchat.

"Moving from known to unknown," the English gentleman continued to study Frank as he spoke.

Where am I? Where am I going? How'd I get here?

Frank's head was spinning and all of Nigel's mumbo jumbo was starting to irritate the hell out of him. His rambling was starting to sound like static mixed in with the background noise from the train. Blah, blah, clank, clank, rumble, rumble. The wash of sound poured in through his ears like a raging torrent, systematically eroding his ability to think or to reason. Now he *was* starting to panic. It was welling inside of him like a slow brush fire at the edge of the forest. Frank needed some answers and he needed them quickly or he felt like he was going to lose it.

Without much effort Frank found himself tuning Nigel out as he spoke. His lips continued to form words and the sounds were leaving his mouth, but all Frank heard was the metal on metal rhythm of wheels and track. Clack, clack, clack, clack.

He leaned forward and cradled his head in his hands. He covered his eyes with his palms and then cupped his fingers over his ears. He tried to block the whirlwind of

chaotic sound from coming into his head, but it was no use. With his fingertips, he carved little rings into his hair as he slowly massaged his scalp.

With eyes still closed, he raised his head and leaned back against the window behind him. *This is a nightmare*. It had to be just a really bad dream. He couldn't remember getting on the train. He couldn't remember what he was doing before he got on the train. He couldn't remember his chest ever feeling this tight before. And he had no idea where he was headed. So if this was just a dream then all he had to do was force himself to wake up. It was that simple. That's all, just wake up.

Frank grabbed a chunk of flesh at the top of his thigh and pinched it hard before snapping his eyes open—only to see Nigel smiling squarely at him. As far as he could tell, the soft-spoken English gentleman had been talking the whole time and was now waiting patiently for some kind of reply.

This is a dream, Frank thought trying hard to convince himself of the fact.

"It's not a dream Frank. This is reality." Nigel pursed his lips and made a little sucking sound between his teeth. "Or at least it's as close to reality as any of us will ever get."

This was getting way too creepy. The man looked harmless enough but his increasingly intrusive insights into his thoughts were starting to give Frank an icy cold feeling. He had to get out of this place. He had to get out of this car.

So he stood and walked away from the strange British aberration. Grabbing pole after pole to steady himself he made his way to the rear of the car and pulled smartly on the door handle. It was either jammed or locked. Or maybe it was just the last car.

Frank smushed his forehead against the glass in the door and cupped his hands around his eyes, but it was too dark to see anything outside. Not a thing. The car bounced violently and the lights flickered again, this time staying out for a few seconds. Frank felt the goose flesh rush up the back of his neck as he stepped backward and steadied himself against one of the chrome metal poles. From somewhere close by, a train whistle echoed through the darkness. Again, the car bounced and shook and Frank almost fell over as he lost his grip on the pole and was knocked forward.

In angry defiance, Frank turned and waddled like a drunken sailor toward the front of the car. He was careful not to make eye contact as he passed the man with the white temples. At the front of the car Frank tried the door latch to no avail. This door, too, was locked. Again, he pressed his head to the glass and peered out into the empty blackness, desperately searching the darkness for something—a flicker of light, a sign...anything. But the darkness just seemed to suck all the light into itself, like everything that ever was or ever would be was being pulled into the blackness just outside the window. Frank felt like the only real existence at that moment was the one that existed inside of that train car. A frightening thought. The train had become the center of all reality while previous realities had either been put on hold or just sucked away into the darkness outside.

Frank wiped his clammy forehead with his sleeve. He closed his eyes and listened. He listened to the clankity-clank of the steel wheels under the car. He could feel the low rumble and steady vibration. He could feel the vibration coming up through the soles of his feet and he could sense the power behind the massive engines. The low frequency

sounds swirled in and out and mixed with high-pitched clatter from beneath the floor.

The rhythmic pattern of the wheels provided a ringing, almost musical backdrop to the slurry of sounds in his head. In a way, it was difficult to pick out what he was hearing now from the past reflections floating around inside of him.

Inside the maze of sound, Frank could hear music. Or at least he hoped that's what it was. It sounded like Don Henley singing and he could remember having breakfast with his wife Sarah that morning. Over the years, she had played that CD to the point of making him sick, but he could never say anything because he knew how much she loved it. Besides, he was the one that had gotten it for her. He knew how much she loved music and he knew how much she adored Don Henley.

After twelve years of marriage, he knew just about everything about her. And like other aspects of his life, this was one that he had no trouble at all remembering. That morning, she'd gotten up early and made blueberry muffins—he could still smell them. Not from scratch, Sarah was never what you'd call *Suzy-homemaker*, but she was perfectly capable of opening a mix and dumping it into a bowl.

He could see her so clearly, stirring the batter and smiling at him with a muffin powder mark across her cheek. He remembered giving her a big hug and hearing that little 'mmm' sound she made whenever he squeezed her real tight. He loved holding her in his arms and the he loved when she squeezed him back.

Another bump and a quick flicker and Frank turned to see Nigel smiling up at him. Again his penetrating stare dug into his subconscious, seemingly rooting around at will.

Frank couldn't shake the feeling that Nigel knew exactly what he was thinking about and it scared the crap out of him. Was he somehow revealing the deepest secrets of his personal life by doing nothing more than just thinking about them?

With a rising queasiness in his stomach and a renewed sense of helplessness, Frank sat down next to the door at the front of the car. He was sweating again and he mopped his forehead with his forearm. He felt naked and exposed. Because the bench seats faced inward there was no place he could go to get out of eye-shot from the creepy British guy. So he sat with his arms folded and his eyes closed, thinking about his wife and the blueberry muffins.

2

"The alarm's gonna go off any minute, hon'."

Frank knew that Sarah was really saying, "Why don't you turn off the alarm before it goes off?"

"Hmmm? Uhhh...yeh." he rolled over, reaching over the top of her and squinted through one eye at the digital clock on the bed side table. "It's only 6:30," he whined as he smacked his lips, trying to get his tongue unstuck from the roof of his mouth.

"Angel," Sarah whispered in that drawn out, almost scolding tone as she tucked her nose up under her husband's chin for her morning nuzzle.

"Let's just lay here and snuggle?" Frank scooped her up with one arm and moved her as close as he could. He kissed the top of her head and silently thanked God for his one

true blessing, his wife Sarah. She was the reason for everything that he did. It was because of her that he went to that hellhole of a job and even tried to make a living at all.

“Frank.” Her tone gave him all the answer he needed as she drew out the ‘a’ sound in his name, inflecting the vowel with sarcasm and pretend sternness. Pretend sternness that felt just a little more than pretend to Frank.

She rubbed her nose against the stubble on his chin and then kissed his neck, pursing her lips like they had been pulled shut with a drawstring. “You were pretty restless last night, mister. You ready to tell me what you were fighting with?”

“I just couldn’t sleep I guess,” Frank fussed as he threw back the covers and moved her off of his chest.

It was amazing how quickly his mood could change. All she had to do was start probing about anything that existed outside of their bubble. In this room, in their bed, together and warm, he was the man she needed him to be—strong and centered and happy. But bring in any piece of the life that existed outside this place; friends, money, job, even a grocery list and he was a different person. Then his mood would close in on him. He could feel it covering him like an ill-fitted suit, pulling at his crotch and binding around the shoulders. And, of course, just short enough at the cuffs to make him look stupid. Frank hated looking stupid, especially in front of his wife. She was nearly perfect in his eyes and he aspired to be the same for her. He just never could quite make it work out that way.

Even when she was the one responsible for bursting his bubble, he still loved her dearly. He loved her because she never, ever did it maliciously and she always had his best interest at heart. She was always striving to make things better—to make *them* better. Even when that felt painful he always knew deep down that she was right...even though he would never admit that out loud to her.

It amazed him that after all these years; he still felt the way that he did the day they'd gotten married. She was a need and a necessity to him. Frank needed Sarah in a way that went deeper than survival. He needed her beyond physical, past emotional and clear into that psychological place that rests just before the primal stuff started. And he constantly wondered if she needed him like that—even though she reassured him daily—he still wondered. That's just how it was for him.

“Angel? Are you going to answer me?” Sarah’s voice was muffled from behind the half closed bathroom door. “What were you thinking about when you were fighting with the sheets last night?”

Frank made his way into the cocoon-like sanctuary of the bathroom’s silence. He was in the middle of a stream of morning relief when he looked up and saw her standing there with *the look* on her face. The one that said, “When I ask you a question, I expect an answer, mister.”

“Yes, I was restless, sorry.”

Being interrupted like that in the middle of a piss was annoying enough, but being bombarded with it this early in the morning was not what Frank was prepared for. To be

perfectly honest though, it was a conversation that he *never* wanted to have. He could feel his mood sink just a little deeper as the sun rose into the window over the commode.

Sarah stood for another moment with *the look* frozen on her face. Frank knew that the “Yes, I was restless,” remark was not the answer she was fishing for and there would most assuredly be a follow up volley. But Sarah knew her husband and could read his moods. She knew when she could push him and she knew when it was time to just back off.

“You having oatmeal or a bagel this morning?” her voice took on a ringing tone as she dropped the subject completely and headed for the kitchen.

Frank knew that wasn’t the last of it. Sarah didn’t just let things drop. This was not the end it and he dreaded having to go downstairs and face her again.

“Coffee,” Frank shouted out the bathroom door, not really expecting her to hear him. Maybe that would fix his mood. It would at least give him the buzz he needed to make his way out the door; a feat that was getting harder and harder to pull off every day. His energy level was dropping with each passing sunset and he was afraid that one morning soon he would wake to find that he couldn’t walk out the door at all anymore. He’d find that he was paralyzed and incapable of movement on his own.

“I can’t hear you,” floated the sing-songy response from the kitchen.

Frank wished that Sarah would give him a break this morning—this morning of all mornings. All he wanted was a little peace and quiet. He could get his own breakfast. He wished that she would just stay in bed some mornings and let him get ready for work in

quiet, by himself, without interruptions or coaxing. No reminders of what he should do, or hadn't done. He wasn't a morning person anyway. It was usually ten or so before he hit his stride. He couldn't remember if he had always been like that or if that was just something that had developed over the years, like his propensity for self-pity. It didn't really matter, though. He just wanted to be left alone.

"I laid out your suit and things."

Frank was standing under the water hearing his wife's voice from between the spray of hot water. Showers used to make him feel better. Now they just felt like another place to hide. If he couldn't stay in bed this morning, maybe he could stay in the shower! But the shower had its own special way of forcing you to look at the cold reality of your life—when all the hot water ran out.

"Ok then, oatmeal it is, mister," Sarah proclaimed loud enough to be heard over the running water.

One of the things that Frank loved most about Sarah—and probably hated most too—was her unshakable ability to just keep going. If she asked a question that required you to make a choice, you had a predetermined amount of time to make that choice, and then *she made it for you*. She didn't get mad. She didn't yell or make a fuss. She just made the decision for you so *she* could get on with the things that *she* had to do. It was her way.

But this morning, Frank wished that she would've just gotten mad instead. He was sick of oatmeal. Cholesterol, shmolesterol. He wasn't sure if there even was such a thing. And even if there was, he really doubted that oatmeal was the ultimate cure for it.

He should've answered her. He loved onion bagels, with cheese and egg and salt. But he also knew that he was only allowed to have cheese and egg once a week. And they'd both agreed that the special treat would occur on Friday. That, at least, was one of the reasons that Fridays were usually good days. Frank closed his eyes and hoped that this would be a good day too.

He needed a good day. And maybe he could sleep in tomorrow. Really sleep, like when he was a kid and he'd come in from swimming all afternoon. That dead-sleep on the couch, in the cool part of the house, with that one amazingly soft pillow, arms dangling, dead to the world—asleep. Frank couldn't remember the last time he had slept through the night, much less even had a restful nap.

This morning the shower seemed like his only refuge. Hiding between the steamy droplets, Frank felt insulated. Like the water was shielding him from the pain and disappointment life offered up every day. He felt safe, enjoying the reprieve that the sound of the water provided, drowning out the endless prattle of everyday life.

Then the shower took its inevitable jab at Frank's deflating mood. The rapidly dropping temperature told Frank, in no uncertain terms that it was time to get out and face the world. It was time to face Sarah and the job and all the other crap that had piled up in his life. But this morning, he would sooner face the job than his lovely, never wavering wife.

Frank killed the water and stepped out onto the rug. He reached for the towel on the rack and missed it by about an inch. It was like his arm, eyes and brain weren't

connected. He was having trouble focusing or concentrating—imagine that. Maybe he still had soap in his eyes. He knew that he still had water in his ears because everything sounded muffled and ringy. But even the simple act of drying himself off seemed like it required more effort than he could pull together this morning.

“Breakfast is getting cold...are you going to be much longer?” Sarah’s voice chimed from the kitchen. Frank could hear that she was trying extra hard to sound cheery. He hated that artificial, “Everything is fine” air she’d take on. She always wore it like a shield, right before they had their talk.

Frank couldn’t remember how long he’d been staring at his shoes when he realized he still hadn’t answered his wife. It was easy for him to picture Sarah sitting at the kitchen table with *the look* on her face again.

“Coming right now, babes,” he shouted while looking up from his untied shoelaces.

Frank was already past dreading going into work. The palms of his hands were sweaty. It was that nasty, clammy kind of sweat that a guy gets right before getting chewed out by his boss or getting a traffic ticket. If only he could just stay there, in the bedroom, for another hour or two. But the conversation was still looming. There was no where to go. There was no place he could hide. He didn’t want to have the conversation with Sarah almost as much as he didn’t want to go to work.

Even the simple task of tying his own shoes seemed to take on a degree of monumental difficulty. His fingers felt thick and Jell-O-ee. He just could not concentrate

hard enough on what he was doing to get anything accomplished this morning.

Everything he did was hard and heavy and draining.

But another day was calling. And now, so too, was Sarah.

“Frank?”

As Frank made his way toward the kitchen, he could hear ‘Desperado’, the title track from the Eagles 1973 album, playing in the background. Back when they were dating, Frank had replaced all of her old Eagles vinyl, one by one with CDs. A gesture he came to regret in the passing years as she played them over and over and over again. But he knew how much they meant to her, so for the most part, instead of complaining about it, he just kept his mouth shut.

For what seemed like an eternity, Frank stood in the doorway and found himself lost in the wonder and intricate detail of his wife’s face. No makeup, hair pulled back in a haphazard bun, wardrobe by ‘warm and comfy’, and still she was utterly beautiful. For some reason, Frank was feeling overly emotional this morning and the sight of his wife standing at the stove in her robe brought a lump into the back of his throat. She was truly an angel, he thought to himself and then swallowed hard.

She moved toward him even before her eyes moved from what she was doing. As if she could feel him standing there thinking about her. Wrapped in her arms, Frank felt hot and the room swirled slowly. As his hand moved gently against the small of her back, he felt like a hormone-drenched teenager exploring the tantalizing feel of a woman’s body

for the first time. When Sarah gave him a hug, he knew that he'd been hugged. From knees to forehead, it was an embrace that Frank wished he could spend an eternity in.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” Frank whispered into the top of her head as she squeezed him around the middle.

“MMMmorning.”

Why did he get so irritated with her? It was irrational. It wasn't anything that she did. As always, it was himself that was the problem—just like at work. It was blasphemy to complain about a woman as supportive and beautiful as she was. Sometimes he didn't understand her viewpoint, and he felt like she was always asking something of him. Not like “take out the trash” asking, but like “focus your energy” or “step back and see the big picture” kind of asking. That ambiguous asking—and for all the things that he couldn't possibly fix. Frank felt like there were days when she simply asked too much of him. And those days were to becoming more frequent.

Still, standing there in the kitchen, wrapped in her embrace, it didn't seem like there were any problems they couldn't work out together. She was his angel and his saving grace. He hoped that one day he'd be able to measure up to what she expected of him. Frank squeezed her one more time before pulling back to look at her face.

“Trouble finding the towel this morning?” Sarah asked whimsically as she wiped his forehead with the sleeve of her robe. “You hungry?”

Frank grabbed the hand towel hanging from the refrigerator and finished mopping up his face. He was sweating like a pig and that realization made him even more tense.

Get a grip, he thought to himself and tossed the towel onto the counter behind him.

This isn't the Spanish inquisition for God's sake. It's just your wife.

They sat at the kitchen table and listened to the CD kick into 'Certain Kind of Fool'. Frank, nursing his coffee and oatmeal and Sarah with her tea and raisin bread, they sat together and just listened to the music for a few minutes without saying a word.

Sarah put a spoonful of honey into a fresh cup of tea and then began the task of methodically stirring it in. Frank liked the tinkling sound of her spoon as she moved the spoon in a slow, circular motion in the cup. It always made him think of wind chimes. It was a beautifully musical sound and Sarah seemed to continue stirring long after the honey had dissolved into the tea.

The CD ended and they enjoyed a long, full quiet as they shared the morning and finished their breakfast together. Frank marveled at how, again, she had sensed his apprehension and adjusted her approach to compensate for it. She had let him enjoy the moment without interruption. There in the still of the morning light, her smile fought for dominance like the sun does on a day that's destined to be overcast.

It was coming and he knew it. The agreement they had made the night before was to get up early this morning so they could talk about it. Sarah had made him promise. She always took the lead when it came to *addressing issues*. Because if left to Frank, they'd never talk about anything uncomfortable. And deep inside, Frank knew that that was one of the things that made them strong together. One of the opposites that made them attract. In many ways, she provided the discipline that he was incapable of providing for himself.

It was smart the way she'd done it and Frank, however much he didn't want to admit it, knew that she was doing the right thing. He knew that it was smart to sleep on it and not to try and talk about anything when he was as emotionally charged and frustrated as he'd been the night before. The whole thing was really infuriating, but even now he could see that he'd been far too upset to have a meaningful conversation about it then. It probably would've ended in some kind of all out shouting match and maybe even a night on the couch.

So as Frank used the crumpled napkin to wipe the dripping sweat from his burning eyes, he couldn't imagine feeling any less helpless than he did at this very moment.

3

Frank cracked one eye to see if the man in his dream was still there.

"This *is* reality, Frank," the man repeated as if in response to some unasked question.

"Damit," Frank whispered and then clamped his eyes closed tightly—at least until he realized how ridiculous he must've looked in doing so. He pictured a two year old kid having a temper tantrum and then holding their breath. He knew he looked pretty foolish.

"Like the seat you're sitting on for instance," Nigel continued, undaunted, pressing down with both hands onto the bench seat as he spoke. "You can feel it. It has mass and substance; color, smell, texture. These are all the things that we use to define our reality, are they not? The things we use to define our very *existence*, I might say. Do you agree, Frank?"

Frank was trapped by the seeming contradiction that this dream wasn't a dream, and yet...it had to be. How could it be anything else? A bump on the head? Amnesia? Some kind of stress related trauma? What then if not a just a really, really odd dream?

And whatever the case, Frank was having trouble rationalizing why he should keep ignoring the gentlemen across the aisle. Just because he made him feel uneasy? Even though he didn't care for the idea of engaging in chitchat with the man, it made him just as uncomfortable to just sit there and ignore the guy.

So, rather than quietly succumb to the growing insanity, Frank looked down at his own seat and thought about the man's question...even if for no other reason than to provide himself with a distraction while he waited for his memory to reenter the scene. After all, if this was a dream then he could say anything he wanted without feeling stupid...and if it wasn't a dream then he figured he was hopelessly insane and you don't worry about sounding stupid when you're a lunatic either.

"Yea, this is real." Frank pushed on the seat and then waved his hands in little circles as he surveyed the car from front to back, still not able to see anything through the pitch-blackness outside of the windows. "But this...this whole scene here...this isn't real. This isn't real at all."

Nigel studied Frank as he spoke, watching him with interest and intensity. Then he smiled and also looked quickly, but thoroughly around the train.

“I see what you mean,” Nigel spoke while he continued his look up and down the interior of the car. Then he nodded and continued softly, “but I believe that, at least for now, the surrealistic nature of the moment is probably going to serve us best.”

Surrealistic? Serve us best? What the hell was this fruitcake talking about?

Frank’s sense of panic was growing again. Not in a big way. Not an overwhelming, smothering kind of panic, just a little sort of a creepy edge. Probably nothing more than simple uneasiness over the temporary loss of memory. That’s all. I mean, that would unnerve anyone, wouldn’t it?

“Isn’t it funny,” Nigel continued quite cordially, “that in lieu of believable situational reality, we’re generally content to settle for the trappings of an *explainable* physical reality?”

Frank looked more confused than ever.

Nigel smiled and pressed down repeatedly on the seat with his fingertips in order to punctuate his point. “The physical,” he repeated, maintaining eye contact with Frank. “The things we can touch and smell and feel. Those are the senses that make something real for us. You might even say that they are responsible for *causing* it to exist.”

Frank was starting to lean toward the insanity theory. It seemed to be the best possible explanation at the moment. He figured that this is how people must’ve felt after they’d gone completely insane. Maybe the stress of the ever increasing quotas and the pressure of the no-win office politics had finally become too much for him and had pushed him

over the edge. It seemed funny, but he'd never really thought of himself as unstable before. Maybe a little indecisive. Maybe a little undisciplined. But not unstable.

“What we perceive as reality is the stuff that’s formulated in our *conscious* minds, Frank. That’s the part of reality that we can see and experience through our senses.” Nigel gave a quick nod toward Frank as if the simple gesture itself was enough to ensure understanding. “Take yourself for instance,” Nigel said, breaking eye contact with Frank and sitting back against the side of the car. “Your conscious mind is doing its darnedest to tell you that this is reality.” The man waved his hand through the air and looked slowly around the car. “But all the while your *subconscious* mind is fighting that notion.”

Frank couldn’t tell if there was really a ringing in his ears or if it was just a form of psychosomatically induced hysteria. Some kind of internal attempt to block out what this crazy Nigel guy was saying.

“Your subconscious mind is trying to push alternatives up to your conscious mind. I think you’re aware of that, aren’t you Frank? But the conscious mind doesn’t want to hear about it, now does it? You see the problem? The dichotomy inherent in the system?”

“No...I, uhm...” Frank was starting to feel carsick now and there was the ever so distant pounding of a headache creeping in behind his left eye. And through the, now too definite, ringing in his ears he thought he could hear music again.

“Where are you, Frank?” Nigel’s voice seemed to come from within Frank’s head. As if the point of origin of all the sound around him was actually emanating from inside his own mind. A thick gravelly sound that rasped at the inside of his ears and made the back

of his throat hurt. A single drop of sweat seeped into Frank's left eye and he rubbed it out with his shirt sleeve.

"What are you talking about? What do you mean, 'Where am I?'" Frank snapped back. "You're just talking nonsense, now. What are you, some kind of hypnotist or mentalist or something?"

Nigel raised his eyebrows in exaggerated surprise and looked over at Frank. "Here, here, it's certainly not a difficult question, is it? At least not at this level."

Frank could feel Nigel watching him. Like hot breath down his neck, the stare seemed to be smothering him. The air had become thin and Frank pulled at the collar of his shirt, trying to loosen that feeling of suffocation that had gotten hold of his throat.

"Where are you, Frank?" the voice roared again, louder and deeper than before. The words were wrapped in a strange sense of authority this time, reverberating as if sounding through a public address system. An almost spiritual sound that commanded respect and attention and seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

Nigel glanced down at his watch and then back at Frank again. "Please understand," his tone was now subdued and comfortable. "I'm not asking the question the way your wife would ask the question. I'm not wondering where you are emotionally or anything of that sort."

With a smile he leaned forward in his seat and glanced up and down the empty car, as if he were about to reveal a secret to Frank.

"I simply want you to express to me *where you think you are*."

Again, the words resonated from a place that seemed far too close to Frank's own inner monolog. It felt as if he'd asked himself the question and was now eagerly awaiting his own response.

Nigel sat back and again, relaxed the tone of the conversation. "It's a simple question and the basis for a quite reasonable conversation—*where are you right now, Mr. Frank Shannon?*"

Sweat dripped into his eyes and Frank rubbed at it with the heel of his hand. The ringing was worse. The headache was worse. The growing sense of suffocation and panic were worse.

Suddenly, with a nearly involuntary jerk, Frank popped to his feet, grabbed one of the metal poles with both hands and shook it as if he was trying to loosen the bars of a cage. In some basic, primal, child like way, he was trying to reassure himself that it was real...that all of this stuff around him was real—or not real. Maybe if he could pull one of the poles loose, then the whole dream would collapse and he'd wake up at home, in bed with Sarah. Reality seemed to have been put on hold for Frank Shannon at the moment and he just wanted to get it back.

"Frank, really...where are you?" the man's voice was becoming irritatingly insistent. Almost nagging. Almost like his boss badgering him over some stupid sales forecast.

"Can't you at least make an attempt at answering the question?"

Somewhere between the confusion and growing panic, Frank popped a cork and found himself shouting, "I'm trapped in a train car with a psychopath! That's where I am. I

don't know how I got here or where I'm going. I'm confused and pissed off and my head hurts. That's where I am right now. Is that what you were looking for?"

Frank stood still, clutching the pole, trying to steady himself. He held on, motionless, staring down at the now silent stranger. For a long time, the only thing that seemed to exist was the sound of the steel wheels clanking on the tracks beneath them. In the rhythmic, almost musical sound of the wheels, Frank could hear his wife singing.

"freedom, oh-oh freedom, well that's just some people talkin'. Your prison is walkin' through this world all alone."

And as Sarah's imagined voice faded into the distance, the sound turned back into the clatter of steel on steel. Frank took a breath, collected his thoughts and stared down at the stranger. It no longer felt like he needed to hide or was compelled to avoid eye contact with the man he had just insulted. Everything was painfully out in the open now. His little outburst had provided a sort of *cleansing breath* for the situation. It was a release that had provided him with a brief moment of peace. But he was still in the train and he still couldn't remember how he'd gotten there in the first place. He was still lost and his ears were still ringing.

Nigel studied Frank's face then, slowly, began to smile. "That's good." Nigel's smile was growing into a huge grin. "That's very good."

And then, as if this was possible, things got even stranger for Frank. As he stood there clutching the stainless steel pole, half embarrassed and half pissed off, he watched as Nigel studied his wristwatch for several long seconds. Carefully contemplating the

importance of some unspoken event in time. And after he was done examining the timepiece, he started writing on a legal pad that was sitting on in his lap. Several quick lines accented by a flourish of punctuation and then he laid the black and gold pen down and looked back up at Frank, still smiling.

“Quite good indeed.” Nigel tapped the wristwatch with his index finger as he shot an impish smile up at Frank and asked, “Which one?”

Nigel watched Frank’s face long enough to see that he obviously didn’t understand the question and then repeated with more detail, “If you think about it, which one of us do you really think is the psychopath here, Frank?”

“Ugh!” Frank let go of the pole, slid down into the seat both disgusted and exhausted and then turned sidewise so he could face away from Nigel.

“Because what I’m viewing as progress here is the fact that your statement, by its very nature, indicates an apparent acceptance of this particular reality.” Nigel directed his statement at the back of Frank’s head. “And by your previous admission, you’ve not only indicated your acceptance of the physical space—i.e. *the train car*—but also of me.” Nigel watched Frank’s back as fidgeted his seat. “In your words the *psychopath*. A descriptive phrase indicative of situational acceptance. And all of this, incidentally, occurring at roughly the same point in time that you’ve begun questioning your own sanity. Now, tell me you can’t feel the tug of the subconscious in all of that, uh?”

Frank’s fidgeting had stopped and he was sitting perfectly still, not sure if he should cry or scream or just go over and punch the guy. There again, if this all was a dream then

he couldn't be convicted of murder for killing the guy. Unless, of course it was a long enough dream to have a trial and a sentencing hearing. Maybe an appeal or two before the eventual gas chamber.

"See, that's the thing about the subconscious: it's doubt. It's the other side of the coin. It's that alternate point of view that you would never ever take a look at by yourself. You see what I mean, Frank?"

Frank sighed heavily and spoke over his shoulder, "No, I don't see what you mean. I don't know what you're talking about. I don't know what's going on here and I don't know who you are."

But just as Frank was proclaiming that he didn't know what was going on, new possibilities were occurring to him. New and terrifying possibilities. And the thought of those possibilities caused new questions to ripple through the back of his already throbbing head. There were possibilities that he hadn't allowed himself to think about before. Possibilities that he wasn't ready to think about now. Possibilities that carried nagging and unexplainably ugly baggage.

Frank turned around slowly to look at Nigel. For the first time, he really looked at him. He had a kind face. He looked like someone you wouldn't be afraid of picking up if you saw them hitchhiking along the side of the road. There was empathy behind his eyes and a kind of deep understanding emanated from within. It was a face that could reel you in and make you feel at ease.

"Who are you?" Frank asked the stranger in a low, somber tone.

Nigel looked at his watch and then back at Frank. He made another note on the pad and then looked at Frank with a soft warm smile.

“I’m a friend. I’m here to help you.”

It was as if Frank’s worst fears had all been realized at once. Something about those words, used in a sentence in that way, caused tears to well in Frank’s eyes. He had no idea what he’d expected the man to say, but this was not the right answer. Why would someone be *here to help* him? Somehow, this was not good. Something vital was slipping away and Frank couldn’t get his arms around it. And all this talk about *reality* seemed to be helping it slip away that much faster. Frank felt dizzy and scared. There was a distinct feeling of panic in the pit of his stomach and all he wanted to do was to reach through it and grab that reassuring sense of peace that he knew was down there somewhere inside of him—hidden just out of site.

Frank wanted desperately to say, “I don’t need help,” but what actually came out was “*Why* do I need help?”

Nigel took a long slow breath and made another little notation on his pad before saying softly, “It’s not an easy thing, to let go, Frank.”

The tears came pouring out of Frank’s eyes and ran down his cheeks like a river. He felt light headed and prickly. He had no idea what Nigel was talking about and at the same time he knew exactly what Nigel was talking about. Something deep inside of him, without a voice of its own, was now, doing the understanding for him.

Sarah looked at her husband, then at her teacup, then at him again, waiting to see if he would start first. When he didn't, she knew that he wouldn't. She knew that it was his nature to avoid the hard stuff as long as he could, or as long as he was allowed to.

"So what's the plan? You wrestled with it so hard last night that the sheets were soaked. You must've come up with something. Some revelation?"

"I don't remember," Frank feigned, his voice soft and muffled. "Maybe if I crawl back into bed I'll be able to remember." A sheepish glance in Sarah's direction was the best he could muster.

All Sarah had to do was look at him. There was *the look* again. Man how he hated it when she did that. It just felt like there was nowhere he could hide. No rock to crawl under or no place to go to get out from under that *look*.

"You know," Frank was surprised by how irritated his tone was and tried to real it in a bit, "If I knew what to do, I'd be doing it." He was really more frustrated than angry, but it was hard not to come off sounding angry when he talked about this stuff. "But whether you believe me or not there's really nothing that I can do here."

"That's it, isn't it Frank? The old *poor me there's nothing I can do* story. But the thing is, I'm pretty sure there is something you can do. In fact, I know there is."

"I know you..." Frank felt defeated and the conversation had just begun.

"So you've hit a brick wall and it hurts. Now you're just going to quit? Give up without a fight?"

“Yea, that’s about it.”

“Bullshit.”

Sarah didn’t swear often, but when she did it was usually to punctuate a point she was trying to make or worse, it meant that she’d had about all that she was going to take. It told Frank that the worst part of the lecture was yet to come. That it was looming just out of sight and was about to pounce like a cat jumping on an unsuspecting ball of yarn.

“Frank,” Sarah’s tone softened somewhat but retained a firm edge, “you’re better than that and I know it. If you’d stop feeling sorry for yourself long enough, you could make anything happen.”

“You’re so terminally optimistic, Sarah.”

“That’s true, but I’m also determined. And there’s absolutely no reason that you can’t be too.”

Frank wrung his hands like a soaked dish towel and he could feel a tightening in his neck muscles. His forehead was soaked again and sweat was running into his eyes. He always had a hard time explaining just what it was like at work. She just didn’t understand it. It was...well, it was complicated.

“You just don’t understand what I have to go through there. How hard it is for me.”

“I understand a lot more than you think, mister.”

Frank knew that she did, but it was the best comeback he could think of under the circumstances.

“You’re the only one holding you back, Frank. You have great ideas and you never present them. You’re a natural at sales, but you won’t do anything to sell yourself. You refuse to lift a finger in order to plan your own success. You just want it to happen to you. And when it doesn’t—well, you say it’s because you’re unlucky or it’s just not meant to happen. Why don’t you stop being a victim?”

“Honey, we’ve been over and over this. You just don’t understand the politics there.”

Frank didn’t care about the recognition. At least he didn’t think he did. He liked doing his job, doing it well and being paid well for it. He was satisfied—mostly. It’s just that every promotion in the last five years had gone to the newer reps. Kids that he’d mentored and tutored and brought along as associates were now his bosses. And the longer he went without advancing his career, the more he was treated like a second-class citizen. Like anyone that didn’t want to move forward was tainted—somehow not worthy of the tiniest morsel of respect.

Sarah sighed heavily and stared out the window. “Frank, I know that you can go as far as you want, but you continue to *set your own limits*. It’s not the politics holding you back,” Sarah turned from the window to face her husband, “it’s you, baby. You’re holding yourself back.”

“Sarah...” Frank was already tired of this conversation. These little talks always made him feel like he should just plow into work with a baseball bat and start whacking people’s heads. Run ‘em over and knock ‘em down—it’s the law of the jungle, blah,

blah. Kill or be killed, take what's rightfully yours. Step on 'em on the way up and don't look back until you're on the top of the hill with all the candy.

"Honey," Sarah reached across the table to touch his hands, "I see you come home frustrated and tired every night. And I listen to you complain about the idiots around you. If you don't get in there and change what you think is screwed up, then you're destined to live the rest of your life this way. And it just tears me up inside to see you do that to yourself."

Frank's eyes were pounding and the sweat continued to sting his eyes no matter how hard he tried to wipe it out. This was killing him. Pressure at work—pressure at home. There wasn't anyplace he could hide. There wasn't anything left he could say. He couldn't argue with her anymore. She was right, he was wrong. Just like at work. Just like at home.

"Frank, this job is killing you, and you are asking me to sit by and watch *you let it*. I can't do that. I know in my heart what you're capable of, even if you don't anymore. Sometimes I wonder where the man I married went."

That was low, even for Sarah. If Frank knew one thing, it was that yesterday was the last time he was ever going to come home bitching about work again. He wouldn't say another thing to her about anything that ever happened at the office...ever. From this point forward work stayed at the office. That was one positive thing that he could decide on and make happen. Work wasn't going to change and neither was his wife so he'd just check it at the door when he got home. Case closed.

“I just want to see you happy. You used to be happy! Work was work, but it didn’t make you miserable. And it didn’t keep you from enjoying the rest of your life.”

“Look, Sarah...” Frank blinked sweat from his eyes and rubbed at the stiffening in his left shoulder.

“I won’t do this. I won’t help you wind up as a stepping-stone for everyone else’s success. Decide what you want and go get it. Make a plan and then make it happen. Fight for something, accomplish something. Decide to change your reality, visualize it, and then do it. That’s the only way you’re ever going to be content when you look in the mirror.”

“Sarah...” Frank couldn’t get his mind around the words he needed to say to Sarah. He’d been having trouble concentrating all morning but this was ridiculous. It was as if he couldn’t remember what some of the words were for or what they meant.

“Honey...I’m...ah, sorry.”

“I know, baby,” Sarah patted the back of Frank’s hand.

This whole ordeal was making it hard for Frank to breathe. The air in the kitchen seemed thick and musty and it was hard to get it down into his lungs. He felt like he was suffocating.

“Please believe me,” Frank pleaded in about the only way that he knew how, “when I tell you that I have done everything I can.”

“I believe that you believe that, Frank. But I also believe in you, and that’s why I believe that if you keep trying—”

Frank's chest was unbelievably tight and he just wanted to be left in peace. "Sarah, look," he broke in.

"You are your own worst enemy, Frank. See it, believe it and do it..." Sarah was so wrapped up in her speech that she hadn't noticed how red Frank's face had gotten or that he was having trouble breathing.

"Enough of this motivational bullshit!" Frank snapped at her and took a long slow breath in through his nose.

This little conversation had gone too far and now he was angry. He was smarter than she was giving him credit for. This whole thing had become insulting.

"If I wanted to hear that crap..." Frank's words trailed off as he rocked forward in his chair, still rubbing his shoulder.

Sweat poured into his eyes—pain in the shoulder, the neck muscles...this damn little encounter with Sarah was going to give him a heart attack. This was enough.

"Sarah, I'm a *has-been*. I'm a *still-plugging-along* loser. That's it, end of story."

Frank's words were beginning to slur and his voice was getting louder as he spoke. For the first time since the conversation had begun, Sarah became painfully aware of the beet red color of his face and how hard he was breathing.

"They know exactly what I'm going turn in every month and they don't talk 'bout it. I'm a producer, but no perks...no input. I'm sorry I make you miserable. I feel... failure..."

Sarah knew that something was wrong and that it may already be too late to take this down a notch. Frank looked like he had worked himself into one of his *episodes* and was dangerously close to giving himself a stroke or something. She leaned forward across the table and squeezed his hand in hers. It was cold and clammy and now Sarah was getting concerned. She could hear her husband's labored breathing and he was rubbing his arm like he was trying to work out a cramp.

"Frank, honey? Are you okay, baby?"

"Tired," was all that Frank managed to get out.

It felt like he was going to sneeze. His eyes watered and his breath came in short gasps.

"Frank?"

For Frank, the room was full of Jell-O and his muscles felt like rubber. He could see Sarah's mouth move but he could no longer hear her talking. All the sound was gone except for a low rumbling. Things hurt. Frank wasn't sure what things, but he knew that there were things that were hurting. He tried to look at Sarah, he needed to tell her something was wrong, but his lips wouldn't move. The Jell-O world he was looking through moved in squishy waves. He wanted to swallow but his tongue seemed to be in the way.

Frank was sliding. His arms didn't respond. His left leg tried desperately to prop himself in the chair but he had to keep bracing himself over and over. He wanted to see

Sarah. She was right in front of him, but he couldn't see her. And he couldn't even say her name.

Then, in slow motion, Frank began to fall forward toward the floor. Instinctively, Sarah stepped quickly to the side of the table and tried to grab him but she was just one more thing to knock over as he fell forward. She was no match for the dead weight that was picking up momentum and together, they hit the cold tile floor beneath them.

Now, dead still on the floor, Frank felt as if he was still falling. Falling away *from* Sarah. As if he was deliberately pulling away into the comfort and safety of the darkness.

5

There were questions to be asked and demands to be made, but Frank could no longer find his voice. Through the cloud of tears, Frank thought that he could see his wife again. He could smell her perfume. Like a lilac pedal's sweet aroma floating on a warm summer breeze. Frank remembered running his nose across her cheek after she'd gotten out of the shower.

"I love you Frank," she'd whispered in his ear.

He wanted to stay where she was, stay and smell her hair and squeeze her tight against him. The thought of anything else was too terrifying to reconcile.

But the cold reality in front of him was that of a claustrophobic train car and a strange man that spoke in incoherent riddles. So Frank reached down inside and found the courage to ask the question that had been asked of him earlier.

"Where am I?" he managed to force out just as his voice cracked.

Nigel tapped his chin with his index finger several times before speaking. “You’re in, what I would call a transitional phase. And I do realize that that’s more of a *time* than a *space* continuum answer but I’m assuming that that’s probably what you were going for. Am I right?”

“Am I dead?” The words didn’t seem real as they left Frank’s lips. The thought had come to fruition inside of the realm of those other possibilities he’d thought about in the preceding moments leading up to this one. The possibility that this was some kind of afterlife. Maybe that it was some kind of hell.

To Frank, the question seemed as utterly ridiculous as it was terrifying. Am I dead? The notion of being dead and sitting on a subway car talking to a British guy about the nature of reality was...just insane; more evidence for the *you’ve-gone-off-your-rocker* theory. But, all of a sudden, the *you’ve-gone-off-your-rocker* theory had a much greater appeal than it had just a few minutes earlier.

Sure, that would explain the notepad the guy was writing on and all the weird questions about where he was and the nature of reality—who’s the psychopath? This Nigel guy’s probably a psychiatrist and he’s doing an evaluation on the new loony.

But there was that damn...thing...that kept saying that was not the case. It was saying, without words, that the unthinkable *was* true. That he’d had a heart attack this morning on the kitchen floor after having an argument with his wife and now he was facing...facing what?

“I prefer not to think in terms of life and death,” Nigel answered matter-of-factly. “I find those metaphors to be far too constraining at this level.”

For whatever reason—didn’t need to know, didn’t want to know—Frank wasn’t put off by Nigel’s evasive answer. In a way, he almost preferred it. In keeping true to his character, Frank just wanted the question to go away and he was sorry that he’d ever asked it in the first place.

“Who are you, really?” Frank asked with humbled reverence. He hoped that the answer to that single question might just answer all the other questions he had.

With a curious and timid look, Nigel shook his head vigorously back and forth. “Oh no, no, I’m not...no...I’m just here to help you. Think of me as a kind of a guide lets say. Someone here to help you find your way through this.”

Frank squeezed his eyes closed to wring out the tears. “And all the talk about reality was just to *help* me see...that it’s not. That this isn’t...real?”

“No, no, you misunderstood completely, Frank. Your perception—everyone’s perception of reality—that’s the reason I’m here. It’s what you and I have to talk about. It’s the meaning behind *this* particular reality,” Nigel motioned around the car at the end of his sentence.

Frank was dizzy and nauseous and confused and he felt like he was swimming in a huge pool of pitch-black water, drowning, suffocating, struggling to catch a breath.

“Look, I understand how you feel. Believe me when I say that it’s perfectly normal.”

Nigel sat up straight on the bench seat. “Sometimes it helps if we just kind of go over some of the more mundane details—to help you get grounded, so to speak.”

Frank was still having a hard time concentrating on what Nigel was saying. Most of it sounded like an AM radio playing in another room somewhere.

Nigel readjusted himself on the seat and flipped back one of the turned over sheets from the tablet. After scanning the page briefly, he began to read out loud;

“This morning at exactly 7:03 AM, Central Standard Time, after having blueberry muffins and coffee with his wife Sarah, Frank Shannon suffered a massive coronary embolism.”

Frank brought his hand to his chest. He remembered having breakfast with Sarah. He remembered the argument and he remembered the pain in his chest.

“I had a heart attack?”

“More of a stroke, really. No actual damage to the heart tissue. But that’s not really important. The important thing is that you’re here now and that we’ve got this opportunity to work through some of your issues.”

That sounded like something his wife would say. Frank couldn’t get away from the lingering image of his wife long enough to concentrate on what Nigel was saying. He wanted to stay where she was, but it was serving no useful purpose except to further his feeling of helplessness and panic. Whether this guy was an angel, a psychiatrist or the

devil himself really didn't matter. Apparently, what he was was Frank's only ticket out of this place.

"Issues like *reality*," Frank threw out with a dose of helpless sarcasm.

"Precisely!" Nigel announced with such a flourish that it startled Frank. "Like reality—or even the lack thereof if you prefer. They're all sides of the same coin, but excellent observation on your part, Frank. I'm quite pleased."

Frank couldn't get a hold of what Nigel was saying. It was as if each syllable was slippery and there was no way to hang on to it long enough to extract the meaning. This really, absolutely could not be happening. He just knew that any minute he was going to wake up next to Sarah and give her a big morning snuggle and then go take a long hot shower—before it got cold and kicked him out. They'd have breakfast together and she'd stir the honey into her tea, making the wind chime sound that he loved to get lost in. Then he'd fight the traffic into work and try not to bitch too much when he got home that evening. Any minute now...

6

Frank's head felt like a timpani drum and there was a sharp pain running from his shoulder down into his right hand. It throbbed and pulsated and when Frank tried to roll his fingers into a fist to help squelch the pain it only got worse. It was hard for him to figure out where he was, but he was pretty sure that he was lying on the floor. He could see the empty oatmeal bowl next to his ear and at his feet he could just make out the shape of the kitchen table on its side.

In the background, he could hear Sarah frantically yelling, “No, he’s not choking. I need you to send someone now!”

Frank could see the kitchen light shining behind her head like a halo. She truly was his angel. Her hair was glowing light orange and her skin was milky smooth in the backwash from the hanging light above. But she wore an expression of twisted misery. She was crying and rubbing her fingers through his hair as she screamed at the person on the other end of the telephone. “I need an ambulance now, damn it!”

Everything was muffled and hollow sounding. Frank could see her lips moving but he couldn’t understand the meaning behind them. He didn’t know why Sarah was so upset. He wanted to say, “It’s okay baby...don’t cry,” but he couldn’t move his mouth. He couldn’t move anything. And why were they on the floor? It just didn’t make any sense to him.

There was a cloud closing in around the edges of Frank’s vision. A darkness that seemed to be erecting a wall between himself and his wife.

He felt himself drifting into it. He wanted to drift into it. It felt good, but somehow he knew that it was a bad thing. He just couldn’t figure out why.

So, for the moment at least, Frank was content to lie there holding on to Sarah’s hand, watching as the gray curtain crept in and framed her pale and beautiful face.

7

“You know that you’ve already begun to understand some of it,” Nigel said in a coaxing fashion.

Frank had that ‘What the hell?’ look on his face as he stared across the aisle at Nigel, shook his head and then dropped his gaze to the floor. He was not in the mood for this nonsensical conversation. This wasn’t a motivational exercise for Christ’s sake. It was hard enough to keep a grip without some formula dribble from this Nigel character.

“I’m talking about this *new* realization. The realization of this *new* reality verses your previous perception of it. I think you know what I’m talking about, Frank.”

Nigel watched as Frank fought with it. Watched as he struggled to deny what Nigel was saying. But it was no use to fight it and Nigel knew it. He knew that everyone eventually came to accept it...but it did take time and understanding.

“Earlier, there were two forces at work inside of you that were trying to tell you something. They were trying to tell you what was going on here. But they were at odds with each other and they were sending you mixed signals—and I’m pretty sure that you were aware of them both, weren’t you Frank?”

Frank felt like screaming. Felt like standing up and yelling as loud as he could. He felt like he was lost at sea with no hope of ever being found. But through all the confusion and anger, he was compelled to think about the feeling he’d had just moments earlier—the feeling inside without a voice. The unspoken realization about what had happened. He thought about what a powerful feeling it had been and how hard he had fought against what it *was* trying to tell him.

“That’s right,” Nigel said without waiting for Frank to respond. “You do remember. Good, you remember the voice from within. Very good indeed.”

“How do you know what I remember?” Frank barked at Nigel.

“Because,” Nigel said gently, “it’s the same for everybody. It’s the same for all of us. And I can see it in your eyes.”

Frank felt invaded. As if the act of Nigel being psychic could’ve made anything any creepier than it already was. He just felt as if someone had crawled up inside of him and was rooting around looking for stuff Frank didn’t want anyone else to see.

Nigel looked around the car and then stared up at the ceiling for a second as he gathered his thoughts. “That voice without a voice that you remember feeling earlier...well that was your *subconscious mind*. The reason that it seemed familiar to you is that it’s been talking to you your entire life. At times you may have been aware of its presence, but most the time, people are not.”

Frank glanced at Nigel for a second and then returned his attention to the floor.

“Everybody knows that they’ve got a subconscious mind, but most people don’t ever realize just exactly what that means. They never get the opportunity to take a closer look and see what makes it tick. To see exactly how it affects them on a daily basis.”

Nigel smiled and paused for a moment and then pressed on without the need for any visual cue from Frank.

“It’s actually a remarkable piece of engineering, Frank. And it’s been designed with a very specific purpose in mind. The subconscious mind is sort of a *check mechanism*. You know, like the guy that always asks the *other* question or takes the alternate viewpoint.

That's its job. That's what it's supposed to do. Do you understand what I'm saying, Frank?"

Frank didn't want to understand. He didn't want to talk either. All he could think about doing was getting out of that train. And he was willing to do anything to be able to do that. He had no idea where that would take him, but if getting out meant pretending to have a conversation with this aging hallucination then he was prepared to do that. So, begrudgingly, Frank answered the question.

"A little. I guess...I think so." He still felt prickly and muddled but he had resigned himself to the fact that, in order to get out of this place, he was going to make an effort. He was going to try and understand. And he intended to follow this conversation through to whatever end was in store. Frank could feel the pull of an unknown force urging him forward and this conversation did seem to hold untold answers for him.

"Technically, it's called the *Sub Surface Layer-III*."

"I'm sorry, what?" Frank wrinkled his nose with renewed confusion.

"Your subconscious, Frank. Its technical name is *Sub Surface Layer-III*." Nigel lifted his eyebrows as if to say 'Get it?' then continued undaunted. "The engineers that designed your subconscious called it *Sub Surface Layer-III* or SSL3 for short. It's really nothing more than a self-running subroutine."

Nigel knew that Frank was not really getting this part but then again, everyone had trouble with this part. He had found over the years that it was best to just plow through the basic fundamentals quickly and then go back over it in more detail as needed.

“*Sub Surface*,” Nigel continued quite matter-a-factly, “like, right below the surface. The subconscious exists just below our threshold of perception—at least most of the time.” Nigel smiled and nodded at Frank. More so to keep him engaged in the discussion than anything else. “And then *Layer-III* for where it falls in relationship to the other embedded protocols.”

Frank’s nose continued to wrinkle back into his eye sockets and the pained expression was a graphic indication of his inability to comprehend what Nigel was saying.

“The embedded protocols are nothing more than the programming that makes us what we are. The subroutines that define our very being and give us balance. These are the protocols that define humanity.”

Frank took a slow breath and started rubbing his forehead with the tips of his fingers. “You make it sound like people are some kind of computer or something.”

“In a way that’s true, Frank. In an overly simplistic way of course, but true none the less. We are all governed by the code that’s programmed into our genes at a cellular level. The instructions of life itself. There are pieces of that code that govern our instinctual behavior—like jumping at a loud noise or the need to eat or even to breathe.”

Nigel waited for the pained look on Frank’s face to subside slightly before he continued, “But on the other end of the spectrum, some of our most open-ended programming resides in the protocol known as *Layer-I*. This is what we refer to as the *conscious mind*. *Layer-I* is in the part of your brain that is in charge of what you do and

what you know...well, at least at this level. It's that part that you are most of aware of and the part that you interact with the most on a daily basis."

Again, Nigel waited and gave Frank a chance to digest what he'd just said. Even if he didn't totally understand it, Nigel knew that Frank would retain some of it.

"So, right under the conscious mind, or *Layer-I*, rests our subconscious mind, or *Layer-III*. Right under the surface or *sub-surface*. Hence: *Sub Surface Layer-III* or SSL3 for short. Your subconscious—SSL3—was designed to give you balance. To give everybody balance. I mean everybody has one...a subconscious mind that is."

Nigel's words hung in the air like some kind of bizarre mobile spinning and swaying in the breeze. Mixed within the sounds of the track and the rumbling engine noise, Frank could hear what sounded like a bell ringing methodically off in the distance. Ding, ding, ding, ding. It was a light sound, not like a big heavy bell, but something smaller—like a wind chime. The soothing sound brought back the image of his wife, Sarah, stirring her tea. She never drank coffee, just tea. And she always put a spoonful of honey in it and then stirred it over and over and over—the spoon making that soft tinkling sound against the inside of the ceramic coffee mug.

"Don't you leave me," she said and looked up from the cup. "Don't you dare, mister."

"Of course not," Frank reassured her. "I'd never leave you. I love you, Sarah. I love you so much."

The car shook and again the light flickered, dimmed momentarily and then returned to full brightness. Nigel walked over and sat down at the front of the car, a few feet from where Frank was staring out the window into the empty blackness beyond.

“Frank. I’m here to help you through this. To help you understand how the subconscious affects your reality. How SSL3 affects your reality. The most important thing to remember is the relationship between the conscious and the subconscious—between Layer-I and Layer-III. They do not live in harmony. They exist in, what we call a *diametrically opposed symbiosis*.”

Nigel’s words seemed inconsistent with the manner in which he was delivering them. Here was this gentle man, explaining things with warmth and compassion, yet his words were about cold, technical gibberish that were supposed to explain the paradox of the human psyche. But Frank couldn’t get away from that strange feeling from before. It was delicately laced with panic but at its core, it was something else. It was *need*. It was primal and raw and focused. And it was forcing Frank to push on toward understanding. Urging him to reach out and try to take what Nigel was offering him.

“Diamet—”

“*Diametrically opposed symbiosis*,” Nigel cut in. “It means ‘*two opposing forces that require each other to live*’—the conscious and the subconscious. Neither could exist without the other. They live in mutual need of each other.”

“Level-1 and 3?” Trying to participate in the conversation at any level, Frank repeated the terms more as a rhetorical statement than as a particular question.

“Uhhh.” Nigel nodded and tapped his index finger on his upper lip. “I see what you’re getting at Frank, but that may be jumping a little too far ahead. You’re absolutely right though, there actually is an SSL2. The thing is it really has to do more with *overlapping contiguous identities* than it does with any discussion on *metaphysical reality*. So if you don’t mind, let’s just keep it simple for right now and stick with L1 and L3.”

Frank’s face was starting to crinkle up again.

“You do see that’s just a little too advanced for our discussion right now, don’t you Frank?”

Frank wanted to say “Hell no,” but all he could get out was, “Sure.”

“Good, 1 and 3 it is...for now at least. So like I was saying, L1—the *conscious mind*—was developed and put into place first. It was the first self-contained, self-running protocol and it was wonderful. It encompassed all the aspects of freewill and self-motivation. Quite a brilliant piece of work really. The original design goal for L1 was to provide man with the tools needed to conquer his surroundings and achieve greatness. L1 supplied the determination and the drive.”

Nigel leaned a little closer to Frank. His delivery on the subject was quite energetic and Frank could see that whatever it was that Nigel was talking about, at least he enjoyed telling others about it.

“But it turned out,” Nigel spoke as he began pointing his finger toward Frank, “to be terribly destructive. Kind of like the old *burning the candle at both ends* analogy. In its

pursuit of perfection, L1 would end up focusing all available energy on obtaining one—or any—singularly specific goal. The system would run wide open until it ended up popping a cork on itself. It turned out to be just too unstable to run on its own for any period of time. Are you with me so far, Frank?”

Frank nodded and then shook his head a little.

“Good. So, with defeat in hand, the designers went back to the drawing board and went to work. But rather than change any of the core parameters of *Layer-I*, they came up with the idea of providing a stabilizing mechanism for it. Of giving it something to balance out its single mindedness. The system that was finally agreed upon was SSL3, *Sub-Surface Layer-III*—the subconscious.”

Nigel smiled and nodded his head as if to say, “There. You got it now, right?” Again, Frank moved his head slowly from side to side, not quite sure whether he should ask a question or just shut up and keep listening.

“The basic idea behind SSL3 was to utilize a buried subroutine that was also self-running and self-aware, but it wouldn’t necessarily be aware of *Layer-I* and vice-versa. It was designed with a backdoor connection that would communicate through something called the *diametrically opposed protocol*. Want to take a stab at what that means, Frank?”

“I don’t know...they need each other to live?” Frank mumbled like a psychiatric patient who’d just been given a little bit too much Thorazine. He’d remembered hearing

the word *diametric* early in a sentence and he knew that it had something to do with needing each other.

“Not a bad guess, Frank, but not completely true.” Nigel made a quick notation on the tablet and returned his attention to Frank. “You’re thinking of the *diametrically opposed symbiosis*. That’s the underlying design philosophy between Layer-I and Layer-III. *Symbiosis* is the word that denotes mutual need. And it is true; they do need each other to survive. But the *diametrically opposed protocol* is simply the means by which the two systems communicate with each other. Diametrical means contrary of opposite. So it’s really a way of communicating that’s designed to keep Layer-I and Layer-III at odds with each other. And it’s all done in the background in order to maintain a link without *you* knowing about it.”

Nigel nodded at the end of the sentence and smiled at Frank.

“So SSL3 became the check mechanism for keeping the *Layer-I* protocol from self-destructing. In a sense it’s a way of holding it back—a yin for its yang. Which, by the way, is another fascinating subject... uhmmm, but we can talk about that later. Anyway, after the first few trials, it became clear that L1 was capable of sustaining itself quite nicely when running under the influence of the opposing force, SSL3. So now L1 was free to get on with its primary mission of providing *motivated self will, desire, drive*...and now it had SSL3 there to keep it from spinning hopelessly out of control. It should be evident that, like so many other things in nature, this balance was absolutely essential.”

Frank's face was pale and he felt like he could no longer fight it. Truly this had to be insanity and he had begun to take comfort in that idea.

"So SSL3 performed successfully as a safety mechanism, or a kind of throttle, that kept the conscious mind from freewheeling out of control to its own destruction."

"SSL3," Frank enunciated as if it was the one word of a foreign language that he knew. Like *bathroom* or *water*.

"Can you tell me what SSL3 stands for, Frank?"

"Sub-layer something."

"Close, very close. *Sub Surface Layer-III*. The *diametrically opposed symbiosis* that was designed to keep our *conscious minds* from imploding. And it does it by questioning everything that the conscious mind does! Absolutely everything."

For some reason, all this strange talk and the zeal at which Nigel was presenting it, was having a calming effect on Frank. Or it could've just been a numbing sensation...Frank wasn't sure, but the fact of the matter was that he wasn't as panic stricken as he'd been in any of the moments leading up to this point. There was no longer that desolate feeling of hopelessness. In fact, Nigel's exaggerated delivery and periodic praise made him feel somehow hopeful for the first time since this whole episode had unfolded.

Nigel made another quick note on his pad and then leaned forward slightly to redirect Frank's attention. "But here's where the problem comes in, Frank. A little bit too much thought went into SSL3's design. I guess the engineers had already failed once, so they

worked extra hard not to have it happen again. You see, SSL3 works *too well*. In other words, it keeps the conscious mind, L1, in check really well.”

Frank turned and looked at Nigel. “I want to see my wife.”

Nigel grimaced and shook his head slowly. He placed his hand gently on Franks shoulder and said, “That’s really not possible right now.”

“Right now?”

“There are still, how shall I say, several variables in play at the moment.”

“I miss my wife. I need to know that she’s okay.”

“Later, when you look back on this moment, you’ll see that it was a point for pushing onward.” Nigel sighed and sat back against the bench seat, his back straight, hands folded neatly in his lap.

He waited for several moments, then sat forward and bounced slightly on the seat cushion underneath him. He pressed into the foam with his fingers and said, “Do you remember our conversation earlier? The one about reality and our perception of it?”

“No, not really. Maybe...”

“I was trying to make the point about how we perceive reality. What it really is in the context of everything else.”

“None of *this* is real. That’s my reality,” Frank said as he turned and looked directly at Nigel. “You’re not real.”

“Oh, now that was uncalled for. I can assure you that I am as real as you are and that everything around you is real. Everything in your life and in your sphere of perception

was, and continues to be real. So much more than you can possibly understand at this moment. But the bigger point here is not what you think is real or not real, but *how* that perception is shaped. How is it molded and formed into a tangible entity with life and blood and even more so, a purpose?"

"I'm never going to see my wife again, am I?"

"The question becomes moot as we move forward in our understanding of *how we control anything and everything in our path*. That's the thing that I'm here to teach you. The thing that you've got to understand in order to be able to move to the next level, Frank. You've got to see that you're in control. You always have been."

Frank was still for a long time, and so was Nigel. This was a moment. An important one. One that Frank knew would make a monumental difference for him, but he still wasn't quite sure how or why. There was an underlying sense of urgency to everything that was being spoken. A kind of overbearing sub-current that carried a rich and powerful message of its own. Frank looked at Nigel and, without saying a word, asked him to proceed.

"It's imperative that you understand how reality is created, Frank. If you leave here with nothing else today, you must understand how *you* are responsible for creating *your* own reality."

"Apparently I don't create it very well if I died of an embolism this morning." Frank was wallowing in his familiar pool of self-pity. He wasn't quite sure how it had

happened, but he'd gotten past panic and anger and was now just tired. He was tired of this conversation and he was tired of just plain not knowing.

Nigel face went blank. "I didn't say that you died."

"You said I died this morning!"

"I said, and I quote", Nigel flipped back to the specific page in the notepad;

"This morning at exactly 7:03 AM, Central Standard Time, after having blueberry muffins and coffee with his wife Sarah, Frank Shannon suffered a massive coronary embolism."

"I suffered..." Frank mumbled as if on the edge of some profound understanding.

"Listening is one of the most important things we can do, Frank. It, in and of itself, can alter the way we view our surroundings and therefore our perception of reality."

Nigel watched Frank's reaction carefully and then continued, "If you misunderstand the information provided you, then you will create your reality based on misinformation and not on fact. And that's an extremely dangerous thing to do."

"Why can't you just cut the talking-in-riddles crap and give me a straight answer? Am I dead or not? And if I'm not dead, then where the hell am I? In some kind of psychotic limbo or something? Or is this hell?"

Nigel looked down at his watch again, flipped the pages back on the notepad and wrote on the tablet. Then another quick look at the watch and still another notation.

"Well?"

Nigel snapped the pen down onto the surface of the paper. “You’re coming along quite nicely, Frank, quite nicely indeed. I am enormously pleased with your progress to this point.”

“What are you talking about? Yes or no? It’s a simple question and I think I deserve a simple answer.”

“I agree, you most certainly do. I have no qualms about that, but the timing of your question is the issue here. There’s basically a stair-step of activity in place and certain events are predicated on certain other events. ‘A’ leads to ‘B’ leads to ‘C’ and so on. You can’t just jump from ‘A’ to ‘C’ without the danger of skipping a vitally important step in the process, if you know what I mean.”

“Ohhhah!” Frank rose to his feet and walked down the aisle to the rear of the car. There he stood, facing the back of the car and resting his head against the cool glass on the rear door.

“It’s just a dream. A really, really bad dream.”

“It’s not a dream.” Nigel’s voice was indignant and filled with urgency.

Frank jumped back nearly a foot as he heard the voice resonate deep within him. He turned around and surveyed the car from top to bottom. Nigel sat at the other end, quietly watching his every move. Frank forced air into his lungs, raised his arms over his head and then ran his fingers deliberately through his hair, raking it backward over his scalp.

“This is not reality,” he said with a calming resolve.

“This is your reality,” Nigel countered in a matching tone. “You see, reality doesn’t exist until you say that it exists.”

“You sound like my wife.”

Nigel nodded slowly and smiled. “Your wife’s a very smart lady.”

Frank thought about what Nigel had just said. Thought about making his own reality and all the times that he’d heard Sarah preach to him on the same motivational bull.

“So you’re saying that I can just click my heels together three times and go back to my wife—if I just choose to do that?

“Well,” Nigel rocked his head from side to side slowly, “it’s really not quite that simple, but I do think that you’re getting a sense of what we’re talking about.”

“Of what? What exactly is it that I’m getting a sense of, Nigel? That’s right isn’t it? Nigel?”

“Nigel Peterson at your service.”

“Great, Nigel. So what is this big sense of something that I’m supposed to be getting right now? Because I hate to break this to you pal, but I don’t think I’m getting anything here but a headache.”

Frank stood quietly for a moment and shoved his hands deep in his pockets. He walked slowly back to the middle of the car and sat down in the same place he had been when he first became aware of his existence on the train.

“Throughout your whole life you’ve been affected by SSL3, Frank. It has been playing on your deepest fears and directing your failures. SSL3 has always been there in the

background. It's been trying to hold you back—that's what it does. But, Frank, where's the balance? What has been happening to—"

"Oh for God's sake will you just quit with the SSL crap! I think you're diametrically opposed to yourself!"

Frank turned to face the blackness outside the window and then, for the first time since he awoke on the train, he was aware of sounds other than that of the wheels on the tracks. Frank heard voices. Other people's voices and they were close by.

He stood and cocked his head from one side to another, listening with every cell in his body. It sounded like the voices were coming from just outside the train car, from just outside the window. The sound of two men talking—no, of two men shouting—but about what? Frank turned and leaned into the window, trying to make sense of the strange chatter.

From outside the window came a blinding flash of light followed by a deafening clap of thunder. Frank felt a sharp pain in his forearm and pressure across his face. He grabbed his shoulder and looked up at the ceiling, only to be hit with another flash of light as he felt himself buckle and drop to the floor.

8

"I have a faint pulse," the guy with the walkie-talkie mic strapped to his shoulder barked as the other man pulled at Frank's eyelids and flashed a penlight across his pupils. There was a deliberate quality to his speech that demonstrated both a cold

professionalism and a grave sense of concern. “Breathing is faint and erratic. Let’s prep for transport.”

The man with the penlight moved around to the other of side of Frank, kicking the empty oatmeal bowl out of the way. The first man keyed the walkie-talkie mic on his shoulder and announced that they’d be ‘moving a thirty-five year old male with signs of massive blood clotting.’

The men’s faces were cast with a yellow-green tinge and they wore white shirts with red and gold badges on the shoulders. And what’s with the flashlights?

“Shit. What the hell was that?”

Someone was pushing something into his lungs. And it hurt. His mouth was covered and it seemed like no one could hear what he was saying. Like he was yelling into a Dixie cup. There were needles stuck in his arms and tubes running up to clear plastic bags that one of the men was holding in his hand.

“All right, let’s roll,” one of them said as they both lifted Frank off of the floor and up onto something soft.

Outside of his house, Frank could see the men towering over him on either side as the sky rushed past behind their heads. Sarah was with them too. She was running to keep up and she looked so frightened, so alone. Frank just wanted to reach out and hold her. He needed to give her a big hug and let her know that everything was going to be all right. The tough part was that he was pretty sure things were not going to be all right. He was

pretty sure that something really, really bad was going on and he would be unable to protect her from it.

Frank could see the pale blue sky overhead. And there were clouds—thick dark clouds everywhere. Gray clouds that had begun to cover the men’s faces as they moved Frank across his front yard toward the street. As they rolled him across the grass, Frank was jostled and shaken as though he was riding an old wooden rollercoaster. Through the growing darkness, he could see his neighbors. There was Mrs. Osborne with her hand over her mouth. She ran towards Sarah, saying something, and then they were hugging each other.

Frank tried desperately to talk to them. He wanted to let Sarah know that he was all right. It wasn’t her fault, and he wanted her to know that. But even though his mouth was moving, no sound was coming out. His fingers felt fat and tingly and someone was holding his hand. It was Sarah and she was crying.

“Sarah.” Frank called out but no one answered. “Sarah!” Something was pushing into his lungs again. He didn’t like it.

“Everything’s going to be alright, Mr. Shannon. Just you hang on.”

Again the men lifted Frank into the air. There was the sound of a car door opening and slamming somewhere and then the raspy sound of an engine starting.

“Watch your step, Mrs. Shannon,” one of the men said, extending his hand to Sarah and helping her up next to Frank.

Frank could feel the vibration of the engine across his back as the motor accelerated and they began to move. The vehicle lurched from side to side and bounced a couple of times before smoothing out. Frank could hear a siren and he saw red flashes of light licking at the inside of the windows.

He felt bloated and couldn't remember the last time he'd been so tired. As the vehicle bounced and shook, the gentle rocking and swaying helped him relax. The sound of the radio in the background and of the two men talking to each other combined with the sound of the siren to create a fuzzy wash of sound.

"Sarah, I'm fine. I'm going to be just fine. Please don't think that you had anything to do with this. It's really not your fault. Really!"

In the back of the ambulance, holding Frank's hand tightly and crying, Sarah looked up at one of the men in the white uniforms. The man looked deliberately at Sarah but didn't say a word—he didn't have to. Frank could see it in his eyes too.

"No," Sarah screamed and leaned forward to put her head down on Frank's chest.

But before she had a chance to move, the paramedic put the heel of his hand hard against her shoulder and shoved her back out of the way. He clasped his hands together and then popped Frank in the middle of his chest, hard.

"Clear!" Frank heard the man shout.

He felt something cold and slimy on his chest and then there was a flash of light and a sharp burning pain.

Frank jumped half out of his seat and grabbed at the front of his chest like it was on fire.

“Crap, that hurt!”

Panting and rubbing at his shoulder, Frank took a minute and tried to figure out what had just happened. The last thing he remembered was hearing voices outside the train and then...

“I’m not dead.” Frank turned to face Nigel directly, “I’m not dead, am I?”

Nigel pressed his lips together and rolled his head from side to side. “No.”

“Am I dying? Will I see my wife again? Am I going to be okay?” Frank was now on the edge of his seat, rubbing his chest across the middle and talking in quick short bursts.

“It’s important to realize that this is a transitional phase for you, Frank.”

“Send me back. I want to go back to my wife. I need to tell her that I’m okay.”

“Believe me, Frank, I do wish that it was that simple. But, it is not.”

Frank sat for a minute while the deep panting subsided and his brain went numb. Like the dentist’s Novocain slowly deadening the nerve endings in your mouth, so too, the train car and its hypnotic cadence of wheels and track were deadening Frank’s senses into oblivion.

“I want to go back to my wife, Nigel.” Frank spoke with a renewed calm in his voice.

“I’d be lying to you if I indicated that that was out of the realm of possibility, Mr. Shannon.”

Frank had a little trouble digesting Nigel's entire statement. As if it had to be broken down into little pieces before his brain could process it and extract any useful information from it. Was Nigel saying that he could go back, or that he could not?

"Is it clear yet, Frank? If you haven't already figured it out, you and I are here for a reason. Your choices and decisions over the course of our conversation will dictate your *future reality*. Nothing more, nothing less."

"My *choices* will *dictate my reality*? What is that? More of that motivational—see it, picture it, make it happen kind of crap? You sound like my wife again. All I want to know is what I need to do to get back to her. Tell me what you want me to do."

"Your wife really is an exceptional woman. You could learn a lot from her, Frank. But, for the moment I'm afraid, you're stuck with me and I can't emphasize how important it is for you to concentrate on the task at hand, Mr. Shannon. And yes, to answer your question, that's precisely what I am saying—see it, picture it, make it happen. Do you understand what that means?"

For the first time since entering this nightmare, there was hope. Hope of escape or of somehow transcending this dungeon and emerging back in the light. Back in the light, with Sarah and with his awful job and with the daily traffic and all the wonderful crap he had to put up with all the time. Anything would be better than this.

"Now let's see if we can get back to what we were talking about before. The contrast between the conscious mind and *that other thing*." Nigel paused briefly to make sure

Frank wasn't zoning out again. He had anticipated it last time, but now it was important for Frank to stay with him and begin to understand.

"Whether we call it SSL3 or just refer to it as your *subconscious mind* doesn't really matter. The fact remains that it's the *can't* against your *can*. It's the *stop* against your *start* and it's all things failure and disappointment wrapped up into one potent little package that just keeps going and going and going. Are you starting to get a picture of what we're talking about, Frank?"

Frank replayed the last several minutes in his head. He wasn't dead. Which meant that this place wasn't hell. Nigel, whoever or whatever he was, was his ticket out of this place. Some how he was the gate keeper and this meeting—this conversation—was the key. But Nigel was evasive too. He wouldn't answer a straight question. Everything had to be cloaked in riddles. Frank was going to have to engage. He was going to have to participate in order to get his answers.

"So...your sub conscious is like the Energizer Bunny," Frank answered while keeping his eyes locked on Nigel's.

"Yes, Frank. But, like the Energizer Bunny on steroids. Like the Energizer Bunny with a mischievous, ominous calling. An Energizer Bunny who's one purpose in life is to hold you back and keep you from getting *anywhere* important and to keep you from getting *anything* that you want. But you should know that better than anyone Frank."

Frank heard the last sentence come out of Nigel's mouth but was afraid to ask what he meant by it. He was afraid of starting something that he was sure that he didn't want to finish. So he allowed Nigel to continue without interruption.

"Okay, let's look at this from another angle. Over the years, there have been literally thousands of books and papers written on the power of *positive thinking*. It sounds like maybe you've had a bad experience with some of them. It's been a topic of wide debate in one way or another for over a hundred thousand years. But every last bit of it has to do with inner dynamics of controlling the affect of SSL3. Some methods accomplish it by overpowering it with their conscious mind or L1—by just running over it with sheer willpower and determination."

Frank's eyes remained locked in place, unwilling to let his gaze deviate for even a second. As if the simple act of eye contact was enough to ensure understanding, and thus, his release from this nightmare.

"While others concentrate on the subconscious mind itself, the root of the problem, by trying to keep it in check through meditation and breathing and such. Let me tell you that's the harder way to go." Nigel rolled his eyes and made a little "whew" sound through his lips.

"So what's the point? I don't understand why you're telling me all of this. If I'm not really dead then just let me out of here. It doesn't matter anymore."

“It does matter, Frank. It matters quite a lot more than you can possibly realize. But suffice it to say that it’s very important for you to try and grasp this, Frank. *Very important.*”

The way Nigel said that ‘very important’ part sent a chill up the back of Frank’s neck. Although he hadn’t actually articulated it, he was conveying a certain gravity to the situation that made Frank stop and think. But it was becoming increasingly difficult to concentrate. He was only interested in one thing and that was how he could get home. How he could get back to Sarah.

Then he could hear the sounds again. That familiar tinkle of the spoon against the cup, the rhythmic sound of the train and that damn song. If he never heard Don Henley again it would be too soon. And there was a whooshing sound, steady and rhythmic. Like wind moving through a bellows...but not like wind.

Frank closed his eyes and thought for a minute. He thought about the ambulance ride and about Sarah crying. He thought about Mrs. Osborne and he thought about Nigel.

“I still could die, couldn’t I?”

Nigel nodded.

“You’re saying that based on *what happens on this train*, I could still die?”

“Very good, Frank. You certainly are one of my best.”

“Best what?”

“Why pupil, Frank. Student, trainee, proselyte...and I, Nigel Peterson, am your mentor.”

“That’s why I’m here, on this train? To be *taught* something?”

“Certainly. Is that such a difficult concept to grasp, Frank?”

Again, Frank took a moment to try and put some perspective on all of this. He knew that he either was currently, or had been recently in an ambulance. He was also almost positive that he was not dead, yet. And he also knew that, somehow, this conversation with Nigel was going to play a role in what happened next.

“What am I here to learn, Nigel?”

“We’re doing it now, Frank. We’ve already begun the process. It’s my responsibility to get you to a point where you don’t embarrass yourself as you move forward...if you move forward. You see, that reflects badly on the both of us. A lot of people end up in this situation and want to do nothing more than complain about their whole life—the whole retched thing. From one side to the other, absolutely nothing turned out the way they wanted it to. Everything they did failed and the whole world was against them in the process. Do you know anyone like that, Frank? The complainer type I mean?”

Frank sighed and pulled his mouth to one side. “Yea, I know one in particular.”

“Our one overwhelming mission together is to get you to understand how utterly ridiculous that kind of talk is. Because L1 is a freight train that will roll over anything and everything in its path on its quest to *create* its own reality. That’s its job and it’s very good at it. All you have to do is guide it. Tell it what to do and let it do all the work. Make a plan and then just hold SSL3 at bay. Manage it, in a sense—but you do that by

being aware of its existence. By acknowledging its presence and understanding its mission.”

Nigel raised his eyebrows and waited for a sign from Frank before continuing. Frank’s head was clearing but it still felt like it was about to explode.

“So when someone sits where you are now and tells me that their life wasn’t what they’d expected or wanted, I’ve just got to laugh. It’s like you said earlier with Dorothy and the ruby slippers. You’ve got the power your whole life to make it into *absolutely anything* that you want. Most people never figure that out, Frank—ever.”

Frank looked down at his feet, half expecting to see a sparkling pair of ruby red pumps on his feet. But all he saw were his black, well worn Rockports.

Again Frank found himself thinking about the way Sarah looked and smelled. He wanted to hold her again. He wanted so to just talk to her. To tell her how right she’d been—about everything. He wanted to go home now.

“Nigel?”

“Yes, Frank?”

Frank turned to look directly into Nigel’s eyes. “Am I going to die?”

“Everybody dies, Frank.”

“Nigel?”

Nigel broke eye contact to look out the window and then took a long slow breath.

“There are decisions being made as we speak—and then questions to follow.”

“Am I going to see my wife again?”

Nigel studied Frank's face for a long time, rubbing his chin with his fingers. "Do you remember the last time you talked with her?"

Frank's initial reaction was 'of course I do', but he thought for a moment before blurting out his answer. He'd had breakfast with his wife this morning. He remembered that. He remembered that she'd made blueberry muffins from a pre-mix package and they'd sat at the kitchen table together drinking coffee and tea—Sarah always drank tea, never coffee—and then he'd left for work.

"You had oatmeal, Frank and you never left for work."

Frank turned his head from Nigel's view as he realized that he hadn't opened his mouth since Nigel had asked him the question about his wife. Nigel had commented on what Frank was thinking, not on what he was saying. A flood of emotion poured over Frank as he recalled the smell of Sarah's cheek and the sound of her stirring honey into her tea. But inside the swirl of emotion and fear and pain was something else, something soothing and satisfying.

There were things beyond words that one could just know. That life was too precious to just let it happen to you. That participation was required. You have a path and that path is designed to take you beyond whom and what you are right now. The lessons that you need are provided, over and over again, until you learn them. The choice is always yours. *The choice is always yours.*

He could feel more right now, right here by himself, than he had ever, ever felt before. He could see that happiness *was* an environment that you could create for

yourself, regardless of where you wound up in the world. And that it had nothing to do with what you had, rather it was based on who you had become and who you would continue to strive to be. We are all mentors and we are all students.

Frank was beginning to understand, although he couldn't find the right words, he welcomed the understanding as it seeped into his soul or psyche or somewhere deep inside of him. For the first time since he had arrived on this train, Frank knew what he had to do, and now, he was not afraid to do it.

"Nigel?"

"Yes, Frank?"

"I'm ready now."

10

From the black plastic and chrome boom-box came the familiar sound of the Don Henley singing with the Eagles "...*why don't you come to your senses, you've been out ridin' fences, for so long now...*"

The CD player was sitting on a small end table next to a rolling rack of specialized monitoring equipment. Screens pulsed and beeped in response to the tiny electrical signals generated by heart and brainwave activity. On the floor next to a stainless steel bed, a chrome IV rack held two clear bags of colorless fluid. The liquid dripped rhythmically down into tubes that dangled like draping ivy. They were attached to needles inserted into the forearm, neatly crisscrossed with white adhesive tape.

The hospital room reeked of the pungent odor of disinfectants. Overhead, the fluorescent light flickered and popped, momentarily going out and then coming back on with a steady hum. In the corner of the room, a large respirator rumbled its low frequency groan as it provided life-sustaining oxygen. Swooshing first in, then out, in a slow cadence.

Next to the only window in the room stood Frank Shannon's sister, Melissa, staring out into the blackness of the night. Across from her, on the other side of the bed, Sarah's mother and father sat quietly on folding metal chairs, holding each other's hands and praying under their breath.

Next to the head of the bed sat Frank Shannon. In his hand, he cradled his wife's arm as if it were a piece of irreplaceably delicate china, slowly rubbing her palm with his thumb. A large tube ran from her swollen mouth and was taped to her cheek. Tiny wires ran from several small white dots across her forehead. Her face was bruised and puffy, one side covered by a large gauze bandage.

"It should be me on that bed." Frank broke down as the tears flooded into his eyes again. "Why wasn't it me?"

His words trailed off as a soft-spoken voice came from the doorway behind him, "I'm sorry, the early EEGs are showing more damage than we had anticipated. I'm so very sorry."

The elderly man in the light blue smock stood almost motionless as he spoke. He was in the awkward position of needing to say more, but not being able to find the words. It

didn't matter how many times he had to perform this task, he could never seem to find the *right* words to tell someone's family these things.

"I'm afraid..." the man paused and looked around the room—saying everything that needed to be said in that instant with only his mournful expression, "...well, again...I'm terribly, terribly sorry."

Frank was numb all over and he was having trouble seeing his wife through the haze of the rushing tears. How could this be happening? They were just having breakfast and...

Sarah's mom began to sob uncontrollably and pull at her husband's shirt.

The man, still standing motionless in the doorway, continued softly, "I'm truly sorry. Um...there's a...a counselor outside that would like to talk to you about...well...about your options. I'll give you a few minutes to yourself and then I'll send him in, if that's alright."

As the man stood, listening to the heartache fill the room, Melissa made eye contact with him and nodded slightly, indicating for the group that that would be all right. The man took a deep breath and looked around the room.

Sarah's father stroked his wife's hair as she buried her face in his chest. "It doesn't make any sense," she sniffled and wiped her nose on his already soaked T-shirt. "Why my Sarah? My baby?" Her words were lost as she rolled her face back into her husband's gentle embrace.

“The nurse told me that the man in the pickup was killed on impact,” Melissa spoke without turning from the empty darkness beyond the window. “I guess that’s justice for broad-siding an ambulance.” She glanced back at the others in the room and then returned her gaze to the nothingness outside.

Frank squeezed his wife’s hand gently and tried to stop crying. But the effort only made the sobbing worse. He was incapable of hearing what anyone else was saying. His life was slipping away from him and he could feel his sanity slipping right along with it.

Without another word, the man turned and disappeared quietly into the hallway, leaving Sarah’s family alone with her artificially animated body.

“Why? Why couldn’t it have been me...why?”

A hand fell gently on Frank’s shoulder, patting him reassuringly.

“I understand,” came the empathetic voice from behind him. “But there comes a time in every journey when we have to prepare ourselves to move on. Are you ready to move on, Frank?”

“I don’t understand...it should’ve been me,” Frank spoke as he rose to face the person at the other end of the gentle hand, “It was supposed to have been me...”

“I know, Frank,” the man said almost in a whisper. His eyes greeted Frank’s surprise with warmth and compassion.

“Nigel?”

“Yes, Frank, it’s me.” Nigel took his hand off of Frank’s shoulder and extended it gently forward to steady him.

“But...I don’t—”

“It’s time to go, Frank. Can we talk outside for minute?”

Frank looked at Nigel for a long time and then back at Sarah’s parents and said, “I’ll be in the hall for a minute. Let me know if there’s any change.”

Sarah’s mother continued to cry and her father kept stroking his wife’s hair without a sound or the slightest indication that they’d heard anything that Frank had just said.

Frank stared at them, trying to figure out if they understood what he was asking.

“Pop?”

Again, there was no response. Not a look or a nod or anything. Frank turned his attention toward the window at the far side of the room. “Melissa?”

Melissa was frozen in time, staring out the wind. She made no sound and gave no indication that she’d even heard Frank’s words.

“Are you guys alright?” Frank looked from his sister back to Sarah’s folks.

“They can’t hear you, Frank,” Nigel said softly.

“But I don’t understand, Nigel...” Frank turned to look at Sarah lying in the bed and started to cry again. “I don’t understand...”

Nigel put his arm gently around Frank’s shoulders and then started moving him toward the open doorway. As he led Frank into the hallway beyond he said, “You will, Frank. You will soon enough.”

The End