

In a Better Country

Michael Fillerup

But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly home . . .

(Heb. 11:16)

“You don’t have to go,” she whispered, the morning grogginess in her voice betraying an urgency that was futile but necessary.

“I know that,” he mumbled.

“Bishop Tolman said—”

“I know. I know what Bishop Tolman said.”

She twisted onto her side, freeing an arm from the sheets.

“You’re going alone then.”

He shoved another T-shirt into the duffel bag and zipped it shut.

“Okay, fine,” she muttered. She would crawl out of bed now, throw on her terrycloth bathrobe and slippers, and hope that no one recognized her driving down the freeway at first light.

He had faithfully dispatched his morning duties: lugging the trash can out to the curb for Friday pick-up, unloading the dishwasher, walking Cleo to the end of the cul de sac and back. But instead of his perfunctory routine of feed and flee, he had lowered himself to one knee, running a hand gently along the spine of their black lab.

“We’ll see you later, girl,” he whispered, and she had stopped chomping on the dry nuggets to gaze up at him with doleful eyes, as if divining his future. Framing her face with his hands, he leaned in close, inhaling her doggy breath. “Man, you stink!” he said and rubbed her head briskly before turning away.

During the fifteen-minute drive to the airport, Margie stared straight ahead, her profile a flashback to the various other times he had failed her—blue eyes iced over, chin tilted high, Geena Davis lips puckered, not for a farewell kiss but to blow him off. As the

Camry idled outside the entry, Mark maneuvered out of the front seat and grabbed the duffel bag and day pack from the trunk. When he leaned in to kiss her, she turned her head and gave him the back side of her unadorned hair. He inhaled the smell of a restless sleep, of dried sweat, fear, and anger.

Okay, he thought. You're just making it easier.

"Thanks for the ride," he said and, in one quick motion, shut the door and waved good-bye—more like a sarcastic salute. He didn't look back but heard her drive away long before the sliding glass doors rolled open to welcome him.

There were four legs to his journey, the first three by plane: to Phoenix, to El Paso, to a polysyllabic south-of-the-border city he could barely pronounce. A bus or train or burro would take him the final leg.

Or so he hoped. He had no directions, no itinerary, no game plan—nothing except the duffel bag, the day pack, a billfold with \$200 cash, and a map torn from a State Farm Road Atlas of North America. His destination was a tiny drop of blood on the loins of northern Mexico.

Rinsed clean by last night's thunderstorm, the small mountain town he called home positively glistened: the pine trees and the little homes positioned neatly around them, the rolling greens of the golf course, the brick buildings downtown. As the plane gained altitude and curved south, he caught a final glimpse of the mountains, the sun washing across their snow-packed peaks, turning them gold.

Flying had never bothered him, not even in these puddle jumpers where you sat shoulder to shoulder and rode the wind like a cowboy on a bronco that couldn't decide if it was going to buck or break. But the roar of the engines was certain to amplify the siren in his head that had started after the phone call and hadn't left since. He pressed his palms to his cheeks and let his middle fingers slide down over his ears, trying to head it off, but it was too late.

He gazed down at the forests of ponderosa pine, chagrined at their resemblance to his own thinning scalp—spikes of hair surrounded by patches of sunburned skin. But the pines shortly gave

way to sagebrush and chaparral as the desert rolled out like a rumpled old carpet crowded with legions of saguaro cacti.

Within the hour they were descending into Phoenix—to his eye, an intestinal mosaic of asphalt, concrete, and terra cotta inlaid with turquoise swimming pools. As he looked down on the rush hour traffic stuttering along the gray arteries of the city, he wondered: How many other icy farewells this morning? How many happy returns tonight? How many broken hearts and good or bad surprises? Did God really keep an inventory of each and every one, meticulously monitoring the comings and goings of the human race? Not just in this world but worlds without number? Every fallen follicle accounted for? Or was the monitoring more like wearing spiritual ankle bracelets? Then was He a glorified hall monitor or the Grand Chess Wizard maneuvering the pieces one bewildering step ahead of the devil? And did the devil ever catch up? Did he ever checkmate God? Was it a never-ending winner-take-all, or a best of seven series? A best of dispensations? Was it possible for Satan to outfox the fox? Win some battles but not the war? Was Sean maybe a casualty of battle or a victim of friendly fire? Or did some guardian angel fall asleep at the switch, take a doughnut break when he was supposed to be watching Sean's backside?

Stop it. Just freaking the hell stop it. He snapped the rubber band on his wrist three times, hard.

He had a one-hour layover, which would have given him time to check his duffel bag if he had wanted to, but it was small and he had packed light: a change of garments, two clean T-shirts, a pair of jeans, a shaving kit, and a light jacket. In his day pack, he carried a pen and notepad, a John Grisham paperback, several granola bars, a pocket-sized Spanish/English dictionary, and a driver's license for I.D. No debit or credit cards. He had heard enough horror stories about gringos getting thrown in jail and being forced to max out their plastic.

He took a seat in the waiting area where the weather man on the TV monitor was bracing the Phoenicians for their tenth consecutive day of 100-plus heat. Mark tried not to think about home, but his thoughts fled north to earlier that morning when he had soft-stepped upstairs to say good-bye to Stacie, sleeping soundly under the open window on the last day of school. Nothing out of

the ordinary except that he had lingered in the doorway a few moments longer than usual, taking in the details of her life: a poster directly above her bed of a leggy, pony-tailed Mia Hamm executing a goal kick; the wind chimes in the shape of leaping dolphins tinkling in the breeze; a collage of every certificate, note, Valentine, letter, or postcard she had ever received covering the wall behind her bed. Her chubby little arm was wrapped around a soccer ball as if it were her best friend.

This morning he had noticed a particular sweetness in the malformations of her face: the thick, pouty lips, the bulbous forehead, the eyes from an alien continent. He had knelt down by the bed, put a hand almost imperceptibly on her brow, and smoothed back her bangs. "I fixed your flat," he whispered.

She had mumbled something—slurred, semi-intelligible.

"There might be a slow leak, but it should be okay until I. . ." *Come home?* The last two words had stumbled out like an accident. Part plea, part question, a two-headed hitchhiker who can't decide which direction to go.

Eyes shut, still dreaming, she had lifted a hanging hand. "Thanks, Daddy."

A full-sized jet carried him across the southern desert and into a yellow haze from a massive forest fire trying to devour the upper half of Mexico. Squeezed into a coach seat, reading the details, Mark snapped the front page of the *Arizona Republic*, smiling meanly. Retribution, he thought.

He had figured that El Paso would be a sneak preview of the Third World to come, and the airport didn't disappoint. The effect was partly due to the paint-stained, concrete floors and the plastic sheets draping the corridors, half-snagging the industrial dust, but mostly it was the echo of Spanish everywhere, from the garbled announcements over the intercom to the mounted TV monitors where men in suits and ties reported the latest breaking news.

Mark followed the bilingual signs (*Puerta/Gate. Salidas/Departures*) past the concessions—Burger King, souvenir shops, sports bars—down a long corridor opening into an enormous hall that was empty save for a small chair beside an open doorway in the far corner. He passed through it, followed a carpeted corridor

around two corners, and dead-ended at a deserted counter with a large number 22 posted above it. Mark double-checked his boarding pass—22, 1:22—, then checked his watch: 11:10. Two hours to kill.

He sat down on a vinyl chair and opened the Grisham paperback—a random grab off his bookshelf. He tried to read but after four pages realized that absolutely nothing had registered. He started over; but failing again to focus, he put the book aside. It was 11:15. Stacie would be lining up for lunch now. Hopefully her reading circle hadn't been quite as catastrophic as the day before. Margie would have returned from her morning walk, had finished tidying up around the house, and was probably out making home visits. Her calling as Relief Society president had been a godsend. All of that free time she'd had to think and mope and heap blame and second-guess had now been replaced by good works: lifting up the feeble hands, changing bedpans, delivering hope on a cookie sheet. Mark wondered if her anger had simmered down. Was she thinking about him, or had she mentally dispatched him for the weekend? Or longer? His return ticket was open, although he had estimated three or four nights. You'd have thought he was leaving for a year. Or checking out for good. What she didn't know she would always deduce. Crazy idiotic foolhardy stupid head-up-the-ass idea, she had called it—throwing propriety and position to the wind (*Mother of the Ward*, the shining example). She rarely cursed, but when she did, you knew she meant business. She was pissed.

At 12:50 a man in a gray suit and a woman in a scarlet dress and black hose entered the waiting area and quick-stepped to the counter. Mark sprang to his feet a little too quickly, startling the woman, who arched a brow. Mark fell into line behind them and tried to eavesdrop on their three-way, but the matronly Latina behind the counter was speaking in a very rapid dialect that bore no resemblance to any grammar or vocabulary he had retained from two very distant and inattentive years of high school Spanish. They may as well have been speaking Cantonese.

His three brothers and his sister had all served Spanish-speaking missions for the Church—this trip would have been duck soup to them—but inspiration had called him to work state-side, in scenic Minnesota. Best mission in the church, they used to say as part

of the conditioning. Best state-side mission in the Church, he and his companion would mutter on the sly.

He wondered now if his Negative Nellie attitude back then had greased the wheels of Fate against him and his house. . . wait: we don't believe in Fate. Justice, yes, punishment, natural and unnatural consequences, guilt, payback . . . all of that we've got in abundance, a six-thousand-year supply—but Fate?

Best mission in Minnesota.

The plane looked more like a rocket, small, sleek, silver. Squeezing through the doorway, he found himself sharing the eighteen-seater with a group of Mexican professionals, all middle-aged men except for the woman in the red dress, and a tall, leathery gringo who was wearing a disappointed but deadly look, as if he had just failed a James Bond screen test. They sat in single seats divided by a two-foot-wide aisle.

The Aeromexico pilot and co-pilot looked official enough in their white shirts and ties and bronze badges, but they kept fiddling with the control panel like teenagers playing video games. The plane labored off the runway, fighting the oppressive pull of gravity. When it finally broke free, it seemed to climb the stairway to the clouds like an obese dog, lunging and grasping at each step. Mark looked through the tiny portal and noticed the wing straining up and down in the turbulence. The ABROCHE SU CINTURON sign began blinking in panic-stricken red; and a moment later, the plane lurched and dipped dangerously downward. Pilot and co-pilot were frantically working the switches as the plane bucked and rattled through the swirling white air. Mark focused on the rivets along the wing, wondering if at any moment they might pop off like buttons on a too-tight dress. James Bond was reaching for his barf bag. The pilot and co-pilot were no longer laughing.

Mark felt unusually calm, as if imminent death would be a form of honorable release. He started to say a silent prayer, but a blast of wind—something—smacked his side of the plane, summoning up Margie's words and Bishop Tolman's warning: *If you go, you go solo.* . . He had done his praying *a priori*.

As the turbulence simmered and the plane leveled out, the ABROCHE SU CINTURON light died. The pilot said something over the intercom in Spanish that made everyone else chuckle.

Peering grimly through the portal, Mark could see nothing but a gray infinity beyond the wing. Recalling old axioms: *Sometimes you have to leave to come home again.* Or the motto framed on his son's wall: *Return with honor.* How about just plain Return? Return in one piece? Return period?

An hour later the plane began its descent. As the clouds thinned, he saw a vast, flat land of beige-on-brown parchment stained with scattered clumps of trees and a river winding across its length like a long, lazy signature. The yellow haze, compliments of the southern inferno, cast a surreal, coastal fog over the city, although they were two hundred miles from the sea. Little wind-up planes cluttered the sides of the narrow runway.

The plane set down gently. The co-pilot said something to Mark that he didn't understand, but he nodded back: *Gracias.* As he stepped onto the portable stairwell, his hand shot to his forehead, blocking the sudden glare. He fumbled for his sunglasses. They slipped through his fingers, and as he lunged for them, he lost his footing. Behind him the woman in red gasped as he grabbed the metal railing, sparing himself a long rough-and-tumble ride to the blacktop, but not before his side slammed hard against the railing, his left leg scraping along the steps. He swore softly as pilot, co-pilot, the woman in red, and all of the other passengers swarmed around him—or so it seemed. There wasn't possibly enough room for all of them to converge on the stairwell, yet it seemed as if they were collectively helping him up, speaking to him in urgent Spanish, dusting him off, genuinely concerned about his welfare. Too embarrassed to feel any pain in the moment, he politely waved them off: "*Está bien, gracias, está bien.*"

He continued down the stairs, ignoring the ache in his ankle yet knowing that, by tomorrow morning, it would swell up like a toad. One of the young professionals handed him the remains of his sunglasses, and Mark thanked him curtly: *Gracias.* His word for the day. He really just wanted to get on his way and forget about the incident. Talk about a greenhorn! He may as well have worn a sign on his back: *Kick me, I'm stupid. Rob me, I'm a tourist.*

He hobbled across the blacktop as the sun clawed at his face. The runway looked like boiling water. By the time he reached the sliding glass doors of the single-story building, his shirt was soaked and sticking to his back. He had dressed for warm

weather—short-sleeved, button-up shirt, beige cotton pants, Nike sneakers—but this heat was downright savage.

The airport was small but clean and carpeted, with large glass doors and windows creating an aquarium effect that far out-classed the concrete tomb in El Paso. Mark retrieved his duffel bag from the carousel, passed through customs, and with gestures and very broken Spanish bought a ticket on a shuttle bus. The shuttle belched and bellowed three or four miles down a desert highway before pulling into a large parking area full of old cars and their rusted ancestors. He shuffled across the yard and into what looked like a gigantic warehouse with little glass-enclosed shops along one end offering snacks, novelties, bottled water, soda pop, ice cream. There was a game room for the children with pinball machines, plastic cars and mini-rockets to mount, and video games with annoyingly loud sirens and flashing lights. A long series of counter-tops stretched across the opposite end of the building below large marquees advertising the various bus lines: ESTRELLA BLANCA, CABALLERO DE AZTECA, PALOMA BLANCA. In the center of the building, Mexican families sat in rows of vinyl chairs bolted to the cracked linoleum floor.

He had no idea which line to take. He gravitated toward the counter with the biggest, brightest, cleanest-looking sign, PALOMA BLANCA, although the second “A” was hanging like a key on a hook. *Don't judge a book by its cover*, he reminded himself, but in this case it was all he had to go by.

Mark changed \$150 to pesos and kept the other \$50 in American dollars for the trip home. At the counter, a young woman greeted him with a big smile tainted by a distracting gold rim around each of her two front teeth. Mark handed her two 100 peso bills. She gave him back a ticket and two twenties, spewed out a blur of words, and pointed to the schedule on the marquee. He was disheartened to see that the bus didn't depart until 16:40—4:20 his time—and would not arrive at his destination until almost midnight.

“Sí,” he said, fumbling with his wallet, the ticket, his change, adding as an awkward after-thought: “*Gracias.*”

The big clock on the south wall read 1:35, and his watch showed 1:32. That he was traveling in the same time zone gave

him a strange sense of comfort. Whether by his watch or theirs, he had three hours to burn.

He browsed around the glass-enclosed shops and bought a liter of water which he promptly guzzled down, then strolled over to the restroom, a little annoyed that he had to feed the turnstile five pesos. The interior was surprisingly cool, although that creature comfort was mitigated by a septic stench and a steady, trickling sound as if someone were at the urinal trying to break a World Record. In fact, there was only one other patron, a middle-aged man rinsing his hands in a stand-up porcelain washbasin minus one corner. The man shook the excess water from his fingers and sauntered outside, leaving Mark alone.

It was a little spooky—the dim lighting, the perspiring concrete walls, the stale smell of neglect. But he savored the moment of solitude. From the moment he had landed in El Paso, he had felt like a stranger in a strange land, surrounded by people who did not understand his language or his intentions or his grief. He could only imagine what the locals were thinking of this blue-eyed giant moving through their midst.

He turned sideways and checked his profile in the water-spotted mirror. Unlike Margie, who had maintained her maidenly figure over time, he had taken on the fat and freckled look of Auric Goldfinger. He wondered if it was the cumulative baggage of fifty-two years on the planet or the stress of the past year that had doomed him to droop prematurely. He was an easy target, like Stacie—heavy for her age and slower on the draw and clumsy, too. (The school kids teased her mercilessly: “Spacey Stacie has no brain . . . won’t come in out of the rain . . .”) He may as well have been parading around in a clown outfit. The locals weren’t ogling him—they were too polite for that—but he could feel their eyes trying to read him as if he were a story in an unknown tongue. He lifted his chin, squared his shoulders, put a bit of iron in his eyes and lips. Better, he thought, giving the hem of his shirt a tug and tightening it over his bulging belly. No, there was no subtlety here, no blending with the crowd, but he had not come to blend.

He couldn’t make much urine—a bad sign in this heat—so he quickly finished his business, bought two more bottles of water, and took a seat in the waiting area. Several big ceiling fans were waging a relentless but futile war against the suffocating heat. The

locals seemed to take it in stride, a few older women casually fanning themselves, indifferent to the inertness of the clock, but Mark was genuinely suffering. Reminding himself to stay hydrated, he broke the seal on another water bottle. He leaned back and tried to relax amid the mustachioed young men in T-shirts and blue jeans and their wives, dutifully holding babies and diaper bags. Across the way, an Indian woman half Mark's height was selling tamales from a metal bucket with a towel over the top.

He gave the Grisham novel another try, but his mind kept detouring to a passage in the Book of Mormon in which the prophet Nephi is commanded by the Spirit to cut off Laban's head so he can secure the brass plates—the sacred record and genealogy of his people: “It is better that one man should perish than a nation dwindle in unbelief . . .”

Nations wouldn't perish in this instance, but he might—if not from the heat of the sun, then in the fires of hell. “Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord. I will forgive who I forgive, but for you it is required to forgive seventy times seven.” Bishop Tolman had quoted those scriptures ad nauseum during their many private meetings.

Tolman was a mild-looking man whose Ben Franklin bifocals and innocuous comb-over screamed white-collar accountant, although actually he earned his bread repairing diesel engines. But he spoke candidly, a tack Mark had found refreshing after the barrage of clichés, casseroles, and sympathy cards. And he could speak with some authority about loss, his wife Sherry having survived several rounds of hair-and-energy-thieving treatments before finally succumbing to cervical cancer. She had been thirty-five.

“Your son's in paradise. You don't need to worry about him—you need to worry about you. He passed his test, but you're still taking the exam. And how you react is a large part of that. The real question is: will you be worthy to stand in Sean's presence on the other side?”

Mark knew the party line on trials, tribulation, adversity. He used to dish it out himself when he was a bishop: There must be opposition in all things—no good without evil, no pleasure without pain, no spiritual growth without suffering, endure it well, for all of this will give you experience, and I the Lord God have de-

scended below all things . . . Job crawling on all fours through the refiner's fire . . . God gives His toughest trials to His toughest Saints.

"You still have your son," Bishop Tolman had said. "And you always will."

At some point during the conversation, Mark's head would drop as his voice wrestled with itself, his fingers dragging down the length of his face as if it were putty. Margie's arm would slide across his shoulder, drawing him in close as he wept a bitter mix into his hands. They would kneel together as the bishop offered a prayer—for faith, hope, courage, perseverance, enlightenment, understanding. Mark would pray for forgiveness and the ability to forgive, the sweet miracle of letting go. Margie would continue to rub his back, comforting him as a mother comforts a young child, assuming that this was the turning point, that they were really, finally, at last, heading home again. She would be right about the first part but not the second.

A week later, they would be back in the bishop's office, Margie squeezing Mark's hand as he stared glumly at the crystal candy jar beside the box of Kleenex already plucked clean. Sitting behind his cherry-wood desk, Bishop Tolman would listen patiently once again, offering similar counsel and a similar prayer, and the next week the same, and the next week and the next until one evening he cut Mark off in mid-sentence: "Mark, Mark, Mark . . . Listen to me. Listen carefully to what I'm going to say." The bishop sighed deeply, slowly, exhausted. "Mark, it's not easy for me to tell you this, but you are guilty of the greater sin here."

Mark tilted his head to one side, as if trying to clear water out of his ear. "Excuse me?"

"Pride," Bishop Tolman clarified. "You're stewing in it. I understand your hurt. I understand your anger. But this is destroying you and your family. You need to humble yourself and ask God for forgiveness and just let this thing go. You've got to move on."

Mark's eyes closed slowly, as if he were dozing off. This *thing*? Move on? Like it was a football game and the home team just got whipped? This *thing*?

And then his eyes opened, glaring. "Ask God to forgive *me*? And what about this—this—this—" He couldn't even finish the sentence, couldn't finish the curse. Could only spit and stutter: "That

is so like you—so to hell like you people to sit on your h-h-h-igh horse and j-j-j-judge! Ask God to forgive me? And who's going to f-f-f-forgive God . . . for not protecting His s-s-s-servant? Isn't that what you tell these kids? Called to serve and all? They're just kids, you know. Kids!"

Mark was standing, throwing his hands haphazardly around the office, waving accusingly at the framed picture of the Savior who was observing quietly on the wall: "Ask Him maybe!"

The bishop listened calmly, his fingers laced together, elbows forming an isosceles triangle on his desk. "I think He knows a little something about suffering," he said. "And I think His Father knows a little something about losing a son."

"That was with purpose! That was by design! Don't you think I know that? Everybody knows that! He gave up His, but He got Him back—almost immediately back. He's God. He's big picture. I'm little picture!"

The bishop didn't flinch. "How do you know Sean's death wasn't by design? Or didn't have purpose? Isn't that the truest trial of faith? To believe even when we don't see or understand?"

Mark was jabbing his finger at the little bald man behind the desk. "Don't patronize me! You don't—you haven't—all of your—your boys. . ."

Margie pressed her palms to her ears, screaming above his scream: "Stop it! Stop it right now!" And then, in the silence that followed, "Please?" Then it was her turn to sob. That was the end of the conversation and of their visits with Bishop Tolman.

That was a year ago. In the months that followed, Mark had crawled deeper and deeper backwards. Each night, after a mostly silent dinner, while Margie self-medicated on Turner Classic Movies, he retreated to the dark privacy of his study where he explored the vagaries of the internet. Sometimes he filled out nonsense questionnaires or entered bogus sweepstakes; other times he read the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* or obscure publications from small farm towns hiding in the breadbasket of America. He checked the bizarre junk being auctioned on e-Bay and sometimes bid a few dollars, no more. He avoided porn sites but became a cynical reader of gossip and entertainment columns and the ASU Sun Devils sports webpage.

He went to bed late, got up late, and dragged himself to work

late. He was curt with his staff and even worse to his customers. No one dared say anything—not even his typically blunt-as-a-hammer secretary or Ray, his co-owner and best friend since high school. He tried to pick fights, but no one took the bait. He was grieving, and they gave him wide berth. Ray told him to take some time off, take Margie on a vacation—to Europe, New Zealand, somewhere fun and far the hell away from all of this.

His daughter became a veritable stranger and genuinely suffered from the void.

“Dad, come on up!” she would call into the hall at bedtime.

Every night he used to read her a story. Now her mother came instead.

“He’s busy tonight.”

“Again?”

“Yes. Again.”

He used to leave her little notes every morning: *Dear Stacie, Have a dolphin day!*

Now, when she announced brightly, “Dad! I had a dolphin day!” he would mumble in his milk. Her disappointment was palpable.

He missed her first two soccer games of the season; and when she burst into his gloomy office, proclaiming, “Daddy! I scored a goal!” he muttered perfunctorily, “Good for you,” and continued fondling the mouse, scrolling down and entering another mindless bid. After that she quit reporting.

One night after Stacie had gone to bed, Margie slipped into his study and softly shut the door. The lights were off, his face half-lit only by the glow from the computer monitor, a ghost-like facade. His right hand was cupped over the mouse, and she put hers over it. He continued staring at the e-Bay offering on the screen, an old football allegedly used by Joe Montana in high school.

“I want you to know,” she whispered, “that I’ve loved you since the first time we met. Our first date. That night when I got into bed I thought to myself, That’s all I want in life—Mark and a couple of children, and I’ll be happy forever. And that’s never changed. I want you to know that. But this has got to stop. All of that love, you’re killing it. It’s killing us—our family.”

He continued staring blankly at the monitor.

She lifted her hand. "You need to do something," she whispered. "I want my husband back. I don't want this morbid stranger living in my house any more."

She leaned over and kissed the back of his neck. Then she slipped out into the hall and quietly shut the door.

3:30. Margie and Stacie were at the Harkins Theatres now for the rush-hour show—a family tradition for the last day of school. They would throw the usual prohibitions to the wind and junk out on buttered popcorn and Pepsi. Super size? Bring it on! This one day of the year. School's out! Let's party! Afterward they would barbeque hamburgers and loiter on the deck, watching TV outside as the sun dipped below the pines.

Mark gazed around at the sea of alien faces, reminding himself he was the alien here, a dollop of winter in this land of smoke and sunlight. A little Indian girl was dozing off beside her mother, who was already asleep in the next chair. The girl's head tilted slowly to the right until it suddenly struck the mother's shoulder, startling them both awake. They traded looks, briefly confused, then erupted in laughter. Mark started to smile, then sat up stiffly, wrenching his head away from mother and daughter. Focus! Focus! Reverie, nostalgia, sentimentality—they were the enemy today.

At 5:20 he stepped out into the boarding area where a small crowd had gathered near a sleek, silver bus that looked newly minted. Idling beside it was a big, brown monstrosity that looked like an old school bus made over by a street thief's hasty paint job. Mark's heart sank when he noticed the words *Paloma Blanca* hand-lettered in white paint across the dented and dust-crusting flank. Noxious black fumes poured out of the rust-eaten exhaust pipe. Through the chalky haze, the late afternoon sun burned a blood-orange.

Weaving his way past the luxury liner, Mark scolded himself: *Next time shop around, stupid! Grow a brain, idiot-stick!* Then he quickly repented. It was better this way. This is why he had come: to travel as Sean had traveled, second class, with the goats and chickens, not to fat-cat around like a gringo tourist. He wanted to eat what Sean had eaten, sleep where he had slept, smell what he had smelled. He wanted to suffer as Sean had suffered. That same culture shock and initial ineptitude with the language. Sean's first

companion was a native from Mexico City, Elder Ortega. A nice enough young man, but Sean couldn't understand a word those first few months. When Ortega met up with the other Mexican missionaries, they would jabber away while Sean stood there grinning stupidly, pretending to get the punch-line when he may have been the joke.

Mark showed his ticket to the uniformed little man who motioned for him to leave his duffel bag by the collection of banded suitcases and cardboard boxes that had accumulated outside the open belly of the bus. Mark boarded and headed to the back, averting his eyes from the other passengers. His body had always seemed a burden that moved at odds with his spirit, but never before had he felt so big and clumsy and out of place, like Gulliver among the Lilliputians. Still, he recognized his size as an intimidating asset; and settling into the bench seat in the very back, he stretched his oak trunk legs and assumed a look of cool detachment: arms folded across his soft but bulging chest, shoulders square, jaw clamped tight. *Don't mess with me*, his body language said, although if someone did he would be pretty helpless. He had no training in the art of self defense. All of his life he had been a gentle giant, playing the fun-loving peacemaker. Playground bullies had kicked sand in his face and pantsed him outside the girls' locker room; they had pissed and pooped in his mess kit—and all of that, okay. Turn the other cheek, walk away, take the high road. For him, okay. He could take all of that. But this other. . . No. No Mr. Nice Guy. No gentle bear. No water off a duck. No forgive and forget. No turn the other cheek. No kiss and make up. There would be no peeing in his son's mess kit.

As the last few passengers boarded, Mark silently noted the incursions on the world he had left behind. There were no goats or chickens on board, but the outside was soft-sale camouflage compared to the ravaged interior. Peanut shells, candy wrappers, and clots of dried mud spotted the floor; the vinyl seats were split and frayed; the cracks in the windows were angry asterisks. These he had almost expected. Harder to process was the little shrine near the driver's seat where a large picture of a brown-skinned Virgin Mary cloaked in a green gown gazed gently back at the passengers. Red and gold tassels dangled from the rear-view mirror, and

the face of a young girl smiled inside a frame of pink macramé. Etched above it, in bold, medieval letters: *DIOS ES AMOR*.

At 5:40 the bus bellowed as it backed out of the shady overhang, allowing the sun to resume its grueling work. Within minutes the interior felt like an oven that someone had switched from low to broil. The locals remained statues, stoic and indifferent even as sweat rolled down their earth-colored faces. Mark unscrewed the cap on his last water bottle and began sipping methodically. He stood up and wrestled with the nearest window until it finally gave, but the air gusted in like dragon's breath, so he sat back down and resigned himself to a long, hot ride. He could feel the globs of sweat colonizing in the soft folds of his belly.

He observed quietly as the bus lumbered through a maze of convoluted streets, intermittently stopping to pick up more passengers: a young Indian couple, the father carrying an infant in one arm and a toddler in the other, the willowy mother on crutches, her left ankle swaddled in an ace bandage. They took a seat near Mark in the back, the woman staring straight ahead, her almond eyes big and glossy, beautifully so, but expressionless, as if her head were mounted on a wall, telling silent tales. Or maybe she was simply thinking about her next meal, the next little behind to wipe, mouth to feed?

Mark turned his attention outside where colonial domes and arches rose majestically above onerous billboards and row upon row of simple shops and hodge-podge homes of mud, plywood, cardboard, concrete, and corrugated metal. Every city had its unsightly neighborhoods, he knew that, but the bus had been rumbling along for over an hour now, and the scenery was growing progressively worse. Where were the elegant stone plazas and fountains? Why were they traveling the eyesore route? Welcome to second class . . .

He was beginning to feel sick now, a little nauseated. Was it the fumes from the bus, the smoke from the south, the city smog, or the early summer heat? Or maybe the to-and-fro tottering of the bus as it rounded each curve and corner like a boat about to capsize? The other passengers were opening their carry-on sodas and bags of chips or removing warm tortillas from plastic bags. He should have brought more water. Food, too. Chips, crackers, something besides his stash of granola bars. Dramamine, *por favor?*

He pictured Sean riding the bus here for the first time, his first solo trip away from home. *Bienvenido, Elder!* Was it a grand adventure in his eyes? Or did he, too, look at the small and broken homes and the hand-me-down laundry drying on the line and long for a safer, cleaner, more familiar place? Pine trees and snowboards. Their little big boy all grown up. In his letters he had tried to sound upbeat and positive, but the subtext was painful; he was hurting badly. In their return letters, they had quoted platitudes: “Forget about yourself and go to work . . . put your shoulder to the wheel . . . lose yourself to find yourself . . . return with honor.”

His son had never voiced a direct plea to let that cup pass. Mark had pretty much put the kibosh on that at the airport. So he had written about dogs falling off rooftops and his linguistic miscues—telling people he was *embarazado* (pregnant) when he meant *embarazoso* (embarrassed). Stand-up comedy mingled with scriptures. In this way, he had survived his first six months in this city that looked as if half of it needed to be power-washed and the other half delicately feather-dusted. Humor had been his true savior, at least in the beginning. And then they had transferred him to the village in the mountains where it was pure and clean and safe.

Within a month, the tone of his letters had changed. The humor was still there, but now he spoke of his “great love for the people.” He must have repeated that a hundred times: “wonderful . . . humble . . . salt of the earth . . . spiritual . . . a believing people. You tell them about Joseph Smith’s vision in the Sacred Grove, and they have no problem with that, not like the ever-skeptical white people. ‘Yes,’ they’ll say. ‘My uncle, he had a vision too!’” Always ending his letters with the obligatory guilt trip: “We Americans have been blessed with so much—not just material wealth, not just cars and toys and stuff, but power too, the power to do good or evil in the world, or to sit on our hands and do nothing. The Ultimate Spectators. Those of us who hold the Priesthood especially have a solemn obligation to . . .” Fill in the blank. Yes, yes, we’re all under condemnation. Mark shook his head, half-smiling, half-lingering at the heavy-handed General Authority jargon so typical of young missionaries who had finally lost themselves in the work. Which was exactly what he and Margie had been fasting and praying for. . . .

No. Don’t say it. Be careful what you wish for . . . pray for. See

the Grand Design. Leave it in God's hands . . . Get over it . . . Move on . . .

Shut the hell up.

They were rolling deeper into the innards of the city: store windows fogged over with dust, newsprint patching up corroded walls, more signs: CARTA BLANCA CERVEZA . . . TECATE . . . DIOS TE LLEVE . . . FLORERIA CLAUDIA . . . FRUTERIA OLIVAS . . . VIDRIOMEX. A man with no legs was sitting a few feet from the corner holding out a styrofoam cup. More like that—an entire street of them, men and women without legs, arms, eyes, mouths. A street of missing parts and pieces. As the bus roared into a busy intersection, the city became a giant pinball game of mad taxis, swerving cars, screaming sirens.

This was not Puerto Peñasco or some other little tourist town where you could lounge on the beach and barter for cheap souvenirs and sip your virgin margaritas on a veranda overlooking a tranquil blue bay. This was real Mexico, raw Mexico, and it had lost its luster. He found himself arguing internally but angrily with God: *Why so many born in these circumstances, with their future sealed in a time bomb? Why are these dealt a pair of deuces while others get four aces?* He winced at the banality of his argument. He sounded like Sean in his combative high school days, raging against God's ways to man. His voice would erupt, his rosy cheeks burning, especially when Mark dismissed his harangue with a patronizing smirk, the rolling eyes: "Don't worry, Marge! Old Sean's just trying to save the world again!" Sean would shove his plate aside, shake an accusing finger at his father: "All you people care about is your stupid house, your stupid cars, your stupid boob jobs!"

In those explosions of passion, Mark, a child of the down-with-everything-but-me-do-your-own-thing-sixties, always felt his own past rearing up and biting him in the ass: *touché*. Sean disdained the fact that his father had devoted his entire life to selling top-of-the-line bed mattresses. Smiling condescendingly: "Relax, son. Your mother and I have been around the block."

Sean had sworn that he would never, ever, under any circumstances, serve a full-time mission for the Church.

It was dusk before they reached the outskirts of the city; and as the bus turned southward, Mark took one last look at its ragged silhouette on the horizon. A gigantic Mexican flag was undulating

defiantly and ironically above the ruins—something odd and strangely triumphant about it, like a besieged city stubbornly refusing to surrender.

As the bus steamed through the countryside, he saw automobile graveyards, gardens of old tires, sway-backed horses roaming barren fields, rock walls three feet high sectioning off rolling hill-sides where a lifetime of litter was masquerading as snow. More billboards: *DI NO A DROGAS PARA QUE TU VIVAS MEJOR . . . GABRINANDO POR GOBERNADOR . . . CARTA BLANCA*. And a parting image just before nightfall—two men lying side by side in an empty boxcar, the heartbreak that was Mexico.

But at almost the same moment, Mark zeroed in on a mud-domed house with a big orange fire dancing licentiously in the front yard. Barefoot children in T-shirts were kicking a soccer ball as a matronly woman tended the fire and a young mother sat on a stump of concrete nursing her baby. Hands on hips, the father was peering at the bus through dust-fogged eyes. Mark's heart spasmed momentarily, like a fist grasping desperately for the last rung on the ladder. He couldn't pinpoint the feeling until that last frame was replaced by another: envy.

He leaned back and tried to sleep, but his thoughts kept escaping north to the mountains. They would be returning from the movies now, Stacie chattering non-stop about the last day of school, the tearful good-bye to her teacher. In his absence, Margie would man the barbecue tonight, and Stacie would ask if they could make microwave popcorn and too bad Dad isn't here to make his world-famous home-made shakes and fries, they're the very best, right, Mom? Margie would smile and say—hopefully?—yes, too bad.

Something was intruding—a thumb pressing on his head, right at the tender temple, trying to divert him home. He reminded himself that he was an emissary carrying God's mail. Everything else was the devil's diversion—Lucifer in a top-hat and coat-tails, mixing shit with sunshine to play the upper hand.

Leave it in God's hands, Bishop Tolman had said. And so, in a manner of speaking, he had. There were asterisks to every commandment.

Margie's parting words forced their way back into his head: "Don't call me. Don't call and tell me you're in some Mexican jail."

He wondered if that missed-kiss outside the airport would be their last. He started mentally writing her a letter but two lines into it shredded the thing angrily in his head. He was aching inside and out, but that was okay. It was good to feel it deep and hard and stinging, like acid in his veins. That's how Sean had felt it. It was good that he was traveling second class. Hell, maybe it was third class. Not quite without purse or scrip but with a few pesos in his pocket. Good that he was thirsty, dry, itchy, sweaty, hungry, homesick—that word! Sean had never painted it that way. Kids. Nineteen year olds. To them it was an adventure. A two-year camping trip. Living off tortillas and beans.

The bus stopped briefly at each little outpost to let more people on or off, and for every burro crossing the road, but never long enough to get out and stretch or take a leak or buy a Coke or candy bar. It lumbered relentlessly through the barren flats until it was consumed in desert darkness, the only break an occasional pair of headlights speeding toward them like twin comets that thank goodness always managed to stay on their own side of the road. He had heard stories. There was no bathroom or reading light on board, just the smell of sweat and exhaust and the fried desert air, and wondering where they were, where they were going, and when they were going to get there. He may as well have been sloshing around in the belly of a whale.

At some point, the air outside grew cool enough to warrant moving closer to an open window. Shortly after, he could sense the extra pull of gravity as the bus began laboring uphill; and within the hour, he could see campfires burning at the edge of the world. The bus began slowing down but never quite stopping as the other passengers stood up and shuffled to the front. Pine tree silhouettes were keeping watch over a small village of log cabins. Indians in headbands and shawls were moving slowly in and out of lantern shadows. A long-haired mutt was lying on a porch beside a man with a face like driftwood. His hawk eyes seemed to be staring directly at him, Mark, condemning him personally for a long, sad history of dead ends or maybe coolly reminding him that he was on alien turf now.

At last the bus came to a complete stop, and the other passengers began shuffling out into the night. Mark wondered if this was

his stop, but when he stood up, the driver glanced up in his rear-view mirror and shook his head.

It was another hour of torturously slow climbing and winding, but eventually Mark saw a nest of lights glowing up ahead. This time the driver switched on his little dome light, nodding, but Mark was already in front of the door, thanking him profusely. Before his Nike sneakers had even touched the broken pavement, a pack of local boys was swarming around him as if he were a star-crossed celebrity. When the driver opened the side panel to remove Mark's duffel bag, a flurry of arms reached out for it, like a fish-feeding frenzy.

It took maybe a second to identify the leader—a tall, slender boy with black bangs drooping to furry eyebrows that made a straight and unbroken line across his lower forehead. The exact countenance of the boy he had seen at least three times in his dreams. The tell-tale giveaway? The gold Rolex watch—Sean's high school graduation gift from Margie's parents—on his left wrist.

"Carlos?" he whispered aloud, but his voice was swallowed up in the commotion.

On second glance, he looked even younger than Mark had imagined, thirteen, maybe fourteen, a street-smart smirk on his lips as he oozed to the front of the pack, deftly released a younger boy's hand from the strap of the duffel bag, and made it his own. Slinging the bag over his shoulder as naturally and expertly as a sailor heading off to sea, he smiled at Mark and asked: "Where you go?"

In plain pants, huarache sandals, and a baggy blue-on-green print shirt, he was not dressed much differently than the others. It was the way he wore the shirt, with the tails loose and reckless and the top four buttons undone, showing off his glabrous chest.

"A place to sleep—*dormir*?" Mark clasped his hands together against the side of his face and tilted his head.

The boy nodded vigorously. "*Sí, sí!*"

His lanky legs seemed to flutter in the darkness as Mark hobbled along trying to keep pace, his ankle throbbing anew as blood flooded back into it. He followed the boy down a narrow street lit by a solitary lamp, the cone of light marking the point where the cracked pavement gave way to cobblestone. They turned left down another narrow street and right down another, and just

when Mark thought they were going to disappear into the darkness of a third, the boy stopped abruptly outside an eight-foot adobe wall. A wrought-iron lantern cast as much shadow as light on a small wooden sign with letters in cursive and a painted picture of a turquoise butterfly: *La Mariposa*.

"*Aquí está!*" the boy announced.

As Mark pressed two twenty peso notes into his hand, the boy's eyes widened in such a way that Mark couldn't tell if he had tipped way too much or way too little until he said, "I need you tomorrow. *Mañana*."

"*Mañana?*"

"Yes, *mañana*. Twelve o'clock. *A las doce. Aquí*." Mark pointed to the ground.

"*A las doce?*"

"Yes—I mean, *sí. A las doce*." He felt as if he were back in high school Spanish, performing Mrs. Velasco's tedious pattern practice drills.

"*Sí, sí, sí*."

He interpreted the rapid succession of *sí*'s to mean he had paid the boy generously. Mark thanked him again; and if it hadn't seemed so contrary, if not outright sacrilegious, he would have thanked God as well.

"Carlos, right?"

For the first time since their encounter, the bravura drained from the boy's mahogany face. "How you know. . ." and he took a gulp of air—for inspiration or composure—"name?"

Mark shrugged: "Lucky guess. *Suerte*. Tomorrow, *a las doce*, okay?" He held up a handful of bills. "*Mañana*. Don't be late."

As Mark watched the boy's elusive frame blend into the shadows, one thought kept going through his head: *The Lord hath delivered him into your hands . . .*

The motel was nothing fancy but decent enough for twenty dollars a night. There were two levels arranged around a small courtyard of dirt and gravel where you could sit in plastic lawn chairs and contemplate the red flowers spilling out of fat ceramic pots. The sound of Mexican trumpets and accordions was blasting through the open doors of a small bar.

The night attendant was so short his chin barely cleared the

counter where Mark carefully placed 200 pesos. His stubby fingers curled up, swallowing the bills, as he handed Mark a room key fastened to a strap of leather imprinted with a turquoise butterfly. In broken English he said that breakfast was served until nine.

Mark said *gracias* and trudged up the wooden stairwell, passing thickly lacquered doors of knotty pine until he located the ceramic tile with number 12. He entered, hoping for cooler air and was marginally rewarded: no refrigeration but a ceiling fan created an artificial breeze that took some of the sting out of the heat. He dropped his back pack and duffel bag on the bed, drew the blinds, and popped the window, allowing in some fresh air along with the distant strands of Mexican music.

The room was small but clean and comfortable—maybe too comfortable for his purposes: tile floors wonderfully cool to the touch, wooden beams ribbing the ceiling, the bedcovers, turned down for the night, sporting an exotic native design. Hanging on the wall directly behind the wooden headstand was a framed oil painting of a white woman in her early twenties—long, straight hair covering one shoulder and half-hiding behind the other. Mark wondered what mixed message was lurking behind this posed portrait of a strawberry blonde in a Mexican peasant dress. There was an innocence about her—the rosebud lips that had not kissed many lips, the optimistic eyes that had yet to see the dark side of the moon. On second look and even more so on the third, she seemed hauntingly similar to Margie as a young college student. He hadn't known her back then, had only seen photos, but she would have been quite a catch. How she had evaded the hordes of horny suitors until her late twenties bewildered him almost as much as why she had fallen for the likes of him. "Desperation," she had cooed into his ear in their early years, back when life was simple, plausible, sexual.

She would be in bed now, reading the latest title chosen by her book club. Stacie would be in bed as well—or maybe not: the last day of school, curfews were typically lengthened. Maybe she had been invited to a friend's house for a sleepover, and they were up late watching TV or something. He hoped so; she needed more of that.

He smiled, recalling her very first soccer game. She had been

nine, a newcomer who had stumbled and bumbled through the initial practices. To appease the league rules, the coach had sent her in to patrol mid-field during the waning minutes of the game. Instead she had bolted after the ball as if her little heart were trapped inside it and she was trying to get it back. He would never forget the image of her sprinting downfield, legs and arms churning, chest thrust forward, head angling back, like a cartoon character in super-acceleration—mouth and eyes wide open, tongue hanging out, expressing nothing but unmitigated joy.

She angled across to the goal, braking, spinning, chasing the ball back to mid-field, and so on, up and down and back and forth, completely oblivious to her coach screaming frantically from the sidelines. He finally ran onto the field and took her by the arm: “Stacie, Stacie, sweetheart, play your position! You’ll kill yourself running all over like that!” And she nodded, nodded, tongue wagging, but he may as well have told a thoroughbred to walk or a malamute not to pull. She spun around and streaked across the field, while the poor coach turned to the crowd with a histrionic shrug.

She was not big or fast or particularly skilled, but jeez, she loved the game. Loved the ritual of strapping on her shin guards, her matching headband, her purple jersey with the number 10; loved to stuff her Adidas bag with her little sports drink, her cleats, her purple and gold sweats and sling it over her shoulder. Tough as nails too. On defense she confronted every opponent as if it were a personal vendetta. No one got by her without a slide tackle or a foot in the shins. Not dirty, just tough. Scrappy. All of her inner hurt and anger were converted to energy on the field.

It seemed strange—even unjust—that he was down here in this cheap but clean motel, while they were up there, a thousand miles away, under the same moon, the same stars, the same sky, yet he felt galaxies removed from them.

He meandered into the bathroom, trying to remember what he had come here to forget, and almost bumped into a small wooden table with a water bottle beside a ceramic bowl. The thirst that had dogged him throughout the long bus ride suddenly returned. He grabbed the bottle, broke the plastic seal, threw back his head, and swallowed. The water was as warm as pee, but he didn’t care. He emptied the bottle in seconds. He turned on the

tap, started to refill it, then dropped it in the sink, scolding himself: *This was Mexico, idiot-stick!* The last thing he needed now was an attack of the Revenge.

But his throat felt like a desert, and his efforts to lick the dryness from his lips resulted in tiny threads of flesh sticking to his tongue. He tried to urinate, but only a few pathetic drops squeezed out, the yellow-green color of anti-freeze. The tell-tale sign of dehydration. What now? Walk down to the bar and buy some water? They'd probably charge him triple. He was too tired. Tomorrow. He could wait until tomorrow. They probably only had *tecate* anyway.

He stripped down and spread his body across the bed which was firm and solid but about six inches too short. He closed his eyes and listened to the soft but steady revolutions of the ceiling fan as more Mexican music intruded through the open window. The female lead was crawling to the high notes, the men yip-yip-yipping in the background. In the relative silence of the room, the ringing in his ears suddenly became loud, shrill, obnoxious. Mark turned onto his side and tried his very best to not dwell on anything even remotely related to home.

At first he thought it was the morning call of desert birds, but then he remembered that he was in the mountains now. Rolling onto his back, he peered up at the ribbed ceiling through blurry underwater eyes and realized it was the monotonous chit-chit-chitting of the fan. He tried to sit up, but everything ached, as if he had been clubbed from head to toe with a baseball bat. Sunlight was slanting full-force through the window, catching the corner of the bed. The sweat had dried on his garments, leaving them stiff and salty. He had brought only one other pair and was saving those for the trip home, so he would just have to make do for now. Crawling out of bed, grumbling—*stupid, moronic bus ride; I'm too stinking old for this*—he caught himself again: good. Let it hurt. Deeper. Harder.

He showered under a stingy trickle of water, the showerhead so low he didn't even attempt to wash his hair, and besides he wasn't going to risk a truant drop sneaking between his lips, raising havoc with his bowels, and sabotaging his mission. Okay, so maybe he was being overly cautious, maybe even downright paranoid,

but he felt like a marked man here, a six-foot-six blob of gringo, and he sensed the subtle elements of the country conspiring against him, trying to get an illicit edge because it was their turf and he had come to take one of their own.

Two wooden tables had been squeezed into the entry, converting it into a small dining area. One table was empty and the other was occupied by two coeds and a gangly young man in a tank top. Although Mark felt somewhat relieved to see other white faces and to hear his native tongue, he noted the abrupt if brief break in their conversation as he took a seat at the adjacent table, and he suddenly felt terribly and incredibly old.

They were roughly Sean's age, college kids doing what college kids do best. Mark only half-heard their casual chatter but couldn't block out the morning-after bravura of the young man. Mark tried to bite back the urge to ask God, once again, why He had carelessly looked the other way when Sean, His anointed servant, was standing naked in the cross-hairs, yet He allowed these kids—wanderers, adventurers, good-timers—to roll merrily along through life, unfazed and unscathed. Okay, so they hadn't made the same covenants as Sean, weren't born under the oppressive yoke of Ephraim, but still . . .

A slim-hipped girl in a flounced skirt floated up to his table and, before he could decline, poured coffee into his mug, then set a bowl of cereal in front of him. Moments later she returned with a plate of steaming refried beans, scrambled eggs and chorizos, salsa, and warm tortillas. He tore a tortilla in half, munching on it slowly, as if it were medicine, then picked haphazardly at the beans, reminding himself that he needed fuel in his tank, although he really wasn't all that hungry. Thirsty, yes, and when the server placed a shot glass of orange juice on the table he gulped it down instantly, hoping she would return with a refill. She didn't.

He tried to ignore the college kids, but now they were talking about a canyon with waterfalls.

"Oh, it was soooo awesome!" the brunette kept saying. "Soooo awesome!"

Mark turned slightly, his wooden chair scraping the tile floor. "Excuse me."

The brunette did a double-take, as if a statue had suddenly come to life. An unsightly silver ring pierced her left nostril, and

bits of blue glitter sparkled on her eyelids, yet Mark marveled at the simple beauty of her face: no lines, no wrinkles, just rosy, sun-blushed cheeks. The legacy of the young.

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t help overhearing—you said something about a canyon?”

The brunette’s eyes darted guiltily between her two friends, as if she had just revealed a sorority secret, but her expression quickly relaxed. “There’s a really cool canyon a couple miles out of town,” she said.

The blonde was wearing a turquoise halter top that made a token effort to rein in her copious breasts; the brunette looked athletic in a sleeveless T-shirt and sports bra. The brunette wore her hair long and straight; the blonde’s was in a ponytail.

Mark asked if it was within walking distance.

The young man’s goateed face scrunched up. “It depends. How long is long?”

“It’s maybe four or five miles, I guess,” the brunette said. “But there’s lots of locals who can take you. Just go to the plaza. They’re all over the place.”

Mark nodded. The brunette thrust her hand into her macramé purse, searching briefly before pulling it back out like a magician who had reached for the rabbit but came up empty-handed. “Damn!” She continued ferreting for something. “You didn’t come here to see the canyon?” she asked, maybe a little suspiciously. Why else would anyone come to this dead-end in the middle-of-nowhere town?

Mark shrugged. “Nope. Just passing through.”

The blonde crossed her nut-brown legs. They were lean and sinewy, like a marathoner’s. “Wherever the wind blows?”

“Yep. Blowing in the wind.”

“Must be nice,” she said.

“Sometimes,” he said, cringing at the irony. In a teenage fit, Sean had once told him that he lived his life with the passion and daring of a Benedictine monk.

His meal barely touched, Mark left a few coins on the table for the serving girl, slipped out the wooden entry gate, and followed the dirt road leading to the heart of town.

In daylight it was much easier to get his bearings. Two high ridges studded with scrub pine and giant boulders flanked the vil-

lage like protective walls to the east and west, with railroad tracks and a narrow highway running north and south, dividing the town in half. A white-washed shrine bulged conspicuously out of the top of the western ridge, and although the sun had long since muscled its way above the eastern edge, its brightness was dampered by the sulphuric haze from the south: Mexico was still burning. Mark reminded himself to check out train departures for the return trip. Anything beat the *Paloma Blanca*.

His ankle felt painfully stiff, as if it had been nailed to his lower leg, but he tried not to limp as he passed a school where young children in uniforms—burgundy pullovers and black slacks for the boys, white blouses and burgundy skirts for the girls—were jumping rope, kicking soccer balls, and playing tag on a large slab of cracked concrete inside a chain-link fence.

The town itself was maybe the length of two football fields; and within a few minutes, Mark found himself standing in the plaza, empty save for a small gazebo in the center, a few iron benches around the perimeter, and a handful of small trees shrouded in the morning shadows of the Catholic church. By far the most commanding presence in sight, it was a towering structure of immense stone blocks stacked six or seven stories high with turrets at the four corners and a huge wooden door, bolted and girded with wrought iron, protecting the entry. A large stone cross protruded from the Alamo hump at the top center; and a large bell half-hiding in the upper recesses clanged at regular intervals, summoning the faithful to mass. Everything else in the village looked tiny by contrast and insignificant.

A few Indian women in flamboyant skirts and puffy pastel blouses meandered in and out of the nearby shops. Otherwise, there was not much human traffic.

Still thirsty, he ducked inside a shop with a sign that read *Farmacia* and took four bottles of water from the glass-encased refrigerator. The shop was poorly lit by two bald bulbs, and the windows appeared foggy although there was no moisture in the air. The lack of light made everything—the bottles of medicine, the candy bars under the glass counter top, the cans of soda pop on the shelves, the racks of postcards and cheap souvenirs—appear old and obsolete.

A little hump-backed woman drifted up beside him so stealth-

ily that he didn't notice her until he almost knocked her over when he turned to go.

"I'm sorry," he said over and over. "*Lo siento*. I didn't see you—I'm so sorry. *Lo siento*. *Muy*. . . *muy lo siento*."

The woman was wearing a tri-colored shawl in spite of the early morning heat. She asked him in a tiny voice, as if reciting from a Berlitz script, "May-I-halp-you?"

"*No, gracias*," he said. "Just looking. *Solamente*. . ." and he aimed a finger at his eye.

She smiled, her teeth like a pair of split bowling pins. She was so incredibly short that Mark felt as if she were staring directly at his navel. He noticed a postcard of a waterfall, so he picked it from the rack and paid for it along with the four water bottles.

His appetite recharged, he strolled across the street to the bakery, bought two cinnamon rolls, and then sat in the shade eating and drinking until both rolls and half the water were gone, and now he felt like a fat Roman. It was only 10:30, but his shoulders were collapsing and his eyelids closing, and he didn't fight it. The sun had found a break in the shade and was gently working the back of his neck like a slow hypnosis.

He and Margie were standing in the bleachers under the field lights, the aroma of popcorn, hot dogs, and cigarettes overpowered by the smell of the rain-soaked grass. Spectators in plastic ponchos or hiding under umbrellas were screaming as the muddied, bloodied players lined up on the three-yard line, water to their ankles, the lights on the scoreboard showing HOME 14 VISITORS 10. Then an instant of almost silence as the quarterback pitched back to a big black kid who looked twenty-five and massive, but who became a blur streaking through a split-second chasm, the collective hometown groan turning to ecstasy at the nasty clash of helmets, the muddied flash stopped cold for a moment before dropping back flat, a yard shy of the milky stripe, and number 55 already on his feet again, staring down like a victorious gladiator. The defeated opponents dragged themselves to the locker room while the home team swarmed around number 55, confetti flying, horns blowing, the soaked cheerleaders shaking their pom-poms and their booty in a rainy, foggy, surreal moment. The boy hero, amid the commotion, stopped and aimed his index finger across the swampy field directly at Mark. His smile

alone could have stanchd the November deluge. At that instant, Mark thought that he could never feel any happier. And two years later, he thought he would never feel sadder, lonelier, angrier, or more vulnerable.

He had held up fine at first, fielding the call from the mission president, his hands and voice finding Margie and easing her into a chair, onto the bed, back into the fold, while she stumbled around, drugged on denial and sleeping pills. And later, holding her steady at graveside as the wind tugged at the hem of her sky-blue dress, adding insult to injury by throwing it up around her thighs a full three seconds for observers to catch an embarrassing eye-full. Guiding her back to the hearse and then steering her through the Relief Society luncheon, the smorgasbord of crock-pot delights and Jello desserts, helping her, eventually, to find a fragment of her smile as the well-intentioned guests offered hackneyed condolences: "He's in the celestial kingdom with Heavenly Father . . . He must have an even greater mission to perform on the other side . . ."

But afterward . . . a week, a month, six weeks, and then one day, they finally dragged themselves upstairs—two words, if that, passing between them: "Mark?" and then a nod, folding up the morning paper and nothing, not one good rotten thing else to do. Together they climbed the staircase, pushing open the door of Sean's room for the first time since the phone call, and it was like diving into the rabbit hole, the role reversal so instant and obvious. Her pioneer stock took charge as she became her old pragmatic self again, stripping the bed sheets as coolly and indifferently as a maid tidying up a motel room. She cleaned out the drawers, then the closet, and then she started boxing up the assorted verifications of his life: trophies, certificates, baseball cards, CDs, the spiked dog collar he had worn one Halloween, the puka shell necklace some admiring coed had sent him for graduation. All of it. There would be no morbid shrines here.

Mark had watched, dumbfounded. Each item tossed into the box was like a mini burial. Finally she had snapped at him: "Hey, are you going to help, or are you going to just stand there with your hands in your pockets?"

He knelt down, reached randomly under the bed, and pulled out a sheet of plywood with miniature tanks, artillery, and plastic

soldiers glued to the surface—Sean’s re-creation of the D-Day invasion. He and Sean had stayed up all night with matches and red nail polish authenticating the display by meticulously burning and bloodying the limbs and faces of selected soldiers. The project had won first prize for Hobbies and Collections at the county fair. Mark fingered one of the soldiers, snapped it free, held its match-blackened face up to the light, and broke down weeping.

11:15. He stood up, tossed the empty bottles into a trash receptacle, and headed back to the motel to meet the boy named Carlos, still uncertain what he was going to do and how he was going to do it.

When the boy arrived, he looked a bit surprised, probably because there was no luggage for him to carry. Mark smiled, summoning up some dictionary Spanish. “*Quiero ver la cascada,*” he said, showing the boy the color postcard of the waterfall. When the boy hesitated, he flashed a 200 peso bill, which elicited an enthusiastic response. The boy himself looked like a picture postcard with his lazy black bangs, baggy beige tunic and matching pants, and tire-tread sandals. Mark did not overlook the gold Rolex that appeared even brighter and brasher at midday.

He followed a few steps behind as the boy led him down a dirt road that wound through the south side of town. Within a quarter of a mile, it was just the two of them, traversing scrub pine that soon gave way to sketchy forests of ponderosa pine. The boy moved like an antelope, stretching his lean legs so swiftly and effortlessly that he probably could have sprinted up the mountain. Mark had read somewhere that the Tarahumara Indians had a ritual where they ran for over a hundred miles. A marathon was child’s play, a morning warm-up. Mark had no idea if Carlos were Tarahumara or if he were even Indian, but he obviously had been nursed on endurance from the cradle. The kid had the lungs of a lion.

Feeling every ounce of the sixty extra pounds in his gut and butt, Mark was sucking air as the incline steepened. He tried to minimize his pathetic wheezing; but it was hopeless, so instead he lagged several yards behind, out of Carlos’s hearing. He did not want to appear weak or handicapped or anything but large, powerful, formidable, scary. A colossus who could crush and destroy at will. Instead he felt like a giant stick of butter melting in the Mexican sun. The boy was probably sneering to himself: another

fat American who any second is going to whip out his cell phone and call the rescue squad. He'll phone in for a golf cart or helicopter to drag him up the hill.

Mark wouldn't give him the satisfaction. The intermittent flashes of gold on the boy's wrist were sufficient motivation. Panting, gasping, the smoky haze adding rust to his lungs, he kept his trunk-like legs moving, slowly but deliberately, ignoring the pain in his bum ankle, grimly determined not to stop unless the boy did, which was not until he had gained the top of a false summit that flattened into a grassy meadow stretching maybe a hundred yards—the calm before the storm—before melding into a gruesome staircase of broken rock and stone that zig-zagged up the bare and rugged flank of the mountain.

The boy paused, hands on hips, barely winded as he waited for Mark to catch up. He said something in Spanish, and Mark (sucking air, trying not to) nodded. "*Está bien, está bien,*" he said, assuming the boy had inquired about his condition. Maybe he had called him a dumb gringo. Maybe he had told him to get the lead out of his fat ass so this silly hike wouldn't take all day. Maybe he had said, "Give me every peso in your pocket!" Or maybe he had said, "Are you tired? Do you want to rest for awhile? Am I going too quickly?"

Mark removed the two water bottles from his day pack and offered one to the boy who said *gracias*, took a long swig, and wiped his forearm across his mouth.

"Is it far?" Mark asked. "*Es lejos?*"

The boy shook his head. "*No, no. Está cerquita.*"

He wanted to ask the boy a thousand questions. Why aren't you in school today? Do you do this every day? Your parents—what do they do for a living? What do you want to do when you grow up? Have you thought about leaving the village—moving to the city maybe and going to school? Are you Catholic? What does that mean to you? Do you believe in God? The ten commandments? Punishment? Justice? Do you know what justice means? Where did you get that nice-looking watch? Was it given to you? Why are you wearing it if it wasn't given to you and it is not yours? Do you know the owner of that watch? Do you know where he is now? Do you know what happened to him? Do you know he has a mother and father, like you? How do you think your parents would feel if

you didn't come home tonight—if you suddenly disappeared and no one ever saw you again? Are you prepared for what comes next? What were you thinking when you did whatever you did to the owner of that watch? Do you ever think about him now? Does he visit you in his sleep like he visits me? Is there anything whatsoever in that pea brain adolescent head of yours? Do you know what God is going to do now? Do you understand that I'm just the messenger here? Don't worry. It will be quick and completely unexpected. Just like Sean. You caught him off-guard, bending over to tie his shoes or maybe tying yours for you? Caught him red-handed in an act of stupid kindness when you thought no one else was looking. But someone's always looking. God is always looking through His all-seeing eyes. Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord. For it is better that one man die than a nation dwindle in unbelief. For it is better that one boy die . . .

So many questions but none that he could articulate in a foreign tongue that to his ear was a blur of vowels and congested consonants.

The boy pointed toward the cliff and marched on with Mark following a few steps behind: not so passive now, not so locked into survival mode, his eyes scouring the ragged wall of yellow rock for opportunities.

They labored up the switchbacks for an hour before reaching another summit, then followed the trail through a section of forest spotted with blue and gold flowers. They squeezed between two giant boulders constricted so tightly that, for Mark at least, coming out the other end felt like a birthing. Next the boy led him through a tunnel of leafy trees and overgrowth. Heads lowered, they moved rapidly toward the circle of light at the other end until they found themselves standing on the lip of a sheer cliff that presented a sudden and spectacular view of the brunette's canyon. On their side, the barren walls plunged a thousand feet straight down to a slow-flowing highway of dark green water. The other side, equally steep, was lusciously layered with pines, shrubs, vines, flowers. Mark did not understand the magic or climatology (or the theism) that decreed one side of the canyon Desolation and the other Eden, but the divide between the two was maybe three hundred yards.

The boy pointed across the divide: "*Las cascadas!*" he an-

nounced, and Mark followed his finger to a point midway up the cliff where water blasted out of the woolly pelt of flora. The daredevil fall looked like one of those preternaturally gifted Superheroes that can stretch itself from heaven to hell, crashing on the boisterous bottom and instantaneously reconstituting itself into a satin smooth flow except where the protruding rocks made rippling white tears in the fabric.

Even for this boy who must have witnessed the scene hundreds of times, the sheer majesty of it transcended the commonplace.

“*Nos vamos!*” he shouted and waved Mark forward.

Moving with the alacrity of a ballet dancer, the boy pranced along the edge where one false step would have sent him plunging to oblivion, and Mark could see firsthand the easy accident. He, too, was quick-stepping now, against his better judgment and abilities, yet he somehow managed to dog the boy’s heels, knowing he had to act soon, that if he waited too long the trail would widen and reduce the margin for error. He tried not to look down. There was a dizzying sense of vertigo, and he had to keep the advantage of surprise. *I have delivered him into your hands . . .* There would be no debate, no second guessing. It would be swift, instantaneous, clean.

And it was: the boy pausing for a moment to gaze down into the canyon as if for the first time, hypnotized, it seemed, by the steady, silver shimmer of the falls; Mark sneaking up from behind, clamping one arm around the boy’s throat, the other wrenching his arm down and around, pinning it roughly behind his back; the boy screaming in Spanish as he tried to break free but his arm trapped so the best he could do was arch his back, pleading in pathetic grunts and squeals.

Mark tightened his stranglehold, surprised by the surge of power in his arms. “You little shit!” he growled. “That was my boy! That was my son! What did you think—that you could just kill my boy and just walk away, did you?”

He was cheek to cheek, spitting into the boy’s ear: “Did you think you could just do that? Do that and wipe your hands and just walk away?”

The boy tried to twist his neck free, but Mark reined him in roughly and shoved a knee into the boy’s spine, hard, seething like

a jilted lover. “Now you’ll see. Now you’ll feel like he felt . . . see what he saw going down.”

And then he was dragging him to the edge, the boy kicking and thrashing, but the adrenal rush had turned Mark into Superman. He could have plucked the boy up with one hand and hurled him into the river. He released his stranglehold and grabbed the boy by his hair, jerking his head back, stretching the fragile neck until the Adam’s apple seemed to be straining like a rat trapped under the skin. Mark thought he could easily snap it—yes, snap his head right off and throw it into the river. Good riddance! One quick, hard yank—but better, less obvious, a little push, a little nudge over the edge. Just another dumb hiking accident.

The boy was crying now, whimpering, resisting a little but not much. Did Mark maybe feel a little sorry for him? Maybe just a little? Hell, no. Hells bells, no. Whimpering little shit. Then finish it. Finish! No, let him stew and suffer a little longer, pre-play in his head that sky-dive without a parachute until the fear and panic killed him. Till the mini macho peed his pants. . .

But in that instant of hesitation on the edge, even as he reminded himself to not lose courage—not a voice exactly but a thought, sentiment—yes, all of that, surely, but this boy, too, has parents, a mother and father who will wonder about his whereabouts, suffer and weep and grieve, wondering over and over what pathetic piece of human sewage has done this terrible, horrible thing.

Only what he had done to others. Maybe many others. Well deserved. Well earned. Only what he was willing to do and more. They would go to the church and pray over the lanky, broken body; burn incense and wave palm fronds and flowers, do whatever it is they did. A kid. A stupid, thoughtless, reckless little kid trashing his life for a silly gold watch. He felt like Abraham of old, the knife raised, teeth clenched, poised to finish the job . . . Then do it! Do it! Do it now! But Sean’s voice, a soft hand on the shoulder, rushed to the rescue: maybe the details of the dream had been confused, maybe the watch had not been stolen but given willingly, a gift maybe in one of Sean’s big-hearted save-the-world missionary moments maybe . . .

In that instant of hesitation, something—a fist, a hammer, a spike—slammed into his upper thigh, high and tight, near the

groin. He bellowed, he howled, but it was the shock more than the pain that made him relax his hold just enough for the boy to duck, twist, and wrench himself free.

He tight-roped briefly along the edge, and then he was gone, his black mop flip-flopping as he bounded down the trail, left, right, left, as if he were paralleling to the bottom. In the mix of sun and shade, his angular body flickered like an old silent movie.

Mark hollered after him: “Come back, you little sonuvabitch!” but it was a half-hearted cry that chased the boy only part way down the mountain and then quit because by then he was not sure of anything anymore.

Except the knife in his upper thigh which had suddenly become very real. He used both hands to remove the blade which the boy had buried to the hilt. He didn't know if that part of the knife was even called the hilt, maybe that was just for swords but it was buried up to that part. He withdrew the blade slowly and in a weird moment imagined young Arthur removing Excalibur from the stone. He felt nothing at first because the adrenaline was speeding so maniacally through his body. But the blood was real, and there was plenty of it oozing and spreading quickly across the upper half of his pants. Removing the knife was like unplugging the dike, and he was tempted to stick the blade back in to stop the bleeding. He didn't know much about these things—he sold beds and mattresses, for crying out loud, and had barely passed his First Aid merit badge and that was forty freaking years ago—but there was an artery down there, he knew that, a great big one, and if the boy had gotten lucky and nicked it, he was a dead man, he knew that too. The femoral artery. That was it. Blood gushing out like water from a broken faucet. Just the thought of it chased the blood from his head to his groin and he thought, *That's it. I'm done.*

But not yet. He managed to half-sit, half-fall on a rock shelf where he reminded himself to keep cool, stay calm, keep cool, stay calm. He'd buried it deep, maybe had hit the bone. Didn't want to look but knew he had to. So he peeled off his T-shirt and tried to tear it into strips but it was much harder than it appeared in the movies, so he finally bit into it, chewed a small hole and ripped the thing in two, more or less, then tore one of the halves into ragged quarters and the other into long strips.

He unzipped his pants and pulled them down for a better look

at the mess that was his leg and now his life and pressed a piece of his shirt against the oozing blood until it was thoroughly soaked, then applied another piece and held it firm until the bleeding had stopped. He took one of the strips and wrapped it around the semi-soaked bandage and knotted it tight but not tourniquet tight. But the blood soaked through again, and when he removed the bandage he inserted his thumbs into the wound, gently pulling the lips apart until they opened up like a dumb dark mouth with hell itself bubbling inside. His eyes clamped shut against his will and he fought and fought but couldn't force them open.

When he finally did, he was lying on the ground with his pants halfway down and his shirt off but his garment top on and his face in the dirt, but he was still alive which meant he had been luckier than the boy who had missed the fatal artery. His pants were an awful ugly mess, but the bleeding had stopped, thank God. And then he remembered to really thank God because he was going to really need Him to get out of this mess alive. The bleeding had stopped but the boy was probably back at the village by now saying who knows what to who knows whom? He had sprinted down the trail as if he were on fire, but these rat-pack kids always had an escape hatch, always had a way back home. Had probably told his parents, the police. The whole village probably knew by now and before long they'd be coming after him with machetes and bullwhips. Besides, he didn't have a leg to stand on, literally or figuratively. Well, there was the boy's knife which happened to be inserted into his leg. Try explaining that to a judge. *No hablo español*. Or his sudden change of heart that kept him from hurling the urchin to a speedy and accidentally on purpose death. *Quid pro quo*. That was a change of heart, wasn't it? Father? There, at the last instant, second guessing? Playing Hamlet. Or was that strike three and I'm out? Judging our actions and the workings of the heart. To even look upon a woman to lust after her . . . Intent is everything. But didn't I balk on the intent? My second and third stuttering that allowed him to weasel out of this?

His thoughts were scatter-gunning everywhere. Stop. Think. Focus. Deal with the moment, save the metaphysical crime and punishment, sin and suffering, eternal judgment stuff for later. He had to get back to town, get this thing cleaned up, sewn up, be-

fore the Mexican microbes infiltrated and took his leg if not his life.

He picked up the knife—small, maybe a four-inch blade although at the moment it looked as monstrous as a Bowie knife and for sure it was infested with germs having been employed to gut chickens or goats or who knows what? The serrated edge had made an ugly wound even uglier. He thought he recalled hearing a clink on impact, something even nastier than the raw puncturing of his skin. Striking the bone maybe and if so was that bad but of course it was bad but how bad was it doesn't matter—doesn't doesn't doesn't. It is what it is and now keep your head on screwed on straight and deal with it.

He tossed the blade aside and, reconsidering, picked it up and heaved it deep into the canyon, then wondered if some goat herder or federal agent might see it glistening in the sun. Idiot. You could have buried the dumb thing. Could have done a million other things besides throw it out there for anyone to find. And with your prints all over it.

He needed to act quickly. There was no one in sight and that was good. He couldn't go back to town, not like this all covered with blood. The boy probably had an uncle or a brother or father who probably was the police chief or the sheriff or whoever doled out justice here, and wouldn't they just love to throw his sorry gringo butt in jail? Wait. Calm. Stay calm now. Stop. Breathe . . .

Okay. Okay. Okay, so now he would hike back toward the village, find a place to hide, wait there until dark. A shady spot out of the sun, close to some water, maybe, to clean out the wound. He would sneak back to the motel at dark—if he could just get back to the motel room and clean himself up. . .

He thought it wasn't right to wear his garment top like a T-shirt in the open with nothing over it, but was it any better to carry it in his pocket like a giant handkerchief? *What would Jesus do?* If he removed the top, the sun would fry him like an egg, so he left it in place and started the long walk back, limping on the left leg now instead of the injured right ankle which he didn't even notice anymore.

Halfway down the mountain, he saw through the pines a fortress of rocks about fifty yards off the trail so he veered toward it and thought, *This will do*. It was a ten-foot wall of boulders that

formed a kind of horseshoe with an oval hole at the bottom wide enough for him to crawl through. On the other side, he found a shady grotto in a stand of trees with thin strips of bark peeling off like badly sunburned flesh—the way his skin would look tomorrow. He lowered himself to the bed of dirt and leaves and tried to relax beneath the crib-work canopy of branches and pine needles. He thought he was protected but fragments of sunlight still sneaked through the overgrowth burning slowly but deeply into his arms and face and neck. His lips and mouth were parched, and he wanted water in the worst way. *Should've brought more, should've shared less, shouldn't have guzzled it all at once.* But he tried to ignore all of that and the little army howling for food in his belly. But what surprised and amazed him the most was the wound. Even though he knew it was there and it bothered him some, there was relatively little pain, and he didn't know if that was good or bad.

He tried to rest—not sleep, because if he dozed off he might not wake up again. He started counting down from one hundred and then he tried to recite the Articles of Faith and then began singing old Beatle songs and hymns and anything else to keep his brain working. But jeez, he was thirsty and the sound of falling water made it even worse although it was probably just the wind in the trees or the ringing in his ears and besides water would draw a crowd on a day like this and he couldn't afford any witnesses.

And so he began praying—a non-stop monologue directed partly to himself, partly to God, partly to Margie—not so much prayer as a blitz of uncensored emotion mixed with bits of contrition, despair, and personal pep talk: we can get through this thing, can't we? Of course. All things possible in Thy book. All things, right?

Thus, he waited, trying to rest without falling asleep as the sun dragged its gassy, liquored body across the Mexican sky; and when it finally touched down on the rocky horizon, he pulled himself to his feet and began a crippled but hasty descent toward the preliminary lights of the village.

The mixture of dusk and the ubiquitous haze made a convenient camouflage; and by the time he reached the outskirts, night had fallen and he could hear music playing in the plaza. He followed the darker streets, ducking behind a tree here, an old barrel there, detouring to avoid a small but persnickety dog guarding

the entrance to a house of mud and sticks. Eventually he found the walled exterior of the motel where he slipped through the wooden gate and staggered across the patio and upstairs to his room, hoping no one had seen him.

Water. He needed water fast. He bolted into the bathroom and lowered his head into the sink, determined to guzzle straight from the tap and suffer the consequences, but he pulled out at the last moment. *This close*, he scolded himself, licking his brutally chapped lips. *This close on so many levels*.

He showered, scrubbed the wound as best he could, tore a bathroom towel into strips, and made a temporary bandage. He put on his other garments, clean jeans and shirt, and then stepped out into the warm evening and headed toward the pillar of light hovering over the village, silently praying that the pharmacy would still be open and the crowd too busy partying to notice an over-sized gringo in a maroon ASU Sun Devils T-shirt and blue jeans gimping along their cobbled streets.

He was in luck because it was Saturday and every man, woman, and child from every two-bit town in northern Mexico seemed to have descended on the plaza where a five-piece band was playing in the gazebo—brassy, sassy trumpets punctuated by the intermittent booming of a bass drum. The crowd was circling around it like a slow-motion whirlpool that kept changing its mind and reversing direction: an old couple dancing a slow but smooth two-step, the mustachioed husband in shiny black shoes, his wife with her silver hair in a bun, while younger couples swiveled their Latin hips center-stage or cuddled on the cast-iron benches. Mature women and their teenaged daughters sauntered into the arena with shawls over their shoulders, the ends trailing behind, like graceful butterflies. A young man in a white dress shirt and tie was sitting imperiously on a stainless steel throne while an oldtimer spit-shined his shoes. Sidewalk vendors sold their wares, and Indian women with bulging bundles on their heads wove adroitly through the crowd as the human traffic flowed in and out of the shops, the bakery, the open-air food stands. For Mark, the smells of fresh-baked delights and meats sizzling over flaming grills were tantalizing reminders that he hadn't eaten since mid-morning. Through all of this, the little band played on with astounding volume and energy.

Watching from the shadows, Mark was startled by this other slice of Mexico. He wondered how this abundance of simple joy had escaped him earlier. In almost every face, he observed laughter; and even in the silent countenances of the Indians, he sensed a quiet contentment. A pack of children seemed deliriously happy kicking a plastic bottle back and forth across the bricks. He couldn't remember the last time he and Margie had danced like the silver-haired couple circling in front of him, couldn't remember the last time they had danced. The energy was so addictive that for a moment even he was tempted to step out and join the swirling, whirling mass. Then he saw through a momentary gash in the crowd two images that reined him back in. The first was a young mother in rags huddled up with three small, barefoot children on the street corner, her open hand, dark and withered, extended to passersby. She could not have been a day over eighteen. The second was the sloping shoulders and mop-haired head of Carlos.

He was coming in Mark's direction, maybe not intentionally but this was no time for even a chance reunion. Mark dipped his head and hobbled down a side street until he found, to his relief, the pharmacy still open. An old Indian man and his wife were at the counter buying tubes of something. They smelled like a campfire.

Through the glass counter he could see tiny boxes and plastic bottles with warped wrappers and faded lettering that betrayed their natural shelf-life. One bald bulb was burning behind the cash register and the other on the wall near the entry. Otherwise the store was cast in evening shadow.

Mark consulted the list he had made in the hotel room, carefully trying to pronounce each item: *alcohol*; *aguja*, needle; *hilo*, thread; *vendaje*, bandage. The hunch-backed woman behind the counter scrunched her face on his first try but smiled on the second, nodding, pronouncing the word correctly: *a-goo-haa*.

As she bagged the items, he grabbed as many bottles of water as he could carry, a can of soda, and two candy bars. Turning to go, he felt his eyes shutting down again, and he grabbed for the counter, trying to steady himself. The woman looked at him curiously—no, gently; it was a gentle look of concern—and asked him something he couldn't decipher. He smiled, nodding, trying without words to reassure her he was fine, just fine, *está bien*, he said,

later thinking it should have been *estoy bien*, but for now he just wanted to get out of there (*gracias, muchas gracias, está bien, estoy bien*) before the wound started bleeding through his pants and he caused a panic in the house.

He gathered up his things and stepped outside and felt marginally better, well enough to stop and buy half a dozen tamales from a street-side vendor because Sean had said that anything hot was safe to eat.

In the hotel room, he ate and drank ravenously, tearing the husks off the tamales and wolfing them down, guzzling bottle after bottle of water. It was lukewarm, but he didn't really care right now. He ate and drank way too much, way too fast, and stopped way too late, but he didn't care. When he was so stuffed he thought his belly would burst, he rolled over sideways on the bed and lay there for several moments, trying to psych himself up for the nasty task of dressing his wound.

For this he placed the remains of his bathroom towel on the bed and removed his pants, wincing as he pried apart the gash, an ugly, jagged ravine. He poured the rubbing alcohol directly into it, then flung himself back onto the bed, snorting and swearing and chewing his upper lip so he wouldn't howl the roof off because the pain was so deep and sharp and savage, like the knife going in and out all over again. He could have gotten something milder, hydrogen peroxide, maybe, which he wouldn't have felt at all, but he couldn't pronounce the words in Spanish, although that was only part of it. More to the point, he wanted the bite, the sting, the torture of hot lava pouring into his groin. He wanted the punishment. So he administered a second round, biting on a washcloth, chewing it almost joyfully as the clear liquid burned hot and deep, whispering his son's name: "Sean . . . Sean . . . Seany boy . . ." And then he flopped back on the bed again, staring at the ceiling fan monotonously chopping up the air, reminding himself that this was the easy part.

It took him six tries to finally thread the needle; and when he did, he almost messed it up on purpose, but finally he forced the tip into the tough, fat flesh of his upper thigh, and yes, the first one was awful—the worst by far, and jeez, it hurt, it hurt, it hurt so damn much, and you had to really muscle it through the stubborn skin and across the great divide, but you had to sew it up, didn't

you? Of course you did, but the second was a little easier than the first, a little less bite and the third pass was a little easier still, not that any of it was easy, but by the time he had looped the thread through from one end of the gash to the other he had come to almost enjoy it. It was his punishment for stupidity, clumsiness, carelessness, shortsightedness. It was his final tribute to his son who had died nobly in service to his God. Each poke and plunge felt like a hot, angry stripe. Like penance. At the end of the gash he pulled the thread around tight, tying it three times for good measure. Tears streaming down his face, he raised the remains of the last tamale to his lips, took a triumphant bite, and then collapsed face down on the mattress.

When he woke up it was still dark outside and the blood-red digits on the alarm clock read 12:17 which seemed impossible because he wasn't tired or even drowsy and it had been well past 10:00 when he had returned from the plaza. Was he so strung out and depleted that he'd slept through the night and the day and into the next night? Or maybe three nights and two days? He had no idea, none. Outside it was perfectly still, perfectly quiet, the only sound the inexorable ringing in his ears. He thought that maybe he was still sleeping except the room was too familiar, too tactile, and had none of the eccentric distortions of a dream. And the pain in his upper thigh was all too real. It felt as if someone were bludgeoning it with a hammer. He unwrapped the wound and cursed at the sight of a red-hot ring around his artless ladder of sutures. He poured more alcohol over the wound, savoring the sting, knowing better but still hoping that the harsher the bite, the more potent the potion. But there was no stopping the throbbing or the sweat lacquering his body or the fire in his flesh. He thought maybe the room was just really hot or maybe he had a fever, but either way there wasn't much he could do about it until morning, so he opened his Grisham paperback and tried his best to focus as night crawled leglessly toward dawn, tried not to watch the laggard progress of the clock or clutter his mind with calculations but did anyway: the train left at 4:00. Eleven and a half hours plus four hours makes fifteen and a half hours. Seven hours to the city, arrive at 11:00. Twenty-two-and-a-half, round it off to twenty-three. Figure an hour to get from the bus station to the airport, get a ticket, et cetera, et cetera. The plane left around 9:00

A.M. Add eleven to midnight, one hour, plus another nine makes ten equals thirty-four. An hour flight to El Paso, kill two makes three, an hour to Phoenix makes four. Thirty-eight total. Puts you in Phoenix about 1:00 maybe 2:00 o'clock. Wait another hour for the next puddle jumper, 3:00 o'clock plus an hour in the air and you're landing about 4:00. Add an hour for glitches, screw-ups, Mexican time. Five o'clock. Flying in over the peaks at 5:00 P.M. . . .

He worked the numbers over and over again, mixed with flights of guilt, regret, anger (*stupid, stupid, stupid . . .*), prayer, and escalating pain; and at some point during the mental mish-mash, he managed to doze off again.

The sun had been up for a few hours, but he stuffed his bloodied pants next to the wall on the other side of the bed so the maid wouldn't see them if she started to clean up. Then he made the final call for breakfast. He didn't want to risk going into town and seeing the boy or the police, so he returned to his room until check-out time at noon. He was not too surprised to see an extra night tacked on to the bill, which he promptly paid, smiling at the young woman with the long braid. Then he limped toward town on the less-traveled south side, marveling at the orgy of colors: shawls of bougainvillea coating adobe walls, flowered vines dripping out of clay pots, young mothers in multi-toned fabric sweeping the walkways of simple homes painted outlandishly loud colors: scarlet, orange, turquoise, pink, chartreuse. They were so bright and bold and in your face that Mark found himself limping along with a little more bounce in his step and a little less gravity in his countenance.

The midday sun had cleared the streets except for a few mangy dogs stretched out on slabs of shade and a young woman slipping into the open doorway of the church. Mark considered following suit, but first he had to attend to his leg. He entered the pharmacy and bought *una cosa para matar el dolor*. Something to kill the pain. Butchered, but the best he could do on the fly. The old woman smiled at him as if he were a regular customer now and handed him a small bottle with faded lettering.

"*Es fuerte?*" It is strong?

The old woman nodded vigorously: "*Sí! Es muy fuerte.*"

"Good," he mumbled, "because I need *muy, muy fuerte.*"

The old woman held up three fingers. "*Tres pastillas.*"

Mark repeated the gesture. "*Tres?*"

More nods, more vigor. "*¡Sí! Tres.*"

Mark bought four water bottles and found a patch of shade where he swallowed three pills and hoped for the best. Even in the shadows, it was scorching; but he toughed it out, watching from afar as a few brave hearts ventured out into the sun—old women lugging plastic bags swollen with the day's groceries; a middle-aged man and his young sidekick pushing and pulling a giant desk across the cobbled streets on a comically undersized hand-truck. No sign of Carlos.

The pills made him drowsy but did nothing to reduce the pain. It was tolerable when he was at rest; but if he put any weight on his leg, it was like smashing it with a hammer. But he was melting in the heat. Gritting his teeth, he limped across the plaza and disappeared inside the church where he was jolted first by the sudden plunge in temperature—the place felt refrigerated—and then by other sensations: the exquisite silence, the vastness of the space, the darkness pricked by a few strategically placed lights and little rows of votive candles burning up front and along the sides, the flames wriggling like goldfish in tiny bowls—all of that—but most unsettling to his Mormon mind was the giant statue of the Virgin Mary in a flowing robe of royal blue, posing dead-center in the front on a pedestal in a three-dimensional frame of tendriled gold. She was staring down at the almost vacant rows of dark wood pews, not with eyes of long suffering but with a cool detachment, arms extended, hands open, awaiting an embrace. The wall behind her was a giant mural of long-faced martyrs and suffering saints divided by four golden columns that urged the eye upward to a domed ceiling populated by chubby cherubim. At the foot of the statue, in a small glass box, the Virgin's immaculate Son gazed down from his cross with bowed head and despondent eyes, a golden crown on his head, the prints in his hands and feet barely visible, like little after-thoughts.

At first the ubiquitous look and smell of gold was appalling to him, especially in a town so small and obviously poverty stricken, lacking in things of the world, but Mark reminded himself of the Kirtland Temple and how the Saints had willingly and joyfully crushed their heirloom china to a fine powder that would sparkle

from top to bottom whenever the sun touched the temple walls. Duty. Sacrifice. Love was smeared somewhere in the mix. And what force had moved these massive blocks of stone, bent double under the cracking whips of friars and conquistadors? Wasn't that how it had come down here? Every nation had its dark underbelly.

To the right, near the front, the young woman with a thick braid of black hair was kneeling between the pews, head bent, eyes closed, lips moving softly and swiftly. A balding old man entered clutching a straw hat in both hands. He dipped his hand into a stone container bulging out of the wall, crossed himself, limped up to the altar in front, genuflected, then crossed himself again before kneeling behind the front pew.

Mark watched for several minutes, but neither the man nor the woman moved. He closed his eyes and tried to feel the Spirit, but the pain in his groin shouted his prayer. There was certainly reverence here, he couldn't deny that, and respect—a willing submission to God. More than he could claim. His antsy prayers were even shorter than his lovemaking. In and out, man. To call them simple hearts was condescending. Believing hearts. Yearning hearts, trusting and devoted hearts. And he had come all this way, for what? His eyes slowly climbed the giant stone blocks that had been hoisted five centuries ago without power-driven motors or machines. The sweat, blood, and tears of a nation. And what nation? Whose people? The chosen children of a lesser God? Lehi's accident? He looked up at the face of the Virgin, who was not smiling but not frowning either. The ambiguous countenance of an ambiguous people.

It was the face of a porcelain doll—smooth, shiny, aloof, and so very white. Yet the longer he looked, the more it seemed to warm and soften. Here was a woman who could understand the agony of loss without divine scaffolding and eternal vision. So maybe the frigid pallor and unblinking eyes were more self defense than apathy and indifference. She had been there, steeled and softened not by vicarious hypothetical loss but daily finite mortal belabored pain and suffering. She knew the score in simple human terms.

He tried to imagine Sean among these people, walking down this aisle with his companion on a preparation day maybe, checking out the local sights. His bristly blond hair and All-American

smile could have lit up the night, couldn't it? Or more likely the sheer spirit vibrating between the two, a gringo and a native carrying their leather-bound scriptures, the twin sticks of Joseph and Judah. Sean would have been respectful in this place, wouldn't he? Not a snotty ugly American rocking and rolling and cowboying up and down the aisles as if he owned the place.

The smell of incense was strong here, and flowers too, although he couldn't see them in the darkness. The smell of stone, cool and damp, the smell of history. Mark closed his eyes, listening: The silence was deep and prolonged, patiently waiting for an answer. It was the sound of deafness, the sound of a god who is not angry or amused but simply indifferent. And yet . . . and yet . . . and yet . . . It was comforting here; not exactly the same God he worshipped but close enough for the moment. He felt safe—alien but safe. Here he could hide from the boy and the sun and the heat of the day and the tentacles of his own history. Like Jonah. Like Job.

He took a seat in the very back pew and began whispering to the God that he had grown up with and had loved and trusted and to the best of his abilities had obeyed. Except this time it was not a prayer of demands and entitlements or of anger and accusations. Nor was it a prayer of defeat, but of resignation.

He leaned forward, head bowed, eyes closed, elbows braced on his knees, waiting for an answer. The silence was immaculate, the only noticeable sound the sirens ringing perniciously in his ears. He thought he heard voices—the angels overhead murmuring among themselves? And then he sensed another presence take the cavernous chill out of the air. He was certain it was Sean who had settled down beside him, but he was afraid to look, afraid that he would break whatever cosmic spell had allowed his son to momentarily sneak back across the veil. He had waited over a year for this, had fasted and prayed and pleaded for this. He kept his head down, eyes closed. He felt many words, heard none, but he would remember four: *Poppa, I forgive you . . .*

He looked up: no Sean, no anyone. The old man with the straw hat and the young woman were gone. He was alone now.

He limped down the center aisle toward the rows of votive candles, knelt down in spite of the pain, and confessed before the

cool-eyed Virgin and her ever-suffering Son the real reason he had journeyed to this faraway place.

The day they had said good-bye to Sean at Salt Lake International, it was snowing miserably—a frenetic explosion of white inwards soiling the sky. Sean looked twenty pounds thinner than when he had entered the Missionary Training Center eight weeks before. He wasn't a pencil neck, but he had dropped the lethal linebacker's mass in his chest and shoulders. His summer tan was gone as well, and his pasty cheeks made his blue eyes look radiant but spooky. He had seemed disoriented; he was smiling but his smile seemed forced. The other missionaries in his group—all in the unmistakable white shirts and the plain ties, clipped bangs and sheared side-hair—seemed to be reveling in the gala of the send off: back-slapping fathers and grandfathers, doting mothers and sisters, girlfriends momentarily breaking the “arm's distance” rule to indulge their missionaries with a departing hug. Laughing, joking, teasing, well-wishing. Some tears, too, but no histrionics, no floodgates opening, just moms dabbing their eyes as they bravely sent their boys off to serve the Lord.

When Mark reached out to offer a farewell embrace, Sean had startled him, wrapping both arms around his father as if he had just returned from the dead, then pulling him in close and tight—tight as he hadn't since he was a frightened little boy in Dr. Lewis's office holding a homemade bandage to his bleeding forearm.

Except that in the airport he didn't cry, although in retrospect (always the damned retrospect!) the force of his embrace had been a louder, more desperate plea. And Mark had felt sick inside, a criss-crossing nausea as he reassured himself, *No, no, no, this is normal, this feeling of loss at departure. He's on the Lord's errand. This is right. This is good. He can't back out now. He'll regret it for the rest of his life and forever after. This is what Mormon men do; it is their work, their glory, their Father's business.* And then his boy had whimpered, called him something he hadn't since grade school: “Poppa . . . oh, Poppa, please . . .” Looking beyond his shoulder and into the goggle eyes of Elder Simmons from Pocatello, Idaho, Sean's gawky, geeky, computer nerd of a companion waiting calmly and patiently (and bravely!) in the wings—in that instant he had been ashamed of his son. And in the next instant, the ugliest thought: *What would we tell people? What would people say?*

Mark gently extricated himself from his son's bear hug, looked into his watery eyes which seemed to be pleading for an honorable out. In his mind he answered flatly: *No*. To the boy, he replied with a smile, a manly pat on the back: "You'll be fine. You be good now." His boy nodded, sniffing as he turned and, head bowed, trudged toward his companion who greeted him with a comforting hand on the shoulder. But later Mark would second-guess that decision, that double-pumping, double-crossing nausea, the ambivalent voice of the Spirit waving him on and off, and it was he—not the boy—who had played the coward, too damn chicken to listen. Later he would be ashamed of being ashamed.

At 3:30 he stepped back out into the sunlight and limped over to the train depot to buy the ticket that would start his journey home. The window was closed, and the small crowd appeared nonplussed by the fact, so he played along. A stocky middle-aged woman was standing guard over a cardboard box the size of a coffin lashed together with twine and duct tape. Behind her stood a young mother with a baby sucking vigorously on her breast, while a little boy with a blue headband clutched the hand of a lanky old man.

Mark checked his watch and tried to tap it faster. No train in sight. A Mexican train running on Mexican time. He eased through the crowd to the far side of the depot, in the shade, but it didn't help. The flesh was dripping from his face. He closed his eyes, reminding himself to hang on, hang tough, he would be home soon, but each minute crawled by as if it too were wounded.

When he looked again, the boy was standing maybe twenty feet away—a defiant little angel in his pale slacks and tunic, one hand on a jutting hip, the other dangling at his side, the gold watchband pimping in the afternoon sun. Mark returned the glare in kind, refusing to let go. For what seemed like minutes but were probably only seconds, the two remained like that—a pair of gunslingers each waiting for the other to make the first move. Finally, Mark tapped his wrist where his boy's watch should have been, then crossed both arms over his chest. With a shrug and a smirk, the boy pivoted on the heels of his tire-tread sandals and disappeared into the growing commotion of the crowd.

A minute passed, maybe two, and suddenly a surge of families

descended on the depot dragging more bandaged boxes and suitcases. Mark couldn't afford to lose his seat, so he joined the human flow edging toward the tracks.

Moments later the silver train rounded the bend—not the newest or shiniest model but a beauty in his eyes. Even the deafening bellow of the horn and the shrill protest of the brakes sounded melodious. He noticed that the sulphurous haze had disappeared. For the first time since he had crossed the border—how many days ago?—the sky was clear, blue, chaste, clean. Had it changed from foggy-smoggy yellow to pure blue during his brief retreat inside the church? Or had he simply been too preoccupied—too self-involved, as Margie would say—to notice the change earlier?

A uniformed officer had entered the area, and Mark hoped it was a routine patrol, not some Mexican dragnet to seek out and strip-search the gringo. Mark stepped forward, grabbing the handrail with one hand, his duffel bag with the other. He was trying hard not to grimace but failed miserably as he pulled himself up the first step, dragging his bum leg behind. One down, three to go—do they have to make the steps so high here? When the truncated porter with the toothbrush mustache reached down to help, Mark looked up, smiled, shook his head: *No, gracias* . . . Sweat was oozing from every pore, it seemed, gluing his garments and shirt to his chest and back, his legs so damp he had to check for blood leaks. His life had become a permanent hot flash. He tried to pay for his ticket, but the porter shook his head and motioned him on.

Easy now. To the back. He scanned the coach—a few families packed into the bench seats, a man in a white business shirt and tie reading the Mexican daily, a young Indian woman in a dress as colorful as a fruit salad sitting all alone staring out the window. Mark sidled down the aisle and eased himself onto the cushioned bench seat. A fist of foam was protruding from a gash in the seat cover next to a sticky splash of spilled soda, but otherwise it looked clean, adequate. No, not adequate—beautiful. It looked absolutely beautiful!

He leaned back and propped his leg sideways on the seat, hoping to take the sting out, but it felt as if some demon monster were gnawing on it. Watch check: 4:35. The coach was almost full and no one else was boarding, but the train continued to idle. “Come

on,” he muttered. “Get this crate moving! One down, three to go. We can do this!”

Peering out the window, Mark noticed the young man in uniform huddled with a half dozen of his sidekicks, talking animatedly. Lots of arms slicing and dicing the air, fingers pointing here, there, the train. One of them motioned toward Mark’s window, and he looked abruptly down and away, instantly regretting it—Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!—like some cheesy spy movie. He began casting a desperate and disjointed petition to God: *Father, please, I know what I have done rather tried to do attempted but didn’t didn’t I stopped my heart was on the verge yes absolutely yes but I stopped or You prevented in Your grace wisdom love cutting me slack again I didn’t deserve but still stopped and did not please now I’m so sorry of for everything that but the rest too my way I’ve been acting those thoughts contrary lack of faith and not trusting Your grander bigger better vision didn’t couldn’t see for that blinded by You know who how that is You know all things of course You do please if You could of course You omnipotent omniscient ombudsman can once again look with fondness where did that come from have I ever said anything cast a fond eye on Your servant Mark doesn’t have quite the same ring as David or Solomon or Joseph the one-syllable ordinariness but please if You could see feel it in Your heart to carry me lead me guide me walk beside me safely please one last look touch taste they’re coming aren’t they coming and there’s no escape now no way out now nowhere to go now but. . .*

And then he felt the very slightest tug in his lower back, and for the first time since his little journey had begun—for the first time in over a year, really—he smiled. Honestly, sincerely, truly. They were moving. He sat back and let the adrenaline drain from his body. His shirt was soaked, his heart was thumping, but he closed his eyes and braced his fists against his forehead, whispering aloud: “Thank You, Father, thank You thank You, thank You. I don’t know what else to say right now except thank You.”

When he opened his eyes, it was pitch black and he realized they were passing through a long tunnel. He felt strangely at peace in the darkness. Safe. He could feel the train laboring—this was the brief uphill part; once they reached the summit they would fly all the way to the city.

The pain in his groin tightened and burned. Should have gotten something stronger. None of this *tres pastillas* stuff. Something

to knock it out for the count, at least until he got home. Got to catch it early, though. The ugly red around the sutures was normal, wasn't it? A little redness? But jeez, it felt hot. His whole body was on fire. He could check again, but what's the point? He just wanted to get home in one piece. Two pieces, Father. A dozen pieces is okay. Just get me home.

He imagined the puddle jumper angling into the final descent, the magnificent view of the peaks, still striped with snow, Margie waiting for him, the look of relief and hopefully joy on her face as he passed through the sliding glass door into the terminal. The long embrace, kissing her as if he really meant it and her kissing him likewise. They would go to the Red Lobster for dinner. Grilled salmon. A big baked potato smothered in butter and sour cream. Screw cholesterol, screw calories for the night. He would tell her all about it—the trip, yes, but all of the stuff going on internally, too. In his head, his heart. Not too much though. Omit the dark and gory details. Keep it upbeat. Keep it positive. She had been through enough already, and he'd put her through even more. Apologizing. He would apologize. Tell her how sorry he was and—yes, how much he loved her. He loved her. He didn't realize how much. Not like this. Not like this hurts your heart to even think about it. He would say that to her. What? What was he going to say? He had fourteen hours to figure that out. Give or take. Grilled salmon crusted with macadamia nuts. That was her favorite. They could rent a movie afterwards. One of those romantic comedies she liked. Meg Ryan. Something light. Something fun. Sit on the sofa with a blanket and just sit. Watch. Enjoy. Enjoy the moment. He prayed for that moment.

They were passing a small village of log homes where late afternoon fires were burning. Mark gazed out the window, sleepy but ecstatic—or was it really ecstasy? He was overwhelmed by a simple but immutable sense of joy. The pain in his groin was growing colder; he'd have to get it checked out when he got home. Doc Flanders would fix him up. The crotchety graybeard would scold him for being a stupid idiot—who do you think you are, some kind of Superhero? You could have lost your leg, or a whole lot more! Margie would chastise him, too. A little bit, not too badly. He hoped to see her nice face—the one with the smile she tried to hide but couldn't suppress. Cleo would be all over him—tail wagging,

high-stepping, turning circles. And the little one—no holding back. She would drop everything—dolls, chocolate milk, book, telephone. She would drop it all and come running, and this time he would fall to his knees and thrust open his arms, big and wide, and he would receive her—close, tight, permanent. Have a dolphin day, kiddo! Have a freakin' double-dolphin day!

The train rolled past craggy cliffs with pine trees leaning out across the tracks like acrobats—a tough land of harsh valleys and odd alliances, where cacti grew alongside evergreens. Through the forest mesh, he saw a small homestead—a simple box of logs caulked with mud, a column of smoke, laundry hanging on the line like a row of colorful pennants. An old woman with a blue scarf over her head was sitting out front, her hands working industriously on something. She looked up and watched a moment as the train passed. Mark lifted his hand and waved to her. Of course, she couldn't see him; he was a dark blot on the window, if that, but he lifted his hand and waved anyway. He wanted to reach out, hand her something, touch, speak. This is where his boy Sean had served, his little corner of God's vineyard. Had he spoken to this old woman? If not her, then surely dozens like her. Mark smiled. He pictured his son and his companion, two young giants in white shirts and black pants, backpacks slung over their shoulders, plodding across this rocky field to speak to this old woman. Do they realize we are sending our hearts? Our souls? Our best? Our very very best?

Mark was smiling but shaking too. Had they turned on the air-conditioning? He didn't know they even had A/C. Suddenly he felt cold. He crossed his arms and clasped his triceps, rubbing them briskly. Maybe he was coming down with something, a sneaky Mexican bug. Or was it simply the excitement, the anticipation: four legs on this journey, one down, three to go.

He looked out at the forest—pine trees spaced randomly, with lots of daylight in between. A man in a white tunic was leading his oxen toward the homestead. Farther off, a young Indian boy with a red headband and baggy white pants was chasing a soccer ball across a barren dirt field surrounded by pines, like a private little stadium. He was all alone but may as well have been playing before a crowd of thousands the way he charged up and down the field, his shirt tails trailing behind like banners, booting the ball, chasing

it down, zigging and zagging with such speed and energy and glee. Like Stacie—sweet little Stacie. Chasing the future into a corner, slide-tackling it on its ass. Feet barely touching the ground.

He was flying, wasn't he? Inside the amphitheater of pines. Ponderosa pines? Yes. Yes, he was almost certain of it. Those tall, asymmetrical, goofy-looking maverick evergreens. Yes, he was sure of it. Just like back home. His little mountain town. He leaned back, sleepily ecstatic. A lovely chill had crept into his feet and was climbing up the inside of his leg, into his groin. Cool. Nice.

And now he noticed something else: he listened for it very carefully, but the ringing in his head was gone. Gone. For the first time since the phone call, he listened to the beautiful symphony of silence. He was feeling warm again. Warm and cold together, the pain passing through him now like novocaine. He closed his eyes, smiling. Home. He was going home.