

The Righteous Road

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My mom held her hand over the phone. “It’s Reed,” she whispered.

I took the phone and leaned against the countertop. “Hello,” I said. “Hello.”

“What, Derrick? No call?” Reed asked.

“I didn’t know you were home.” I lied.

In November, Reed sent a practically illegible postcard. He was always sending postcards—from Istanbul, Mumbai, Munich, Hong Kong—all written in a sharp, hurried scrawl. *Let’s get together over Christmas*, he wrote. *It’ll be like old times*. I’d studied the postcard with its photograph of a cramped and filthy open market in Jerusalem: bins of dried fruit and lentils, skinless goat and sheep carcasses suspended from steel hooks.

And then there were his letters, as long as novellas, self-aggrandizing rants stuffed in manila envelopes he’d decorated with intricate and baffling designs. The message was always the same: the minute details of his service among the impoverished and downtrodden masses, and his grandiose plans for a future that had us saving the world from tyranny and environmental annihilation. I couldn’t finish the letters, nor could I respond with equal enthusiasm. The letters were too rhetorical, trying to persuade me to recapture some embellished memories from years past. Unlike Reed, I’d grown up, moved on, gone to college. I was in my last year of law school at Brigham Young University. I was engaged.

“I knew you wouldn’t get the postcard,” Reed said. “They were going through my mail. Israeli secret service. The *Mossad*. Sometimes they’d follow me. But that’s life.” He said this as if the inconvenience of wire taps and surveillance were a fact of his workaday world.

“What’s important is that you’re here,” Reed said. “There’s someone who needs our help. Eight at my house. You in?”

I could only guess who this somebody might be: the Palestinians, Mexican border crossers, old growth Douglas firs, the spotted owl, hump-backed whales? I imagined one of Reed’s windy, vainglorious speeches, a call to action to save the oppressed or right some ecological wrong, and me sitting there nodding ecstatically as if I still devoutly believed in the cause. I was ready to tell Reed I had to catch a plane in the morning, which was true. I was flying to Aspen to spend the weekend with my fiancée, Cassie, and her family. But the thought of another night playing Scrabble with my parents while my dad grumbled about his irritable bowels and diminishing retirement seemed unbearable. Worse, I imagined Reed showing up on our doorstep.

“I’ll be there,” I said.

My mom was on me the second I hung up the phone. Behind her, the Christmas tree winked on and off in a way that hurt my eyes.

“I never liked Reed,” she said, “even when you were little boys. Always a bad influence. And all that mischief in high school. I never believed you thought of it yourself. His parents had a handful. Edna Swenson still calls me. She cries about him. Did you know that? She wonders where she and Bob went wrong. She blames herself.”

“Boys will be boys.” I said this to get a rise from her, not because I believed it. I was of the opinion, and had been for years, that Reed needed to move beyond the perpetual adolescent state he lived in.

“But when do boys grow up?” my mom said. She began rearranging the nativity on the coffee table. “You grew up. Maybe you can talk some sense into him.” She pointed a shepherd at me. “Tell him to go to college and stop giving his parents grief. Tell him to go back to church. He’s still young enough to serve a mission. It’s Edna’s dream.”

“I’m not going to talk some sense into him,” I said. I didn’t want the responsibility of steering Reed back into the fold. Besides, Reed worshipped Mother Earth. His congregation convened in the tops of trees while angry loggers cursed from below or outside third-world sweat shops where the oppressed toiled for a nickel an hour. His sacrament was a thick joint and cheap wine.

“You just be careful over there,” my mom said. “I can’t imagine he’s changed much. I’m sure he’s still the same old Reed.”

Her warning annoyed me. As if Reed had any influence on me. He was a vestige from another life, an adolescent, simple-minded incarnation of myself I would never relive.



We grew up in the same wooded subdivision outside Auburn, Washington, had the same teachers at Lake View Elementary, attended the same ward. The sand box, Sunday school, cub scouts, T-ball. When didn’t I know Reed?

He always had this deeper ecological and humanitarian consciousness. Our Sunday school teachers, sweet old ladies who brought us oatmeal cookies, stared incredulously as Reed decried the cruelty of Mosaic animal sacrifice or questioned the goodness of a god who required the massacre of every Canaanite living in the Promised Land. At twelve, Reed’s first youth talk in sacrament meeting was a five-minute criticism of God’s command to Adam and Eve to subdue the earth and have dominion over it. “Why can’t all His creations just have an equal relationship?” Reed asked. “Why can’t everything just be free and happy without people messing up the forests and the air?”

When we were fifteen, Reed’s ecological sense found a focus. It was one of those boring summer nights, with nothing to do but sit in Reed’s living room and flip through channels until we were catatonic. The only thing on was a Greenpeace paid advertisement asking for donations to protest the Icelandic seal hunts. I watched in horror as a hulking Nordic in a blue, fur-lined parka clubbed a pod of yelping harp seals to death. The saliva drained from my mouth and a nauseating weight bloomed in my lower guts. I wanted to turn the channel and forget this injustice, find a brainless comedy to purge the disquieting image of the doomed seals. Reed made a choking sound. His lower lip quivered and a glistening line of snot oozed from both nostrils. Tears streamed down his cheeks. I pretended not to notice.

And then in the middle of all that slaughter, the death blows and the freshly-skinned pelts, the camera shifted to four men dragging an activist across the blood-specked ice. Tall, with a blond beard and fierce blue eyes, the activist chanted something about stopping the slaughter. Lars Norgard, we later learned, Greenpeace activist and captain of the *Sea Shepherd*, a man of mythical proportions who'd made a name for himself by ramming a dozen whaling ships.

Wiping the snot from his nose, Reed said, as if in a trance, "That's what I want to be."

Reed called a toll-free number that flashed on the TV screen, and in a couple weeks some brochures came in the mail. We pored over each color photograph: the *Sea Shepherd* slicing through the glacial, turbulent North Atlantic; hippy kids chaining themselves to the bows of fishing boats; and Lars Norgard, with his thick blond beard, standing on the *Sea Shepherd's* bridge, barking commands into a CB as he stared down a menacing Russian whaling ship. What more could two fifteen-year-old boys want? Adventure, danger, heroes and villains, the open seas. We wrote Lars and volunteered our services. We'd do anything: scrub toilets, cook food, do laundry, whatever he needed.

Lars actually wrote back. We sniffed the envelope and thought we could almost smell the briny sea. While applauding our ecological maturity and commitment to such a noble cause, Lars said by law we'd have to wait until we were eighteen. Until then, if we really wanted to stop the bastards, we should send money for fuel. "Keep believing and continue the fight," he wrote. "Patience. When the time comes, I'll have two spots on the *Sea Shepherd* for my eco-warriors." The words thrilled us.

We must have gotten on some mailing list. The pamphlets and newsletters filled Reed's mailbox: Animal Liberation Front, Amnesty International, PETA, Earth Liberation Front, Doctors without Borders, the Sierra Club. Shocked and sickened, we stared at the sharp color images of clear-cut wastelands and veal calves wallowing in their own feces and skeletal Somalians with distended bellies. Before, such abject suffering and unchecked destruction had only existed in the abstract—a brief image on the evening news. My parents had shielded me, I knew, and now I wanted to do something

about all this misery and devastation, something more than praying for the sick and afflicted or cleaning out flower vases at Mountain View Cemetery or repainting worn bleachers. All that seemed ridiculously inconsequential when I considered the dying whales and the vanquished ancient forests and the starving Somalians.

When we could finally drive, we skipped school one Friday to check out an animal experimentation protest Reed saw advertised in the *Seattle Weekly*. There were about a hundred people there, chanting, waving signs, and marching in front of a towering glass and steel skyscraper in downtown Bellevue. Someone dressed in a fluffy rabbit suit smeared with red paint writhed on the sidewalk. One man wore a dog costume and had Vaseline smeared over his eyes. He howled mournfully as a woman led him around by the paw. Truthfully, Reed and I thought it was a bit much, until we looked at some literature a protester handed us and saw the lab photos of the terrified beagles hanging from their paws, the kittens with electrodes protruding from their skulls, and a chimpanzee in an oxygen mask running on a caged treadmill. All that suffering so Meyer Chemical could sell us lip balm and antifungal cream. The protesters' outrage was contagious. Reed and I walked up to a middle-aged man in dreadlocks who seemed in charge and asked if we could help. Smiling and then giving us both a bro hug, he handed us signs. For the rest of the afternoon we marched, blocked sidewalk traffic, and loudly upbraided anyone who dared enter the building.

After that, we were sneaking up to Seattle a couple times a month to march and pass out literature at anti-fur rallies or knock on doors for Amnesty International. At night, we'd go out with other activists to spray-paint butcher shops and furriers with pithy slogans like *Feed it, don't eat it* or *Are clothes to kill for?* Afterwards, we'd hang out in some grimy apartment in the University District or near Capitol Hill and listen to rousing environmental and humanitarian escapades while Phish played in the background and a thick joint and a jug of wine made the rounds. We partook because these were the fruits of the earth, or so they told us, a shared sacrament for nature's children meant to enlighten the mind and strengthen the body. If I experienced any guilt after that first toke, these assurances certainly mitigated it, as did my budding awareness that as an only

child I felt controlled and smothered. I wanted an identity apart from church and my parents' conservative politics. They bored me. No hobbies, no friends they went out with, no interest in music and art. If that was righteousness, I was pretty sure I didn't want it.

Soon, Reed and I stopped eating meat and dairy. We refused to wear our black leather church shoes, refused to wear any brand that exploited its workers in third-world sweat shops.

At home, my parents said little about my new-found activism, probably believing it would pass. Reed, however, felt morally compelled to win over his siblings and parents to his way of thinking. He saw the roots of their ecological and humanitarian apathy in what he called the naïve and narrow-minded strictures of Mormonism. Suddenly, Reed's rhetoric burned with anti-religious sentiments: religion as a social construct, as a mental illness, as the opium of the masses. He could go on for hours, until even I couldn't take it anymore. His home became a den of acrimony, screaming, and vague threats from Reed's parents, a constant tension simmering just below the surface. Soon, Reed refused to attend church and early morning seminary. This appealed to me, too, for no other reason than that I longed for more sleep. My parents, probably sensing Reed's influence, offered unrestricted use of my dad's old Plymouth Reliant and a Shell gas card if I didn't miss a day of church or seminary. Even Reed liked the idea. Because without a car, how would we get to Seattle?

And then in January of our senior year, Reed didn't show up for school on Monday. At lunch, I called his house. No one answered. When I got home that afternoon, my parents sat solemnly on the living room couch. My mom dabbed at her red, weepy eyes with a crumpled Kleenex. My dad, who shouldn't have been home for another two hours, stood and pointed to the love seat. "Derrick, we need to talk," he said. My heart pounded.

He said Sister Swenson had called that morning, Reed and two others had been arrested Sunday afternoon for vandalizing an Albertson's meat counter in Seattle. But there was more. Brother and Sister Swenson, no doubt distraught and suspicious after receiving this news, had gone through Reed's drawers and discovered a joint and a bag of dried shrooms. "Do you know anything about those?" my dad asked. "Are you and Reed using drugs?"

Staring at our beige carpet, I denied everything, denied vehemently while suddenly realizing my parents knew. I was sure.

Reed was now on a plane to New Mexico, my dad said, where he'd spend the next ten weeks in a wilderness treatment program for drug addiction and behavioral issues. He insisted, at least while Reed was gone, that I take a break from the activism and from our little cadre of hippy friends at school. Now I'd eat lunch with the kids from church. Did I understand? my dad wanted to know. Or did they need to go upstairs and look through my drawers and closet? I stared at his polished Wingtips and nodded quickly.

The next day at school, the church kids—all bores and blind followers of the faith, Reed and I thought—invited me to eat lunch with them, an invitation arranged, I was sure, by my dad and Bishop McKinley. I accepted their invitation, hoping it might allay some of my parents' suspicions. And I'll admit, after two years of fiercely debating the environmental or humanitarian issue *de jour* over lunch with Reed and our friends, I actually enjoyed the cheery, inconsequential conversations about church dances, BYU football, and future mission calls. I sat with them for a month, though I never told Reed.

His first postcard came two weeks after his abrupt departure. "Living off the fat of the land," he wrote. "Stars so pretty. Grateful to the Creator for all good things. Searching for a heart at peace." A week later another postcard: "At harmony with the world. Love and respect for all people." He'd included an enigmatic postscript, a quote from Edward Albee's *The Monkeywrench Gang*, a book we'd read at least three times. The postscript said: "Because we like the taste of freedom, comrades. Because we like the smell of danger."

It wasn't a surprise, then, at least to me, when Reed escaped.

After a search of the area around the camp yielded no Reed, the Sheriff's department got involved, blazing out into the high desert on motorcycles and ATVs, even in a helicopter flown up from Albuquerque. Search and rescue volunteers came from Santa Fe. With no sign of Reed after three days, his parents flew to New Mexico. The ward fasted and prayed for Reed's safe return. My parents, I'm sure assuming Reed was dead, asked if I'd like to meet with a therapist. Not necessary, I told them, believing Reed was out there living his wilderness dream, holed up in a warm shelter,

feasting on pine nuts and cattails as he meditated away the hours. But as the days passed, I considered the possibility that Reed might be gone. At night, worried and unable to sleep, I found myself kneeling at my bedside, something I hadn't done in a long time, praying to God for my friend's safe return. I somehow knew, with an assurance I couldn't articulate—more a feeling than anything else—that Reed was all right.

And then a week later Reed called his parents from Pueblo, Colorado. Incredibly, he'd endured a freezing, high-desert night and walked fifty miles to the interstate, then hitchhiked the 350 miles to Pueblo. He was staying with some guy who was president of the local clean air conservation group.

Reed's parents drove to Pueblo and pleaded with him to finish the treatment program. He refused. He wanted to go home. His parents wouldn't hear of it. Reed had strained the family almost to the point of rupture. They quickly reached a compromise with Reed, one that showed their desperation. Until the end of the school year, they'd rent a studio apartment for Reed near Auburn High, pay the utilities, and give him a food allowance. He could come home once a week for Sunday dinner. Not a bad arrangement, Reed thought.

Every day after school, we smoked weed there, and Reed would often articulate his vision of our lives after graduation, how we'd travel the world over in search of perilous humanitarian and ecological causes to throw ourselves into. It was just talk, or so I thought, the impractical, idealistic machinations of a young man on the cusp of the adult world. Realistically, the next year I saw us at Green River Community College, done with the weed and the booze, hitting the books. And then at nineteen, I'd always assumed Reed and I would do what had been ingrained in us from birth by cheery primary songs and a thousand talks and Sunday school lessons. The mission. I'd meant to bring it up with Reed: the mission as an altruistic adventure, two years serving the indigent gentry of some third-world backwater, learning their language, teaching them to love one another. What was wrong with that? I also understood the unspoken stigma we'd bear if we didn't go.

Though I hadn't told Reed, I was tired of the Seattle activists and their scene. Loud, pushy, self-righteousness, they disliked almost

everything and would go on and on about anarchy and environmental destruction as if they knew nothing else. Ragged clothes and bad teeth, many looked indistinguishable from the homeless and unemployed begging dollars at freeway off ramps and downtown intersections. I didn't want the ascetic's life, though I didn't aspire to excess and luxury either. I wanted a few comforts, a life equal to or perhaps a little better than my parents'. A decent home for my family. Maybe a nice car. Nothing wrong with that.

But if anything, Reed was becoming more extreme, more dedicated to the cause. He had other plans for us.

It was a Friday at the end of May, two weeks to graduation, when he waved a hand-written letter in my face and said, "You want out of this hole? Here's your ticket." We were at his apartment, smoking a joint. Kurt Cobain screamed from the stereo. I squinted at the letter through a pall of smoke.

"Freedom and adventure. Saving the world," Reed said. "Right? Everything we've talked about for the last three years."

Reed, always audacious, always sniffing out the next adventure, had written Lars Norgard to remind him of his promise, and then, to prove we were ready for a life of activism, he'd detailed our activities from the last three years and explained we were eager to take it to the next level. Lars wrote back. We were in luck. There were two spots on the *Sea Shepherd*, but we'd have to act quickly. He'd be docked at the Tacoma Marina for a couple hours on Monday, June 13th. And then Lars warned us that this was the most dangerous work in the world, and for that reason he couldn't guarantee our safety. Reed read those words, smiled, and then read them again.

I feigned excitement for the next two weeks as we bought rucksacks from the army surplus store in Seattle and stuffed them with everything Lars said we needed: wool pants and sweaters, rain gear, lug-soled boots, waders, sunscreen. I smiled as we concocted our plan to meet that Monday morning at the bus stop behind JC Penny. I'd park the Reliant on Main Street, leave a note for our parents on the driver's seat, and then we'd take the bus to Tacoma. I praised the soundness of the plan, all the while knowing I never intended to meet Reed.

That Monday, I lay in bed and listened to the phone ring and ring and then go to the answering machine. I was alone, my dad at work, my mom gone to a church quilting project. "Where are you?" Reed's voice boomed through the house. "Derrick!" He called again and again. I heard him through the pillow I'd put over my head. Finally, I picked up the phone. I owed Reed at least that.

"You sleep in?" he shouted. "Are you sick?"

I cleared my throat. "I'm not sure. . . ." I struggled to finish the sentence. "That life. I'm not sure I want that life." I tried to explain: the transient, hand-to-mouth existence, the pessimism and never-ending activism. "I don't want to give up being Mormon," I told Reed. "I mean, I thought after all this we'd go on missions."

"Missions?" Reed said. He seemed confused. "Why would we go on missions?" And then he drew in a sharp breath. "You believe," he said slowly. "You believe everything they ever taught us."

I believed, believed weakly, I knew, perhaps believed through association only, a subconscious absorption of faith as I slept through church and early morning seminary. I believed, maybe, because my parents believed, because despite all their buttoned-up, conservative stuffiness they'd loved me selflessly and unconditionally. I imagined that God, if anything, might be an extension of them. I wondered if the church would let me go on a mission, after all the weed and the alcohol and the vandalism done in the name of saving the planet. I'd have to make amends. Tell my parents everything. Meet weekly with Bishop McKinley.

"I won't even get into how ridiculous it all is," Reed said. I could hear the disgust in his voice. "Angels and gold plates. But that's not even the worse part. It's the culture, Derrick. The Mormon factory. You go on that mission and you walk straight in, and when you come out, you're just like them. You'll dress like them and think like them and talk like them. You'll live in your little bubble. You see that, Derrick? Is that what you want?"

"But what if we do it differently?" I said. The idea suddenly came to me. I held the portable phone tightly to my ear and paced the living room. "Not like our parents. What if we did it our way and still believed?"

“Do it differently?” Reed said. “It’s not in the program, Derrick. They don’t want that.”

I heard the hiss of air breaks and then a monotone voice crackle over a speaker.

“Derrick,” Reed said. His voice trembled. “Come on. There’s still time. You don’t think we can do some good? There’re other ways to do good.”

I felt a rawness in the back of my throat. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

That night I called Reed’s father. There was no anger or accusations. Brother Swenson thanked me, and that was it. Reed was eighteen. What could he do? I knew the truth. He was glad Reed was gone.

I spent the year at Green River Community College, attended the stake singles’ ward, made restitution and repented for everything I’d done. I received a mission call to serve in Rio de Janeiro. After, I enrolled at BYU and earned a degree in political science. And then law school. I hadn’t seen Reed in seven years, but in that time, a month had never passed without a letter or postcard from him.



At eight, I stood on Reed’s doorstep. Loud Arabic music rattled the windows, strings and a high androgynous voice locked in a repetitive groove. I knocked hard and waited.

The music stopped, and then a moment later Reed stood in the doorway, smiling. He wore a Greenpeace t-shirt, faded jeans, and a white knitted beanie. “Seven years,” he said, taking my arm and pulling me into the house. “Seven years and rarely a letter. And look at you now: the lawyer in embryo. You gonna stick it to those fat cats in their corporate towers?”

“Sure,” I said. I could only imagine the selfless narrative Reed had conjured up for me, the rabid environmental lawyer saving the world from greedy land developers and wicked industrialists intent on melting the ice caps and decimating every forest. Actually, I was leaning toward corporate law. My dad agreed. The hours were long,

but the money was good. The previous two summers I'd clerked in Latham and Watkins's Los Angeles office, and I was optimistic they'd offer me a job after law school. I wanted stability. I wanted to provide a comfortable life for my family. I wanted to be a partner. But I knew these achievements meant nothing to Reed. He'd think there was no adventure in it, nothing of the bravado and altruism we'd dreamed about and discussed years ago while smoking a joint in his apartment. Worse, he'd think I'd become one of them, sold out for the all-powerful dollar.

"And you, the world traveler," I said, because I knew that's what Reed wanted, a little opening to gush about his adventures, to sing his environmental consciousness and deep empathy for others' suffering.

"I've been a few places," he said, ushering me toward the couch. "But it's good to be home, right? The old stomping ground. You want something to eat or drink?" he asked. "Some juice or cookies?"

"No, I actually just ate. I just came to say hello."

He insisted. "Come on. What can I get you?"

"Really, I'm fine," I said.

"You have to try this tamarind nectar I brought back from Gaza," Reed said.

He was halfway to the kitchen before I could protest.

"How are you parents?" I asked, hoping they'd materialize from somewhere. I was uncomfortable around Reed. After so many years, he felt like a stranger.

"Still believing their conservative conspiracy theories," Reed shouted from the kitchen. "Still praying Reagan will rise from the grave. God help us all. Actually, they took my sister and her husband to Crystal Mountain for the night. They're sick of me already."

Reed returned with a plate of baklava and two glasses brimming with an opaque liquid. He handed me a glass and then set the plate on the coffee table. He took a long drink, smacking his lips and looking at me expectantly. The liquid had the sheen of motor oil and smelled slightly fermented. I took a sip and cringed as the sweetness hit my fillings.

"Delicious, right?" Reed asked. He emptied his glass.

“It’s different,” I said, taking another small drink. I looked around the living room, at the beige carpet and the black leather Lazyboy. Nothing had changed in ten years. In fact, I was sitting on the same brown microfiber sectional where we’d first seen Lars Norgard protesting the harp seal hunts. “How’s Lars Norgard?” I asked. “What’s he like?”

“A phony,” Reed said quickly and unequivocally. He picked at something under his thumbnail. “‘Fuel to help us get the bastards,’ my ass. The man’s a gambling addict. And”—Reed knocked his knuckles together—“he’s a carnivore. An environmental phony. I was done with him a long time ago.”

“Well, it’s good to see you,” I said. “Really good.” I tried to think of more to say, to dredge up some nugget from years ago to carry the conversation, some innocuous memory we could bat around for a minute. I asked about Israel.

“Palestine,” Reed said. “The Zionist propagandists want to erase history, like no one lived there before 1948. Gaza and the West Bank are concentration camps. Genocide. People dying every day and no one hears about it. I wanted to change that.”

I was confused, but not surprised. “I thought you were studying Arabic. Didn’t you mention that in a letter?”

“Just a cover,” Reed said. He put his hand over his mouth and laughed. “My ticket into the country. A lowly student at Berzeit University. My mom was thrilled. I didn’t tell her that I was a human shield with this group called *Adalah*. And then the Zionist pricks caught wind of what I was doing. Israeli Secret Service. They think I’m an insurgent. Can you believe that?”

“You were a human shield?” I said. I thought of long-haired, wild-eyed hippies throwing themselves in front of bulldozers. “Don’t people die doing that?” I could only imagine the swollen image Reed had of himself: the solitary, undeterred student halting that massive tank in Tiananmen Square, the revolutionary, a savior to the oppressed.

“It happens,” Reed said stoically. “It’s war and war has its martyrs. Put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus.” Reed shoved a piece of baklava

into his mouth. "At Ramallah and Nablus we stopped the Israelis. We built roadblocks. But that's not all. Remember I always said I wanted to fight in a revolution?"

Reed was on a roll now, warming to the subject. When he reached for another chunk of baklava, I glanced at my watch. I thought of letting him go on for another fifteen minutes before I made my exit.

"None of that passive-aggressive shit," Reed said. "I wanted the real thing. Tear gas and Molotov cocktails. I knew these guys in *Hamas* and sometimes I'd go out with them at night. Patrol, they called it. What a rush. I even got something to show for it." He inched up his sleeve to show me a gauze bandage wrapped tightly around his bicep, and then he unwound it with a practiced dalliance. As the gauze fell away, I saw a crusted red gash no longer than an inch. "The kid standing next to me got it in the stomach," Reed said. "I don't think he made it."

"Someone shot you?" I was incredulous. I wanted to laugh.

"An Israeli sniper." Reed cradled his arm as if it were a badge of honor. "Revolution, brother, the real thing," he said. "Twelve-year-old kids blowing themselves to pieces on Israeli buses. They're committed. You have to admire that."

Reed stood up and walked into the kitchen, raising his voice so I could hear. "Oppression. That's what it is. People should never be oppressed." He returned with a full glass of tamarind nectar. "Bullies," he went on, staring down at the glass as if reading something in its black surface. He walked to the window. "Isn't the world full of them, from the playground to the corporate office to the White House? Aren't they everywhere?"

"Everywhere," I said, not in agreement or denial, but merely because that's what Reed wanted to hear. His breath came in short bursts. I looked at my watch and wondered if my parents were in bed yet.

Reed paced the room, passing the glass from one hand to the other. "When I was in Venice last summer, I ran into Liz Schuller at this bar near San Marco's Square. What were the chances, right? You remember Liz from high school? Carly Cantwell was her best friend. You remember Carly. Your little crush."

“Carly Cantwell,” I said, her name strange on my tongue. We’d had some classes together our junior and senior years. We’d even studied together a few times. She was a shy girl, a state champion swimmer with curly blond hair and a lean body tempered through long hours of cutting through water. I had a crush on her, sure, one of those pubescent musings that never comes to anything. She wanted to be a doctor, I remembered. I wondered about her sometimes when searching my bookcase and seeing the green and gold binding of my high school yearbook. “Did Liz mention Carly?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah, buddy, she mentioned Carly,” Reed said. “In fact, I think she told me a little more than she wanted to. *In vino veritas*, if you know what I mean.”

“What’d she say?” I tried to sound casual, but I suddenly found it difficult to breathe. I wondered if something had happened to Carly.

Reed stopped his pacing and looked at me. “You really want to know? You ready for this? Denny Bradshaw raped her the summer after our senior year. It happened at a house party. He cornered her in a bedroom. Sure, she tried to fight him off tooth and nail, but Denny’s huge. And in the middle of it some girl walks in and then just turns around and leaves. Doesn’t do a damn thing. Carly’s crying for help and the girl bolts.”

I stared at my hands. They suddenly felt cold. “Did she tell the police?” I asked. I wanted to hear that justice had been done, that Denny had been punished, though I already knew the answer.

Reed sat on the coffee table and leaned in toward me. “You see, that’s the kicker, my friend. Right as Denny’s zipping up, he tells Carly he’ll kill her if she ever tells. She’s in shock for about a week before Liz convinces her to report what happened. But the police won’t do a thing. That’s the legal system for you. They’ll give you all the justice you want unless it interferes with what Daddy Bradshaw’s passing under the table.”

Denny Bradshaw was a grade above us, a high school athlete whose father owned the largest construction company in Auburn and sat on the school board. I remembered Denny as an arrogant athlete with his shoulder lowered, pushing through the school hallways as if moving down the field, shouting at anyone in his way. At

least once a week at lunch he'd stop at our table with a couple jock friends to wave a hamburger in our faces and laugh hysterically. Once he overturned a garbage can on top of our heads. After high school, he went to Washington State on a football scholarship, but only lasted a couple of years before dropping out and moving back to Auburn to work in the family business. I'd heard a rumor that his father cut him off for embezzling money.

"And you know the girl who walks in on the rape," Reed said, "the only witness who can put Denny away? She's a secretary at Bradshaw Construction. Started a few weeks after the rape. A real coincidence. And what about all the other victims. Liz said there were always rumors."

"It's not right," I said. I looked down at my fisted hands.

"Of course it's not right. It's a travesty." Reed walked to the window and glowered at the darkness beyond the glass. "And with guys like Denny, the great injustice is that it keeps happening. I'd bet my life on it. Seven years after high school, you think he's changed? The man's a predator and we're going to stop him."

Reed turned and stared at me, as if expecting me to say something.

"What? You want to blindside him in an alley?" I asked. "Sneak up behind him with a tire iron? Is that what you're suggesting?"

"Hell no," Reed said. "I'd never harm a living thing. That's not what I do. I want to shame him. I was thinking about a little body work on his car, leave a message he'll understand, let him know somebody's watching."

"Reed, come on." I tried to laugh. "This is crazy. Really."

"He works at that old bar on Main Street," Reed said. "The Mecca. He parks in the back. I've done some reconnaissance. One or two minutes. In and out. We'll leave him a nice note."

"I'm in law school," I said. "We get caught and I'm ruined. I couldn't take the bar."

"Is that all you care about now?" Reed asked. "Come on. If we don't do it, then who will?"

"It just doesn't feel right," I said.

Reed laughed. "Doesn't feel right? Isn't there a higher law? The spirit of the law? Don't you believe that? And what about everything

we used to believe in? Making the world a better place? Helping those who can't help themselves? Don't you believe that anymore?" Reed straightened his face. "Okay, think about it this way: what about that rapist running wild out there? Does that feel right? What about some justice for Carly? Doesn't she deserve that?" When I didn't say anything, Reed kept talking. "Don't you see this shit every day on the news? The Denny Bradshaws of the world pushing their way through life, knocking people to the ground, mouthing off, wanting a free ride? Don't you remember what he called us in high school? How he'd push us around? And let me ask you this. Didn't it always piss you off that you couldn't do a damn thing about it? But what if we could? Tell me, Derrick, and be honest, how would it feel to stick it to Denny? To send him a message?"

I didn't say anything, just stared at my hands, but I knew it would be wonderful, sheer bliss.

"You want to do what's right by the law," Reed said. "I respect that. I value that. But I'm going."



Two weeks later Reed called me in Provo.

"The team's back together," he said, "fighting injustice and oppression. Just like old times." His voice sounded as if it were percolating up from the bottom of the ocean. "Hey, I'm in El Salvador until June and then it's off to Honduras. Maybe you've already heard about the exploitation down here, about the sweatshops. Nike, Reebok, Gap. We're talking nineteenth-century England, children working their fingers to nubs for a nickel an hour. So how about it?"

I felt the weight of the phone on my shoulder, and then the heat building between my ear and the molded plastic.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Reed said, "but maybe you're not interested."

I moved the phone to my other ear.

"I hope," Reed continued, "that you don't hold something against me."

"No, it's not that," I said, and then I thought: *It's what you are and what I am now. I don't want to be you. I can't be you.* I remembered

Denny's car, not the souped-up muscle car I'd expected, but a beige Ford Taurus station wagon, clean and well-maintained, the kind of car my dad would buy. A small photograph in a plastic frame hung from the rearview mirror. A woman in a white dress holding a smiling baby, and behind her lush trees and lawn.

There was a momentary roar on the other end of the line—a passing truck or bus. I imagined the tropical heat, the crowds of perspiring bodies, dark skin, the chatter of a language I didn't understand, the odor of rot and food permeating the streets.

"Derrick, I know what you're thinking," Reed said. "You're thinking, 'He made me do it. He made me smash that car. The sinner made me sin.' Have you become one of them, Derrick? You gonna say your prayers tonight and write your tithing check and feel so wonderful because your God will right every wrong in the life to come? If you believe that then you're a bigger sinner than I am."

I unplugged the phone and walked to my bedroom. It was snowing outside, white flakes collecting on the bare branches and dead, yellow lawns. A car passed. The apartment was silent, my roommate gone, shopping or studying in the law library.

From the closet's top shelf I took down a cardboard box full of Reed's letters. Each envelope was decorated with a dizzying arrangement of intricate designs: arabesques, paisleys, loopy-loops twisting and falling in on themselves in a practically untraceable pattern. I saw in the elaborate patterns a complex network of roots going back through the years, back to someone I didn't want to be or think about, back to Reed.

For the next half hour I fed the letters into the shredder under my desk and listened to its high-pitched whine as the paper disappeared into the machine. I found myself repeating something I'd once read, perhaps something I'd taught in Rio's crumbling *favelas*. *To rid our lives of sin, we must destroy the roots of the sin.*



I never imagined Reed living a long life. He didn't either. In high school, he enjoyed mulling over the possible scenarios of his passing. They were all heroic and horribly violent: pulverized by an explosive

harpoon as he protected whales in the northern Atlantic; the human shield ground to a bloody pulp beneath an Israeli tank; hacked to pieces by a crazed band of Islamic militants as they overran a Red Cross hospital in Sudan. For Reed, anything less would have been unworthy of his life, and so he had lived, always searching out that dangerous, altruistic cause to throw himself into.

So when I answered the phone one Saturday morning and heard my dad's voice—strained, fighting for composure—I knew what he'd say.

"Bob and Edna Swenson called this morning," he said. "It's Reed. He's dead."

I stood in the living room and watched Cassie at the kitchen table, laptop open, searching online for the best stroller and crib money could buy. We'd been married about a year and owned a house in Burbank's Magnolia Park. I was an associate in Latham and Watkins's Los Angeles office.

My dad said the American Embassy in Honduras didn't tell Bob and Edna much, just that Reed was there with a human rights group to protest the treatment of workers at a textile mill outside Tegucigalpa: picket lines, boycotts, even sabotage of some of the looms. The Honduran police didn't know if Reed's death and the protests were connected, but they found him, stabbed three times in the chest, a block from his hostel, pockets emptied, shoes stolen.

"Do they know anything else?" I asked.

"His knuckles were bruised," my dad said. "He didn't go easily." And that's what I wanted to hear, that Reed went out fighting.

And then my dad said: "Bob and Edna asked if you'd speak at the funeral. Will you do that? It would mean a lot to them."

Outside, birds chortled in our lemon tree. Down the street someone gunned an engine. "Sure," I said. "If that's what they want."

I put down the phone and walked to the window. Parked in the driveway, my silver BMW glowed in the mid-morning sun. Cassie's yellow tea roses and Santa Barbara daisies edged the front yard. Later, our gardeners, Miguel and Hector, would come to cut the lawn and hedge the bushes. Like my pioneer ancestors, I'd prospered, cultivated my garden, sanctified materialism. I'd served an honorable mission, pursued education, found gainful employment,

married in the temple, paid a generous tithe, and would soon be a father. I was second counselor in my ward's bishopric. I should have felt like a success.

"Who was that?" Cassie asked.

I turned to look at her. I could already see the small bump pushing at her waistline. "My dad," I said. "Somebody I knew from high school died. He called to tell me."

"A friend?" Cassie asked.

I lifted my laptop and walked to the couch. I'd never told Cassie about Reed, never mentioned our years in high school, nor did my parents. There was something unspoken between me and my parents, as if we'd agreed those years never happened. There were other things I didn't tell Cassie. I didn't tell her that twice a year I sent a check to Amnesty International and Earth First!. I didn't tell her how with our friends and at church, there were some opinions I didn't share.

"Just someone I knew," I said. "My parents want me at the funeral, as a favor to the family."

"Are you all right?" Cassie asked.

"I'm fine," I said. "We weren't close."

I needed to buy a plane ticket, pack a bag. In a couple of days, I'd be home, sleeping in my old bed, eating my mom's food. And then the funeral, the bright chapel and drab organ music, and of course Reed, laid out in a dark suit and white shirt, hair trimmed—finally the missionary his mother had dreamed of. I'd stand at the pulpit and say something kind and comforting, something about Reed's love for all living things. But I couldn't say everything. Looking out at all those devout, grieving people who believed Reed's life was a tragedy, how could I say that maybe he'd died a brave man, a rich man, a righteous man?