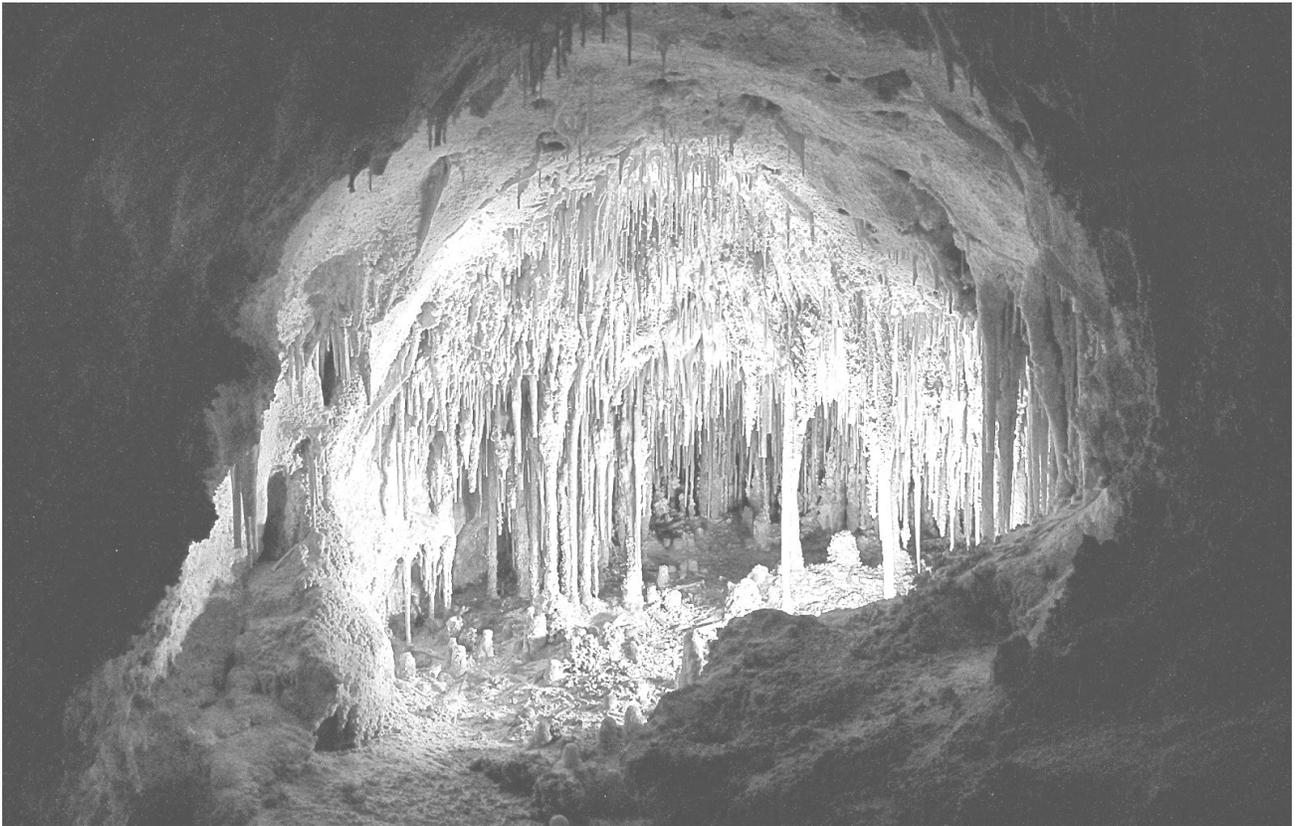


Bad Carl



Rick Snook

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## Chapter 1:

Dear Diary

Carl woke up with a familiar sense of hunger and anxiety. His bedside clock said 6:45. He put on his robe and went to the bathroom down the hall where he emptied his bowels, washed his hands and face and wiped up the counter with the paper towel he used on his hands. On seeing his reflection he saw behind him his daughter. "You're not here," he said.

"Neither are you," she replied.

Returning to his room his mind was absorbed in what he needed to do to get some heroin. And some coke. Sandra had said they needed some coke, and she had a way to get some money. It was still before 7:00 a.m. so he got dressed, found 7 quarters in his change jar which made him feel very good.

You can always benefit from saving change, he thought.

His skin felt prickly. Not too unpleasant yet. He made sure he had a lighter, some foil and pen in his pocket and went downstairs to the payphone.

He called Jordan and asked to borrow her car when she was at work. She agreed under the condition that Carl refill the tank. Carl agreed.

Jordan was the sister of his dead wife. She felt some duty towards him.

He called another number and Jose answered. Carl asked him if he wanted a driver and Jose said that today was a good day for it because he had a lot of stops.

"We'll be drivin' all day, so I give you two bags," he said.

Carl asked that one of them be white (as opposed to the black that was his usual desired item) and Jose remarked on his odd purchase but said that that would be fine, that he had some today he could bring.

He checked the time. Not even 7:15 and Jordan didn't go to work until after 7:30. Her condo was only 6 blocks away. He stepped out into the morning air and the coolness woke him up as well as a cup of coffee.

Which was good because he couldn't afford a cup of coffee.

The sun was just peeking up over the mountains. Walking quickly it astounded him how quickly the scenery changed going from his dilapidated hotel room to the ritzy condos that took over the empty warehouses nearby where Jordan lived.

She met him at the door, all ready for work. She was short and stocky but looked very much in charge in her smart blue pantsuit and designer briefcase. He told her he needed the car to help a friend. When he dropped her off at work, she admonished him to be

safe and to please fill the tank this time.

He headed for highway 30. He heard someone in the back seat. It wasn't her; it was the demon. Looking wasn't necessary- he knew exactly what the creature looked like.

"I have never met a human who was more of a waste of air. At least you're not breathing air anymore," he said from the backseat. "The world is a better place without you, that's for certain."

"You aren't real," Carl said.

"Pot and kettle," said the demon.

Carl drove to Scapoose to pick up Jose at the Safeway there. Jose said that their first stop was at 135<sup>th</sup> and Division ("at the Jesus store" he said) and so that was where they went. On the way, Jose opened his knapsack and rummaging around as though he lost something for a minute, pulled out a deodorant container.

Holding it up he said, "Right Guard."

He took off the cap and screwed the deodorant bar all the way forward, so it fell out into his hand. Underneath the bar were little bags. He pulled out 2. "One brown, one white."

Afterwards he was silent, as usual.

"What's at the church store? Are you religious?" Carl asked and immediately felt improper for asking.

Jose laughed and said, "Only Jesús Malverde!" In saying this he took a locket out from his shirt where it hung around his neck. Carl presumed it was a picture of his saint but didn't ask any more about it.

They stopped at what appeared to be a store specializing in Spanish language evangelical christian sermons on videotape. Posters showed they had dubbed Billy Graham and some others, but most appeared to be ministers with Latin names. Jose got out of the car and went inside.

Carl opened the small bag of brown sticky heroin and took the foil and pen out of his pocket. Screwing the barrel off the pen he pressed the foil into a bowl shape at one end of the empty barrel. He broke a very small piece off of the heroin and smeared it on the foil.

A voice behind Carl said, "You don't belong here." It was the demon.

He didn't turn around. "You don't belong. Leave me alone. I have to take care of business," he said.

"Your business is to die," the demon said. "Which you've already done. So, mission accomplished. Dead dead dead."

Obviously, Carl's approach to getting the little fucker to shut up was not working.

Carl considered this for a moment and then replied, "You just don't like to be awake. You'll be fine in no time."

There was quiet. Ah, thank God, Carl thought.

Flicking his lighter under the foil he gradually heated the heroin which soon reached a point where it vaporized. He always tried to make it go as far as possible by not heating it too fast.

Inhaling the vapor through the barrel he felt the sensation in the very back of his skull: a slight buzz followed by a gigantic weight being taken off of his head. He got 2 hits. It was enough and really all he wanted was enough.

The peace he experienced was not one of blank euphoria but rather just an acceptance and appreciation for things just as they are. The way they are has, in Carl's recent memory, mostly been a horror show.

Carl looked in the back seat. Nobody there.

"Good", he said out loud to no one.

Eventually Jose came back with a whole shopping bag full of videotapes. Putting them on the floor he pulled one out. Holding it up he said, "This one will save your soul. Head for 16<sup>th</sup> and Belmont."

He popped it open and inside was a tightly packed brick of heroin, maybe a few ounces, not yet broken into salable bags. He put this in his pack and tossed the bag of videotapes in the back. "You can have these," he said. "Head for train station on Sandy."

Jose rolled the window down. The weather blowing in from the Gorge whistled and hissed. They drove off. Carl could hear the demon laughing in the wind but not in a way that was unkind.

With that they meandered all over Portland making deliveries, setting up meetings. Jose had a flip phone and kept on it the whole time. Some of the time he went inside a building and Carl waited in the car. Sometimes They would meet people at a transit mall (when he wasn't being driven, Jose would take public transit around to deliver product). Carl did another smear of heroin before they were done for the day. He still had most of it left.

Feeling pretty good about things he drove the car back to Jordan's condo and stuck the keys in her mail slot. He had not filled the gas tank.

Carl rode the bus to Sandra and Jerry's apartment in southeast where he was soon sitting at the cluttered dining/ living room table. Jerry was at work on an overnight janitorial crew at the Regal theaters.

Sandra opened the small bag of cocaine he brought her. She lit a candle on the table. She narrated while she worked.

“Okay, first we add some water to the coke in this big spoon. Then we take just a bit of this baking soda, just about the same amount as the coke, maybe a little less. This is a nice bag! We heat it up. Now, watch it start to form a bit of a slick on top, we back off the heat, let it cool- now, see? Watch the crystals start to form and voila! Now let's get it off there and let it dry.”

She used a toothpick to scrape the crystallized substance onto the cover of a book.

“While that's drying we'll take a look at our equipment here,” she said, picking up a small open glass tube with what looked like a wad of copper pot scrubber jammed in one end.

“This is your basic crack love flower tube you can find in any convenience store. The brillo is just from a copper scrubber that you burn the plastic off of before using. I'm telling you, you don't want to torch that plastic and get it in your lungs, Shit'll kill you.”

With that she took a small piece of the white crystal from where it had dried on the book and applied it to the copper material at one end of the tube, put the other end of it in her mouth and brought up a lighter to crack end of the pipe and inhaled. I could see a white smoke going through the pipe. She took it in deep but not for long, exhaled a cloud. She smiled and said, “Not bad.”

Carl did it next. After he exhaled, he felt his heart beating very fast and he ran to the bathroom and threw up. Yet, when he came back, he wanted to do another hit.

“Wow,” Carl said, “I can't say I like the feeling, but I want it again. That is wild, Sandra.”

“Yeah,” she said, “When you don't have it it's no big deal because, shit, you don't even really like it but it keeps calling you. And, no joke, if you smoking this shit you can suck dick all night long.”

There it was. The reason Carl was there. Sandra had a gig, a john who was a Dominican crack dealer who had expressed a desire for a duo including a white dude. No butt stuff was the deal, but he wanted oral sex from a man and woman at the same time. And he liked to smoke a lot of crack. And Carl was to get \$200 for 2 hours. That was way better than the maximum \$10 a pop he got giving blowjobs at the adult bookstore where he often got nothing.

Carl had said, “But I'm impotent. I haven't had an erection in over a year. Since the last time I kicked smack.”

Sandra had said, “It doesn't matter. You don't have to have sex, just help me suck him off.”

Sandra had wanted to practice with the crack first because she thought Carl was a lightweight who was likely to barf right out of the gate. He had not disappointed; he

made it to the bathroom first anyway.

He got the hang of it quickly. It was nerve wracking but also felt good while you did it. It made you want to flex your arms and work your mouth. Yes, he thought, I could suck dick all night with this.

They spent about 30 minutes smoking up that little bit of crack. Sandra showed him how at the end you could push the Brillo back through the tube (Sandra used a long iron nail), scraping off the residue and presenting it as a fresh hit on the other side.

"It's like magic," she said, "This is the Cadillac. It's the best." And with that she smoked it and he followed suit with his little pipe.

After about 15 minutes from the last hit Carl said, "This feels shitty. I'm totally nervous but not happy. I want more." He began to look around in the carpet below the table.

"Maybe I dropped some. That looks like some right there."

"That's a bread crumb," Sandra said.

He smoked it anyway. "Yeah. You're right," I said.

Carl spent the next 5 minutes trying to smoke a speck of baking soda, a piece of what could have been kitty litter and one very small piece of crack he found still stuck to the book cover.

Sandra said, "Look, I don't have any money for drinks, or I would have had some booze. If you don't have heroin you gotta have something to help you come down. I've got some clonopins if it's bad. Manny will have good liquor."

"I have a little smidge of heroin," Carl said, "but I didn't want to do it in front of you since it's not enough to share." Sandra had been shooting heroin for 15 years and she didn't fuck around with remnants from \$20 bags.

"Don't worry," she said, "I'm cool and I'm buying an eight-ball later tonight."

It took smoking the rest of his bag to calm him down by the time Manuel Montblanco ("Call me Manny") showed up at her door at 8 o'clock. Punctual, thought Carl, now quite chill. They rode together in Manny's silver SUV back to his house.

He had a duplex apartment in Northeast. It was well furnished with modern but comfortable stuff. They went to the living room, Manny put some porn on the huge television, brought a bucket of ice, some glasses, bottles of Crown Royal, Dewers and soda. He handed out two-hundred-dollar bills to Carl and four to Sandra.

A pile of crack in little twisted plastic bundles, prepped for sale, sat on one end of the table with pipes and lighters. A bowl of corn chips sat at the other end.

Everyone gradually took clothes off, got drinks, opened the little packages and smoked

crack (in no particular order). Carl and Sandra went down on Manny together doing a variety of tag team maneuvers, trading positions on his adjacent anatomy and rather large member. As they had discussed, Carl let her do all the deep throat though Manny insisted on making him gag some of the time. When Manny was fucking Sandra, Carl would grab his testicles or rub her clit. Sometimes Manny wanted Carl to lick Sandra's clit and his shaft while his penis was inside her. They would take breaks while doing these and other things to smoke more, drink more and comment on the porn action on the television.

Carl never got hard but Manny ignored it. Carl got better at smoking the crack and knowing how Manny wanted to be touched, licked or sucked.

By the time Manny finally came and ended the party Carl's mouth was getting sore. Sandra was tired. Manny dropped them both at Sandra's where Carl stayed long enough to buy an eighth of an ounce of heroin from Sandra's connection and left just as Jerry was coming home from work at two a.m.

Carl took the bus home to his room, smoked some heroin and felt good that he had a stash that would keep him for several days.

A little less to worry about next time he was in the mood for worrying. Maybe a little time to think about how to get out of this life, if any of this was real. If he was actually alive, it didn't seem so bad now.

The demon, unseen but his voice coming from behind Carl, said, softly, "This isn't so bad." His voice sounded to Carl just like his mother's.

Another little voice in his head said, oh, and you've forgotten that you just had to spend the whole evening gagging on dick. His mother's voice said, "Hey, I'm talking about right now, right now is not bad."

With that, quicker than counting sheep, Carl fell deeply asleep.

## Chapter 2:

### Carlsbad

Carl Rowland had a full name he rarely shared with others as an adult. Carlsbad Peyote Goddess Revealed Infinite Wisdom Rowland was named by (all) the *most* High Elders of the Rainbow family. His earliest memories were of traveling with the family. Grateful Dead playing in the meadow. Parties in the woods.

When he grew a little older his mother, Angela Rowland, settled down in a very small, small town in the mountains of Southern Oregon. Sometimes other Rainbow Family members were there, sometimes they went to the big annual parties in the woods. It was great to be a kid, he often thought when he was older.

One of the men who would come to visit paid special attention to him- Jesus Frank. Jesus Frank would emerge from the woods a couple times annually to get supplies.

One time he brought Carl an animal carving necklace made from bone and leather. Another time came with a bracelet made of animal hair strung with interesting rocks he found and had somehow drilled holes in. Sometimes he just brought a rock. Frank called these gifts "Totems". Carl always thought of them as Frank-Totems.

Carl wondered if Frank was his father. He had nothing but good feelings about Jesus Frank. "That would be okay," he thought to himself.

Frank had no modern clothes. He never touched plastic or money. He wore animal skins. After years of living in the forest his look became more and more extreme. On those occasions when he returned to the small community, even these tolerant old hippies were known to exclaim, "Jesus, Frank!" at his outlandish appearance. It stuck.

Takilma was miles from anywhere on the road to somewhere else. Post 1968 it became a center of the back to the land movement from the cities. The original, red-necked residents eventually got fed up with the newcomers and moved away. By the early 80s it was long full of women in peasant dresses walking horses by the side of the road and men with long hair. If you didn't go into the "City" of Cave Junction, a literal crossroad, you could get most of what you need in Takilma where people paid for everything from vegetables to medical care with eggs, chicken and marijuana. There was a multi room geodesic dome in which the community operated an accredited school serving kids from kindergarten to high school. It had a medical clinic staffed by doctors who had moved there from the Haight-Ashbury Clinic in 1968.

The residents of the town also grew an enormous amount of marijuana. In the time of prohibition this made them a wealthy community, though you wouldn't know it unless you looked closer. The rough shacks without electricity or running water often had new 4-wheel drive trucks parked nearby. This pre-internet isolated town kept in touch with

everyone by radio and had a communications center based in the Takilma Free People's Clinic.

The grow operations were as high tech as they could be for the time. Watering systems, alarms and even some traps had been installed often deep in National Forest land.

It was a simple life without much worries.

The biggest drama of his life at that point was when the community chose to boycott the Cave Junction merchants and felled a tree across the only road leading to Takilma. This happened after the Sheriff's office in Cave Junction began using access to federal funds to launch helicopter raids on grow operations with armored police and assault weapons.

That was the origin of the chain launchers used later in local herbicide protests and later in California. They weren't actually deployed in the Cave Junction boycott era because the boycott worked. When they were used by SOCATS (Southern Oregon Against Toxic Sprays) they sent warnings to the local government that it would be dangerous to send helicopters anywhere near them. They also used flare guns as warning shots.

No one had gotten hurt in the raids but people were frightened. Often the Sheriff's intelligence was wrong, and they freaked people out who were not anywhere near a grow. The community responded with the boycott.

Within 2 weeks the sheriff's office had an agreement to stop using helicopters and to get a community representative at the Takilma Clinic to accompany the raid. The clinic could then radio the grower and have them get out of the way. The rebellion lasted 12 days, the tree disappeared from the road.

When Carl was 9 years old his mother and 2 other men from Takilma took him along to be part of an anti- herbicide spraying action in Northern California. In order to keep the helicopters away they brought a home-made chain launcher, made in Takilma.

In southern Oregon the helicopter pilots didn't come in range of the launchers. That was the point. This was not their first rodeo.

Unfortunately, no one bothered to tell the California pilots about the launchers. The day was bright, and the pilot and his passenger were park rangers monitoring the protest, not sprayers of poison. It was a sunny day, and they didn't see the flares. This led to the death of one forest service employee and paralytic injury to another.

All the protesters were arrested, and all were initially charged with murder.

Carl was watching when it all happened. He saw his mom and the others rush to rescue the pilot and pull the already dead passenger from the wreck. Carl would never forget the horror he saw in his mother's face when she realized she had participated in killing someone and the way she turned herself over to the authorities as soon as they arrived.

In the end the prosecution settled for murder convictions on the two Oregon prisoners who provided the weapon. The others were convicted of various charges from reckless homicide to trespassing depending on their level of perceived leadership in the event.

Carl's mother was convicted of murder, sent to the state prison in Sacramento, California, and would not be eligible for parole for 25 years.

After a couple years being passed around by court appointed providers in California while his mother's case and his disposition wound through the courts, they decided he was a resident of Oregon, and he should be their problem. He came into the foster care system in Portland at the age of 11 where he met Bob and Helga Rheinsplaz who would keep him in their home for the next 6 years.

His foster parents took him down to the Penitentiary to visit her once the first year he was with them. They encouraged his relationship with her and never asked him to call them mom and dad. They were a little too easily shocked, for Carl's taste, so he learned to give them the best version of what he felt. He called them Bob and Helga.

He remained close to his mother, and they kept up an active correspondence and spoke on the phone weekly. It was not enough.

Carl grieved deeply and felt as though he did not belong anywhere.

At school, he was constantly in trouble for lack of attention. He was the focus of, if not the instigator of, many fights over his long hair and Frank Tokens (which he continued to wear in spite of instantly knowing they were "weird").

Entering on his first day to the John Brown High School which occupied a 1940s era building in the Northwest part of town, he was greeted by an older black man in yoga pants, afro, bushy beard and a rough cotton shirt.

The man saw the necklace with the bone carvings and said, "Wow, man, I bet there is an amazing story behind that. I hope you'll tell me some fine day."

The man beamed. Carl felt so good he almost cried but he kept it barely in check. The man was Dave.

It was months before he heard his last name-Brattin. It was the end of the year at the annual celebration that he learned it was Dr. Dave Brattin.

It was an auspicious beginning to what became his reasonably successful high school years.

JBHS was designed by a group of Yale PhDs as a pitch to the Portland district at a time of late-peak baby-boom high enrollment, high drop-out rates and well-funded programs. It was meant to meet children where they were at and to keep kids in the system. They were given an older school to play with.

For certain, many of his school chums used their relatively easy school to goof off and Carl was no saint. He smoked weed, took acid a couple times during school hours but he was generally very applied. In truth he was less interested in drugs than his fellows but did it to fit in. By the end of his freshman year, he no longer actually inhaled the pot and he rarely drank the alcohol

His foster family had grown on him- they were really very caring, and he appreciated their kindness. He had learned to easily hide from them the things that would worry them.

When he was 15, Carl's mother was diagnosed with cancer. His foster parents were notified initially, and they had spent a couple days worrying about how to tell him. The moment they chose to tell him was the day he came back from passing his written test for his Learners Driving Permit.

Picture Carl, buoyant with the sense of freedom it gave him to think of driving a car, even if the permit required that he have a legally licensed driver over 21 as his passenger. He would still be driving. Then, when he's 16 he can go *anywhere*.

Picture Carl devastated from losing his mother a second time.

His foster parents had reason to be scared about sharing the news. She was already on chemotherapy and the prison social worker, a courteous but timid sounding woman named Marsha, had told them the outlook was very bad.

They had said they would arrange a phone call but she wanted to schedule for a time when Angela Rowland was breathing better and could speak more than one sentence. "The best time would be on Wednesday, the day after her steroid infusion," she said.

On Wednesday morning Marsha pushed a wheelchair through the lower security area at the Correctional Medical Facility, where Angela was essentially on Hospice care in a room she shared with a comatose woman.

"Do you think you can talk today?" asked Marsha.

"I think I have to," replied Angela. She got into the wheelchair and they went to the phone room.

Carl had only the one phone call with her before she died.

"Carl, I'm so sick," she said.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to talk with you again. I'm so sorry I left you alone to face this world. You are the best child- I couldn't ask for better."

She went into a spasm of coughing. Carl began to cry. She went on.

"I know you have wondered about your father," she said quietly as she got her voice

back.

Long pause.

Carl's ears picked up and he stopped sobbing. Here was some information he should pay attention to.

“The truth is, I don't know who it is. Around the time you were conceived I had not had sex for a few weeks because I was breaking up with someone. Then I ended up being in the hospital for 15 days.”

“To be honest, though I never told him so directly, I allowed the man who I had broken up with to believe you were his son. That was Frank.

“I sometimes wonder if that's what drove him nuts!” she said, and then began laughing. Her laugh made Carl laugh and they laughed together until he realized she was coughing uncontrollably.

After they both quieted down, she said, “Actually I think it was Vietnam.”

Long pause.

“I'm writing you a letter. I love you. Never forget me, please, and think of me as good.”

He never spoke to her again after that call. She held on in the prison hospital, eventually had to be on a ventilator. He was notified the week before his 16th birthday that she had died, putting a damper on driver's license joy. Her ashes arrived exactly a week later, the same day as her last letter. It had been dictated to the social worker who had signed it saying that she had shown the letter to Carl's mother who had indicated that it was exactly what she wanted to say.

It said:

Take me into the earth.

## Chapter 3:

### Good Carl

It came to pass in the year after his mother's death that Carl decided to fulfill her wish. As it happens, he took one of his rare hits off a joint before becoming convinced of this. Upon this realization also came resolve. He didn't have a plan yet, never having been in a cave.

First, though, he brought up the idea with Bob and Helga and they were horrified. Helga suggested that he instead think of taking the ashes to the ocean.

He said, "My mom didn't love the ocean, she loved the Earth. I was named for a cave."

They both pretended he had said nothing. "Or the mountains. We can go up to Timberline," added Bob helpfully.

Carl had already decided not to argue over it. He didn't say another word.

The other thing that had come to pass in the year after his mother's death was a driver's license. He was even allowed once in a while to use the family car, a 20 year old Studebaker, to "take his friends up to Rooster Rock State Park to go swimming". In Carl's mind this was a euphemism for, "We're going wherever and doing whatever".

Because his friends were all driving, some who were 17 or 18 had their own cars, they didn't just go to Rooster Rock. They owned the Columbia Gorge, hiked all the trails. They had their own special cliff below the road at Crown Point where they ate watermelon and spat the seeds into an abyss dropping 600 feet.

They had recently gone to a place near Mt Saint Helens called Ape Cave. Carl's friend Eric, being aware of his name and its speleological association, on his birthday took him there with 4 of his closest buddies that had all crammed into Eric's Plymouth Fury.

They walked through the main part of the cave on sturdy steel ramps with handrails, much of the way lit with electric lights. They had one flashlight and hardly had to turn it on the place was so full of tourists.

Carl was vaguely disappointed but still had a good time. He needn't have worried. Eric, who had alerted them to this attraction, had spent some time at the library and the next part of the excursion was going to be a search for one of the unmarked caves which were supposed to be in the area. Eric led us to a packed dirt parking area about a mile away from the Ape Cave attraction. There were no other cars.

Studying a map, Eric said, "There should be a cave within a mile of this parking area. One of the trails here could lead to it. This is called the 'Lava Cast Forest'. The cave we're looking for is on old forest service maps as 'Lake Cave'."

We set about exploring. The area was full of holes in the rough basalt ground. Places,

Eric said, where lava flowed around immense trees and then solidified. A living few trees dotted the ground and some low shrubs but it was fairly open and we soon spread out rather than keeping together. The trails were all interconnected and dispersed in sort of organic looking patchwork through the creepy landscape. We seemed to naturally stay in eye contact of each other.

Carl saw it first. There was a living tree on a ridge of lava rock over the outline of a large tree-cast hole. Peering into the shadow as he walked a little closer, he got a chill when he saw the drop-off where the tree-cast became the opening to a cave.

He yelled and soon everyone was there. Eric had the flashlight. They inched into the darkness closer to the edge where it became clear that their was a drop of about 10 feet and then a dark opening. There was, they found, a rope ladder that had been nailed to the upper edge of the hole with a set of large spikes.

They all climbed down, one by one. Where they stood had a dark opening on one side. Entering it became immediately darker than the touristy cave they had been through earlier. The ground was also very uneven, with immense grooves and large boulders blocking the way.

It became difficult to move forward. One person trying to climb over the boulder or other obstacle needed the flashlight as much as the next person. They had to stop.

Eric said, "If we had a lantern instead of this crummy flashlight we might make it. Someone will get killed going over these rocks. Let's stop here for a minute."

"I want to turn off the light, see what it's like."

Everyone agreed that that would be cool. Eric said, "Okay," and turned off the light.

None of them had ever seen such darkness. Instinctively, no one spoke. It was as if no one wanted to pierce that dark silence. The only sound was the dripping of water, ceaselessly echoing down into the cave before them.

Carl felt an energy-like connection with his friends in the dark. His friend Park, his closest companion and Park's girlfriend Kimberly had been his oldest friends at JBHS but Greg and his brother Brian were also like his family. Along with Eric, in the dark, he felt it as a current flowing through all of them.

Their eyes, searching for meaning in the dark, began to fill with patterns and fantastic shapes. If you ignored the cold rock against your hip or whatever, it was like floating in outer space subject only to the great wheel that moves the stars and utterly subject to that wheel.

Carl loved being in his life at that moment. He also felt the presence of his mother in the cave with its hypnotic dripping and darkness. He knew this was the place for his mom's

ashes. He would need a lantern and use of the Studebaker for the day. This was doable. After a long time someone said, "Whoa, guys, I'm getting creeped out. Turn on the light and let's get out of here." After Eric turned on the light, they got out of there, walking, climbing, stumbling mostly in silence toward the entrance. The light from outside became apparent much deeper than they had experienced going the other way. Soon everyone could see the entrance with the rope ladder, and they emerged into the sunshine.

Somehow they had not noticed all the huckleberries when they wandered the area looking for the cave. Now they could see the berries were everywhere. They ate their fill and Carl was certain these were the sweetest things he had eaten in his life.

No one spoke again of the silence and the connection, at least that Carl heard. It was too holy to talk about.

Each of them was thinking: Was that real? Did this just happen? Did anyone else feel it?

The following week Carl mowed lawns until he had enough money to buy a white gas lantern, fuel and a couple mantles. On Friday night he asked Bob about using the car to take his friends to Rooster Rock. Bob said he thought that would be fine but to ask Helga. This is how it always went.

Saturday morning, he asked for and got extra eggs and bacon, made extra toast for Bob and Helga and some for himself. He ate everything and drank a quart of orange juice. It seemed like his body was preparing for a momentous journey. He stashed his lantern and supplies into a duffle, put his mother's ashes and a canteen of water in his knapsack and got out to the car without having to explain the extra gear.

An hour later he arrived at the unmarked parking area where his friend Eric had parked last week. Once again it was empty. He got out, checked his equipment, opened the lantern, installed the mantles and filled the fuel tank. He clipped his aluminum canteen onto his pants, checked for the box of wooden matches in his coat pocket, locked the car and headed into the lava cast forest going right to cave as if drawn by a magnet.

At the bottom of the rope ladder, he pumped the lantern, opened the gas and used a match to ignite the double mantles. The brilliant light illuminated into the area at the cave entrance much better than the flashlight had. Carl thought, this is cool, and went down into the steep slope of the cave which was like a giant had dug out a trench with his finger, leaving sharp stoney ridges that seemed to try and deliberately skin your legs.

With the lantern he could see that the huge boulders and breakdown strewn across the floor of the cavern had come from the roof, now about 25 feet above him. When he got beyond the initial rocky area that had stopped his friends there was a bit that had the grooved floors again and then another cavernous breakdown area that looked like more

than one lava tube had fallen in together.

Then the cave did something extraordinary. It widened out and the floor became sandy and sloping gently. In the middle was a small creek flowing from underneath the breakdown area. All that dripping must go somewhere, thought Carl.

There was another breakdown area, but the sandy floor and its little waterway continued on the other side. Carl was getting the hang of these boulders but liked the sandy floor better. He noticed that the ceiling was getting closer and the sand deeper. The water became a pond, and he reached the point where he couldn't travel further. Here he sat his lantern down on the sand and his body on a not uncomfortable rock.

## Chapter 4

### Into the Earth

Carl sat without moving for a long time, his lantern etching bright shadows on the walls from the intervening boulders. He slowly stood and took the plastic bag of ashes from his knapsack. Holding it over the water he poured it slowly and imagined an hourglass marking the time. Not much of an hourglass he said to himself as the ashes ran out and he shook the bag. Some of the ash hung in the still air and he thought it smelled like a campfire.

He sat back down and not knowing why, he reached over to the lantern and shut it off. The mantles still glowed for a few moments but soon it was completely black all around him. After several minutes his vision began to compensate for the lack of stimulation and the delicate geometric patterns played games with each other, chasing and flowing into each other all around him. The dripping sound all around him gave him the feeling that he could sense where the walls of the cave described the edges of this world.

He thought he would test out his feelings about where the wall was. Walking carefully and gingerly, avoiding the boulders he remembered, he felt towards what he thought was the nearest wall. Despite his care his foot caught on a dip in the floor and sent him sprawling into a cave wall that was much closer than he had thought it was.

“Ow,” he said to no one. “That wasn't the best idea.” He thought he heard laughter in the dripping water.

On his hands and knees he found his way back to the lantern, fished out the matches, pumped the tank and lit the mantles, bringing the visual world back with intensity. His hands were scraped and he felt a trickle of blood where his face had broken his fall against the wall. He sat quietly again.

“Bye mom,” he said some time later. “I miss you and I'm doing the best I can to make it without you. It's been really hard but I'm in a good school, I have cool friends and Bob and Helga have been super nice. I think it will be okay.”

He had already decided that he would leave a Frank-Totem with his mother's ashes. It was a pair of beaver's teeth on one of Frank's hand-made strings. He knew that his life was going off in a new direction. Mom and Frank and the Rainbow Family were not going to be there. They would always be in the past.

Carl began the walk, climb, walk process back through the cave. His lantern swung and rocked as he traveled, making outlandish shapes radiating out everywhere. In the breakdown zone about halfway through the cave he estimated he was about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile from the entrance. He took a different route over the boulders than he had coming in.

Finding his footing alongside the rough wall he looked into a crack in the rocks below him. It looked like it went further down than the floor of the cave. It was a narrow passage with sharp turns and points- he moved the lantern to get a better look.

Yes, he thought, it goes way down. And there's a larger space below. Maybe it's a whole other cave. Carl lowered the light into the opening but couldn't get a better view due to the rocks jutting from the side of the crack in the basalt.

He decided to explore it and see if there was another cave. It was wicked narrow and looked like it would catch on his clothing so he took off his coat and laid it and his knapsack on the sandy area below the hill of boulders.

Climbing back up onto the breakdown he found the crack and began to climb down into it backwards, quickly became stuck then came back up and lowered the lantern into the hole before climbing in after it face first.

Carl could see where the bend was and maneuver around it deeper into the hole. He inched the lantern down before him. There was a wider space he could see about 12 feet down but there was another sharp curve that kept him from seeing into the dark area. He was definitely below the floor level of the main cave now and progress was becoming very slow.

His body upside down, Carl felt the blood pulsing in his head as he struggled to bring his right arm forward to move the lantern another space. As he did this his hip, which had been hung up on a rock, slipped free and he dropped rather abruptly about half a foot where it caught again. His right hand shot down flailing to break his fall and connecting with the lantern sent it end over end down into the dark hole, where it disappeared from view with a crash and tinkle of breaking glass

The dark hole below him was somewhat lighter now but dimming. Carl knew that the mantles would not last long even if they were not broken when the lantern fell. He thought, I'm fucked now.

With the light gradually turning dark he tried to gauge his situation. There appeared to be a larger space not far below him and it was closer than the top of the breakdown where he entered this crack. Unfortunately it was difficult to see how he could fit through the final bend in the crevice.

He tried to work himself backwards, got both hands down in front, pushing off the sharp walls of the broken basalt rock. His hips were now wedged where they had broken his fall.

He was seized by terror. He could not move forward or back. Carl was surrounded by thousands of tons of rock. He suddenly felt like he couldn't breathe. Screaming, he heard his voice absorbed by the emptiness and began to hyperventilate. A violent spasm went

through his body and he felt a very sharp rock against his ribs tear through his clothes and skin.

Okay, he thought, I need to calm down. He began to try and moderate his breathing. He tried letting out all his breath to see if it improved his mobility in this rather tight space. I got down here, he said to himself, I can get back out.

His efforts brought him inches, back to where he had slipped, but did not get him appreciably further out. As the light from the dimming broken lantern faded he decided to try and get all the way down into the wider space. Maybe it would be possible to climb out head first if he could turn around. The effort was exhausting.

He didn't know he had fallen asleep. He was with his friends at their spot below Crown Point on the Columbia Gorge. They were laughing and rolling around on the ground, a rather narrow cliff ledge hanging over a 200 foot drop. It was raining and the wind was howling. Sometimes one of them would roll off the cliff and the wind would blow them back, still laughing.

Waking, he imagined he was in his bed and tried to stretch his legs and arms, causing instant pain that brought him back to the hole in the ground that was now his life. He was in complete darkness, his lantern having given up the ghost while he was asleep.

He thought, I'm going to die down here. I'm only 16. I've never had sex. He began to cry.

When his tears ran out he crawled as far as he could into the crack below him, trying to reach the wide spot. Less than a foot down, his shoulders would not let him through and he only succeeded in pinning his left arm against the rock. Goddamn puberty he thought. A few years ago he would have been able to climb in and out of this hole without a problem. He imagined himself as a child and saw in his mind that child easily defeating the cave.

Then he remembered his mom- the reason he was down here. He thought, I brought you in and it looks like I will be staying with you and he began sobbing again.

Carl couldn't tell if his eyes were open or closed. He felt pain in his ribs and the cold rock gradually sucking the heat from his body. He heard the constant dripping of the cave above him but he also thought he heard it below.

All his efforts to move just tore his clothes and skin, leaving him in tears. He was only going back and forth in a very limited space, not making progress either way and not achieving enough room to even turn over to his left or right.

A cramp tore through his midsection, sending bright shards of pain through all the places his skin was jammed against sharp rocks and he simultaneously shit and peed. The foul mixture dribbled down toward his head but managed to drip off his back first. He vomited but nothing came out. Instead, the effort made him jerk forward and opened up

a new cut on his head.

Day and night was all the same and Carl lost all track of time. It was as though he had been underground for years. He felt that he was becoming one with the earth. It was appropriate, he thought, it was fate. Fucking goddamn Rainbow Family.

The geometric patterns that occupied his waking visual field when he first encountered real darkness had long ago merged with dreams and resolved into other kinds of pictures.

A school of fish swam by him. Fairies danced in the deep. A man on horseback offering him a cigarette. Jesus Frank brought him a Totem that turned into his mom's ashes.

Early on, he spoke once in a while just to hear a voice. Later, finding the steady drip dripping of the cave above him could be heard as a slow, musical voice, he learned to have deep slow conversations with it.

But the dreams and flights of imagination eventually brought him back to where he was. Cold, bleeding and trapped. A repeating cycle of hope, effort, exhaustion and sleep mixed with an increasing thirst and hunger and a sort of acceptance.

As the earth, Carl imagined he could feel the sunlight on the trees and meadows above him. He gradually became aware that he was also the sunlight itself, that everything was actually connected by touch. He saw his human body, crusted now in dried shit, buried deep underground was connected to the rocks, connected to the groundwater. The earth itself, Carl thought, was connected to the air, the sun and stars.

He remembered a lot of the folks in the Rainbow Family and the good citizens of Takilma believed in astrology. He was skeptical but was also open to the possibility that things were connected on a larger scale.

His body unable to move, his breathing slow, Carl believed he could feel the turning of the earth, the moon holding onto it at arms length, the sun far beyond bathing them both in light. These were, he knew, also all connected and moving together.

The long, slow voice of the cave said, "Do you know me, Carlsbad Peyote Goddess Revealed Infinite Wisdom Rowland?"

The cave always used his whole name when addressing him.

"I know you are not just a cave," said Carl. "You are the water dripping down that has filtered from above. You are the trees and the animals with their roots and burrows digging toward your roof."

"I am ultimately everything," the cave said. "As are you. It is very unfortunate that your organism is in such an inhospitable situation. I think you need to look at it as a loss at this point."

It had taken the cave a very long time to say this but Carl had no words for time anymore.

"I get that," said Carl. "I can see that everything I use to define myself as separate, as an individual, is actually the place where I interact and blend the most. I think it is probably good to realize these things before you die. So that's lucky."

Carl experienced ecstasy as he beheld that all things were not really separated by their surfaces, and he was not separated by his skin from all of creation. All the things that make me an individual in a world of differences are my intersection with a world of unity, he thought.

He considered the idea of his person-hood in a world where things seemed to happen to him and then saw it from another perspective, where he was just a reflection of the apparent things around him which were also reflected in his individual form. His last thought was of infinite mirrors. He dissolved in this sensation.

Time ceased to exist and became circular all at once. He was mostly unconscious. It really was beyond description.

Over time, the voice of the Cave became a whisper and disappeared. Other beings, imaginary he supposed, came and went. Rocks and the occasional beetle were his main companions.

One of his visitors was a red cartoon demon with a pointy tail that would both berate him for being stuck and insist that he was dead and in hell. It looked identical to that devil that would sit on Goofy's shoulder opposite an angel when Goofy had an ethical dilemma. In the cave there was no angel to go with it.

Sometimes he was lonely enough he'd talk to the demon for something to do.

It would go like something like this:

Demon: Boy are you fucked. Have you considered that you are already dead and in hell?

Carl: Hey big fella, your skin looks especially red this fine day.

Demon: Days and nights are all over for you, kid. You get to be here forever because you're already dead.

Carl: Okay. What else you got?

Demon: That's it. I'm a one trick pony.

Inevitably Carl would return to his body where he experienced time again in excruciating slowness, along with pain, despair and again, gradual acceptance and eventual ecstasy. There was no way to know how long this took or how many times the cycle repeated.

Then it changed. There was light and new sounds, human voices. Carl could only see a

bright orange yellow light. Was someone talking? He drifted away.

He was aware of being strapped onto something, carried. The bright orange light was all he could see. He tried to speak but could not make a sound. He drifted away again.

## Chapter 5

### Out of the Earth

Carl must have been asleep because he woke up, startled by the brightness of the pink light that seemed to surround him. He tried to speak and it came out as a croak, unintelligible. The effort caused a spasm in his limbs that hurt like hell. Something crashed to the floor and someone exclaimed, "He's waking up!"

He felt pain all over but differently than he was used to hurting. He tried to speak again, or maybe he just thought it. He fell back asleep.

The next time he woke to the pink light it was less bright. He tried to speak again and was able to make somewhat human sounds. "Hey! Where am I?" he croaked, sounding more like "Heh. Wheh aaa I?"

Someone answered, "You are dead."

It was the demon.

Carl said, "Why is it so pink?"

The demon said, "Oh, that. You have your eyes closed. Open them and you'll see that your mind is imprisoned in a hospital."

Carl opened his eyes and saw that he was in a bed and the only light came from the machines that fed him fluid and another attached in several points by electrodes. They seemed unbelievable bright and beautifully colored. He turned his head and looked around the room, finding the little red devil sitting in a chair that was apparently there for guests.

The demon continued.

"This is how this story goes. They found you in the cave. At some difficulty they extricated you from your stone tomb. Miraculously, in spite of being stuck there for almost a year, you were still alive. They have been monitoring your heart and giving you intravenous fluid and nutrients.

"It's all a sham. You are not here."

Carl said, more clearly now, "It feels real to me." He immediately felt some sense of not-rightness in the back of his head.

"Puh-Leaze!" said the demon. "Let me tell you another story. I guarantee it is as plausible as this stupid hospital.

"Lets say you are not here in this hospital bed, not stuck in a cave and not actually in hell exactly, but only because the word is so very imprecise. Instead of any of these things, you are actually the God of Dreams.

“As the God of Dreams you can create as many dreams and as realistic as you want, they can last less than a second or as many years as you want.

“As a 16, 17 year old boy I know exactly what kind of dreams you would create first. That's the kind of thing the God of Dreams does.

“So that's you. It is super cool. Anything you desire can be in your dreams. But you are doing this literally forever so you make dreams that are more elaborate and you even try to make them so real that you yourself can forget who you are and that it's a dream.

“Eventually you are succeeding so well that each part of the dream is having its own perspective and has totally forgotten yourself, the Dream God. Being so far from the predictable scenarios of your early attempts, there is a realm of the dream universe where the perspectives of organisms represented by the likes of, say, Mr. Carlsbad Peyote Goddess Revealed Infinite Wisdom Rowland, citizen of earth, are as Hellish as the Dream God can make.

“This, Carl, is where I propose you are living. It goes way deeper than you know, deeper than the deepest cave. And darker than any mere 'vision' of hell.”

Carl said, “That's a pretty story.” There was that sensation in the back of his head again. “I always thought you were a one-trick pony.”

“There is,' the demon replied, “only one trick.”

With that Carl was awakened by the morning light in his room. He was very slow in opening his eyes. He got a good look at himself and his surroundings. He thought, just like I dreamed it. He moved his arms and legs, surprised that they worked, though not well, and were not impeded by rocks.

A man coming by the room saw his movement and opened eyes. “Hello Mr. Rowland. We are so glad to see you awake.”

Carl carefully croaked, “Hi. Are you a demon?” (Came out as “Ha, ah oo a demon?”)

“No,” said the man, who smiled, “I'm your nurse. Name is Daniel. I've been monitoring your fluids and cardiac activity. I'll notify your doctor that you are conscious.”

The man put a little water in a glass and handed it to Carl. This will help you speak. Your throat hasn't been used in a long time.”

Carl drank the water and, concerned that he had hurt the man's feelings, said, “It's not you. It's been a long time since I talked to anyone who wasn't a demon or a rock. You're fine.”

His speech was almost completely intelligible.

The nurse came back with the doctor a few minutes later. The doctor did a variety of

things all at once, checking the cardiac graph, checking the fluid log and engaging in useless banter that made Carl's head ache.

“Well good afternoon Mr. Rowland! It is wonderful to see you awake. Will you bend this elbow? You are some kind of miracle, sir, I'll tell you that. Bend here, stick out your tongue. What a perfectly gorgeous day you chose to wake up. David said you had some water. How was that?”

Carl started to speak but the doctor had already moved on to dictating a timeline to the nurse for introducing liquids and foods. “It will be a while before you can eat solid foods, I'm afraid,” he said.

When he had finished doing all his checks, he sat down on the chair next to the bed. Carl noticed that it was the same chair used by the demon. The doctor looked Carl in the eyes and spoke slowly and calmly.

“May I call you Carl? Yes? Good. I'm Dr. Frank Finders. Call me Frank.”

“Carl, what has happened with you is just amazing. You appear to have been in that cave for over 11 months. You lost almost half your weight but you stayed alive longer than anyone would have thought possible.

“You are at the Medical School Hospital in Portland. You were brought here by helicopter when you were found last week in a fissure off of the Lake Cave on Mt. St. Helens.

“You are not out of the woods. All your body's systems are gradually coming back but most are sluggish. You have been unconscious in this bed for 15 days while we re-hydrated and fed you intravenously. How do you feel?”

“I feel very strange,” Carl said, “a little bit removed from myself. I feel very weak. I can sort of move my arms and legs but I probably can't do much else. Someone should call Bob and Helga, my foster parents.”

Frank and Daniel exchanged a sad look.

“I have some bad news,” the doctor said, “Bob and Helga were both killed in a collision with a drunk driver last Christmas.”

Carl felt a flutter in his chest and a sensation like wind blowing. The room took on a slight echo.

Daniel spoke, “You have some friends who have been calling to check in- we'll let them know you're awake and can have visitors.”

He liked Bob and Helga and he would miss them. He also felt clearly that he had been an orphan for years. This was not new.

Carl asked to see himself in a mirror. He saw an older looking man with deep lines in his

darker colored face and a full thick beard. At the time he went into the cave he had only just started shaving weekly to clean up the scraggly fuzz. Who was this Paul Bunyan-looking mother fucker? His eyes, once very green, were now bright blue.

He let out an involuntary shriek at the sight and saw the monster in the reflection do the same. The doctor tried to assuage his fear:

“You actually looked much worse when we brought you here. More like a mummy or bog body than a person. With the way other tissues are coming back after their extended hibernation, we expect your skin tone and smoothness to return to something more normal for your age with time. If you don't like the beard we can shave it off for you.”

Carl kept looking at his image in the mirror before he said, “Yeah, the beard is cool. I'll try it for a while.”

That evening he tried drinking a half-cup of warm apple juice. It tasted great but then his stomach turned. He felt like throwing up but he kept the 4 ounces of sweet bland liquid down. He did not have solid food for a couple more days.

Eric, Park, Kimberly and Greg all came to visit the next day. Brian had to work. The others had skipped school. It was the next to the last week anyway.

They spilled into the cramped hospital room with an explosion of greetings, tears and careful touches (Carl looked extremely thin and delicate). Park and Greg both made comments along the lines of “Jesus! What happened to your face?!” before being shushed by Kimberly.

Carl told them that the doctor said it would get better but they really don't know what will happen.

“I guess I'm super lucky to be alive,” said Carl.

“Everyone thought you were dead,” said Eric. “That cave had been searched back when you were first missing. They say you were in a fissure off of the main cave. The fuck were you thinking? I'm glad you're alive but I want to kill you.”

They talked, Carl mostly listened. His throat felt hoarse very quickly. All the news and changes among his crowd were amazing.

Park and Kimberly had broken up but were still best friends. Park had come out as gay. Greg's brother Brian had finally been kicked out of his school (not JBHS) for repeatedly rearranging the letters on the school reader-board to spell out indecent suggestions.

Carl remembered one from what must now be a couple years back. The board had read “PUBLIC AUCTION for our PTA!” With the removal of an “L” and a “U” it had become “PUBIC ACTION for our PTA!” The real coup here was that the sign stayed up for a week before the school realized it had been changed.

Apparently, he had become more creative as well as ambitious in his works of chaotic public art. A reader-board that said "Wonderful Weather For Ducks!" became "We are real Fucks!" "Annual Exams Week" became "Anal Exams Week".

Kimberly, at this point, interjected, "Too bad they never had an 'annual fancy duck dance'."

When the reader-board was covered up, Brian had gone on to paint neatly written inscriptions that greeted students above the entryway doors. "Abandon all hope ye that enter here" was the last straw.

Brian's brother Greg had graduated the year Carl had disappeared. He applied for over 100 grants and scholarships (this took him a couple weeks straight of constant work) and received a generous student income from his efforts, a patchwork of mostly smaller grants. Greg had moved out of home, gotten an apartment and was going to Portland State University studying business and taking Chinese language classes.

Eric, the guy who was often the driver for their excursions, had been riding his bike everywhere. He was graduating in a week and going to run a marathon in Eugene and would start school there in the fall.

Park had auditioned for a part as a child in a road production of Long Days Journey into Night and found he had been selected for the summer company.

Kimberly was working weekends at the pet store on Burnside next to Kienows.

Everyone had been going on, doing new things. Becoming themselves. Carl thought it wasn't fair. He was feeling sleepy and losing track of the conversation. The air conditioning vent seemed really loud. He could almost hear a voice...

Greg was waving his hand in front of Carl.

"Hey, Carl. You in there?" he asked.

"So glad to see you guys," Carl said, "I am super tired. Don't know why. Been asleep for almost a year."

As he spoke, Carl heard his voice begin to waver and fade. His tongue felt thick. The last part sounded like "Beh seep mos'yeh".

His friends stood and sat around for a moment after Carl drifted off. Kimberly said, "Geez you guys, I can't believe you said that about his face."

Eric said, "He does look wicked old. And the long hair and beard! Holy Moly, he's like some desert prophet out of the wilderness."

As Carl slept his friends found their way out of the intricate warrens of the medical school complex on Pill Hill. As those things can go, they never managed to come back as

a group while Carl was at the hospital, though Kimberly stopped by a couple times. Eric stayed in touch by phone. Greg called once but was super busy that summer with scholarship related projects.

It was 2 days before he ate his first solid food which triggered his first bowel movement. The contents of this excretion, black and tarry and laced with hard brittle shards, did some damage on its way out. In a week he was regularly getting out of his bed and going to the bathroom using a walker. His face smoothed out gradually but a sort of leathery color remained. Carl kept the beard.

## Chapter 6

### My so called life

Carl stayed in the hospital for 5 more months. During that time he turned 18 and since he had been a ward of the state and he now had both his majority and resources, his ass was on its own.

Only high school stood in his way. He had lost almost 2 years which meant most of his mates graduated during his early days in the hospital. They all either had jobs or were going to school.

While his friends continued to come by, they came with decreasing frequency. His new friends were nurses, physical and occupational therapists And one psychologist. As the weeks dragged into months, everyone was encouraging. Carl was disinclined to feeling encouraged.

Carl felt like a very small boat riding a very big wave. He had confided in the elderly psychologist, Dr. Durin throughout his stay here and he requested a visit.

"I can't focus. How will I live on my own? I can't read more than a few paragraphs and it becomes too tedious. How am I going to be able to go to school? Am I just going to be a drop out?" opined Carl.

Dr. Durin said, "We have done all the testing and there's no reason you should worry about school. You are out of practice, is all.

"We are watching your brain very closely because it's return to normal after such prolonged dehydration is nothing less than astounding. We are trying to understand you. The research people would like to keep you here forever but that is not in your interests.

"I also know you are still troubled by feeling disconnected from things. Well, how could you feel connected? This hospital is not real life. Despite your fears, you will do fine. Just get out there and do the things that come up to do. Show up. Especially for your follow up with Dr. Tazanian.

"I'm also really pleased that you have not seen or heard the devil you told me about. The fact that the psychosis subsided so quickly after you became conscious- within the first week, right? We think it was nothing less than your incredibly resilient brain keeping itself barely alive with jolts of activity."

"Carl, back when you were still not conscious but it was clear that against all known science you had survived without food or water for nearly a year, we checked into your background for any previous signs of this kind of survival in your family.

"I told you about the researchers who would keep you if they could? They had already started to swarm before you woke up. You've met 'em. I won't name names but, like, all

those interns that don't introduce themselves as doctors but describe themselves as faculty.”

Carl's mind flashed through the faces of the people he was referring to.

“Shit, I'm on the faculty but that's a different job. Anyway, we looked into your background and couldn't find your father. We found someone who said he was your father but he wasn't. Couldn't have been by anyone's account. A real mystery

“In fact, at the time you seem to have been conceived, your mother was recovering from a bomb explosion. She had sustained severe trauma to the front of her body exposing her abdomen including the intestines, stomach and uterus, which, itself, the uterus, was punctured by debris in the bomb.

“One of the wilder theories about your parentage is that your mother picked up dna from someone else who had been closer to the center of the explosion, maybe the bomber himself.

“What matters is that somehow you are something nobody has seen before. With potential advantages. Huge advantages.

Carl said, “Why you telling me all this now?”

Durin replied, “Get out of this place while you still can. The University is already patenting things they learned from you in hopes that it becomes money even if they don't have something yet. I'm not kidding.”

That was his last visit with Durin before his discharge.

Someone came from JBHS to make plans for his return to school. It was not someone Carl knew. The man introduced himself as the school psychologist, Dr. Damien.

Carl asked him, “How is Dave?”

Dr. Damien said, “I don't know a Dave. But I've only been there for 6 months. There were a lot of changes before I came on. You've been gone a while.”

Most of his time not in therapy was spent watching television and wondering what would happen to him now.

The O.T., Sandy, was the one tasked with taking him home. Sandy had an old reputation as the go-to person in the O.T. Department. If you could get her. For the past couple years she had been completing her doctoral coursework and working on her dissertation.

She was especially a good fit for this transition because she had worked with him in the hospital on his plans for return to life. She had volunteered to work on his case and had been given the assignment out of sheer surprise that she volunteered.

She stopped and they bought some groceries and cleaning supplies on the way at the Thriftway. After she helped him put food away they went through the house opening blinds and curtains, raising a ridiculous amount of dust. He opened the front and back doors allowing a soft breeze to traverse the house.

Sandy and Carl sat down and listed things to clean first and talked about what else he'd need to do and appointments he had (one with an attorney regarding the estate of his foster parents and another follow-up with doctors on the hill).

Sandy said, "You have all the phone numbers we talked about at the hospital in your mini planner from the hospital. Use that for now but I'd suggest going to an office store and getting something more sophisticated. You're just 16 in your head and you have an adult's body and responsibilities. They're expecting you at school in 2 weeks but if you take longer it won't be a problem. I'm advising don't push it."

Carl said, "Didn't they tell you? I can only control my money when I graduate from high school. Until then I only get room and board."

Sandy stayed all afternoon until Carl finally said, "I got this. I'd like you to go so I can just let the other shoe drop. I'm going to be here alone, time to get it over with. Anyway, my friends are coming over in about an hour with booze and I don't want old people around."

Sandy's jaw dropped and she looked horrified and Carl said, "I'm sorry, man, I'm just yanking your chain. That sounds mean and I didn't mean that. I mean, I didn't intend to be mean. You know what I mean."

"I know you aren't that old. Probably 30? My friends won't be here until 7 and I have no reason to think they'd have booze. Or even if they'll show. I only told them last week when I learned my discharge date for sure. I had to have all those tests and scans."

He thought a moment. "And shit I look *way* older than you."

That was true. Carl still looked like a much older man. He had improved during his time at the hospital but he reached a point where the improvements became harder to see until he had what seemed to be his new forever face. He appeared as a rugged man, someone in their early 40s maybe, but who's face was carved, like driftwood in the sun and wind. It was a harder face than he had before.

Carl felt bad. Sandy felt bad, visibly, but she verbally forgave him. She thought to herself, Well, at least I don't have to come out and see him. He seems so sad.

It must be noted that many people seeing Carl interpreted his rough lines as sad. Sandy knew that Carl had not seen the sun much in a very long time. She knew that whatever happened to Carl in that period beyond which he had no business being alive had left a cruel mark.

She made a mental note to add that last part to her dissertation somewhere. It had sparkle. She made a mental thank you to Carl for being the most interesting medical phenomenon of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Then Carl said, "I really just want to feel what it's like to be alone. It's been a long time. I need to get my bearings."

Sandy gave him some last minute assurances about how well he was doing, told him to go to his appointments and she went home. Carl was alone. In his house. With no parents. Carl had a detached thought that he'd make a film about a teenager who comes into an inheritance... but the thought died before he could give it any flesh. He lost interest.

That seemed to happen a lot. Oh well, he may have thought, if he could think that well, Dr. Durin says Carl is doing great.

One of Carl's appointments Sandy had reminded him of was with an estate attorney who was the executor of the last will and testament of Bob and Helga, written in the first year of his stay with them.

Bob and Helga had no children of their own and the house was left to Carl along with a separate trust that would pay Carl's expenses until his graduation from high school. Then he would receive the remainder of the Rheinsplaz estate consisting of savings, life insurance. In the current market, 1988, that was about \$40,000 after home payoff and taxes. He could also roll it over into a perpetual trust with small annual payout and less tax bite.

High school just didn't thrill him anymore, not what Carl felt like doing. It seemed tedious. He tried to gear himself up to go anyway. In two weeks.

The time slipped. When Carl looked at the clock in the kitchen he had about 15 minutes before people were coming over.

He made sure he had clean glasses and wiped them out again with a paper towel. He made a mental note to wash all of the towels and linens. Dusty, he thought. He wanted to wash them.

Before he could put them in the wash, the doorbell began to ring crazily. It was just a buzzer but it was being operated like by a pack of monkeys. Whoa, thought Carl. My sense of time is screwed up.

He wasn't even sure who was coming. Carl opened the door and saw Kimberly standing there with a bottle of champagne.

"I was trying," Kimberly burst out, "to play 'God rest ye merry gentlemen' with the doorbell. Came out like the beginning of 'Helter Skelter!'" and she rushed in the door

hugging him almost off his feet.

Carl got his clean dusted glasses and they opened the champagne.

"I don't think anybody else is coming tonight," said Kimberly. "Park is on the road. Everybody else is either working or out of town. They'll come by later now that you are back. I worked today but the store closes at 6."

Carl opened the chips he bought on the way home from the hospital and they sipped and ate, Carl telling her about life in the hospital and Kimberly talked about changes that had been made at JBHS.

"The school district fired the principal and the new guy got rid of almost half the teachers," she said. "Dave is gone. You know they've wanted to clamp down on things there for a while. Too much freedom. I was glad to leave when I graduated last year."

It had been quite a while since he had alcohol. One glass and he was feeling very wobbly. Kimberly picked up the bottle to pour a second glass.

"I don't think I can drink more of this," Carl said, "I worried about my ability to stand up."

"Well, I'm having more," Kimberly said as she filled her glass back up. "I've been working since 8 o'clock and I'm super excited to see you back home. Is it odd being back here with your foster parents gone?"

"It's very weird," said Carl. "It's like they are still here. Nothing is different. I expect them to come in the door any moment."

Kimberly drank her glass down in one gulp. Carl looked pensive for a moment.

"I want you to tell me something, Kimberly," he said. "I look so different. I don't even recognize myself when I see my face in the mirror. Am I really ugly?"

Kimberly gave him a long and direct look before she spoke.

"Not a bit," she said. "You look much older, but to be honest, you are super sexy. You look like a man's man. And the beard is – well, movie star hot."

She took his hand in hers.

"I have really liked you for a long time. When I was with Park I used to fantasize about cheating on him with you. There. I said it."

Carl's head was swimming from the booze but her words sent it spinning.

Without thinking he said, "I'm a virgin."

"Park and I never went all the way," said Kimberly, "I think he just really didn't want to. But I'm a pretty good kisser."

With that he leaned toward her and their lips met. She climbed up in his lap and kissed

him hard. He tentatively reached for her breast and she grabbed his hand and pressed it against her. In moments they were laid out on the couch and hesitancy was out the window.

Their clothes still on, it was by far the most excitement Carl had ever felt. His erect penis strained against his underwear and jeans. He was humping against her legs and, amazingly, she was grinding against him. Their mouths were glued together. It was fairly soon then that he ejaculated and groaned with a combination of pleasure and disappointment. He fairly collapsed in Kimberly's arms and she hugged him tightly.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I couldn't stop."

"Oh my god," said Kimberly, "That was awesome. I never had a make-out like that before. Carl, I am so glad you like me. It's much better to be with someone who likes girls!"

They talked for a couple more hours. She told him about working in the pet store and how it was fun to learn about different animals. Kimberly got him to drink a little more but it made him nauseated.

When she left ("I have work in the morning and I still live with my parents.") Carl walked her to the door and hugged her again. His balance was impaired enough he thought it best to lie down on the couch before going to bed.

Reaching the couch he saw it was inhabited by a familiar little red cartoon devil.

"Did you miss me?" said the demon. "Hmmm? Dead boy?"

"You can't really have hell without visions of paradise. Count that as one of your last peeks."