



# HELL ON EARTH



## **The Gnostic Divine Comedy**

Book One: *Hell on Earth* (Sample Version)

Book Two: *Atonement* (Coming Soon)

Book Three: *The Astral Plane* (Coming Soon)

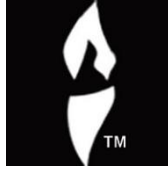
# **Hell on Earth**

Job

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Lambency Media LLC

## Plato's Allegory of the Cave

*"And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened:—Behold! human beings living in an underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads."*

*"At a distance higher up is the light of a fire burning behind them; and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have before them, over which they show the puppets."*

*"And do you see, I said, men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall? Some of them are talking, others silent."*

*"To them, I said, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images."*

*"When one of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows."*

*"The prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, and you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world according to my poor belief."*

**A conversation between Socrates and Glaucon that appears in  
*The Republic* by Plato. English translation by Benjamin Jowett.**

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## Forward

*The Gnostic Divine Comedy* is a modern literary project inspired by Dante Alighieri's classic work *The Divine Comedy*.

The first book, titled *Hell on Earth*, is an anthology of short stories divided into three parts. The first part, *The Entry*, must be read first. The second part is *The Journeys*. These are short stories that can be read in any order, and individual journeys can be skipped at the reader's discretion. The third part is called *The Exit*. It is two short stories that *should* be read after reading *The Journeys*.

*The Exit* is also a segway into a second book titled *Atonement*. *The Gnostic Divine Comedy* is a trilogy with a unique modern twist on Dante's epic poems *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*.

Nothing in this literary project was created by generative artificial intelligence (AI). However, other aspects of this project, including marketing the work and any derivatives, may be. It is hoped that the short story format resonates with modern readers. It is anticipated that some of the prose in the trilogy will be converted to other modern media delivery formats.

Lambency Media LLC is developing two additional collections. The first is titled *Window Voyeurs*. These are vignettes showcasing life scenes consistent with the title. The second is titled *Valley of the Silicone Dolls*. This is an anthology of short stories about the impact of technology on modern society, seen through the lens of a creative writer.

## Sympathy for the Author

Pleased to meet you. Will you guess my name?  
I am a man of wealth and faith.  
God's servant, Satan, millennia before his failed coup, picks me for a game.  
He convinces God that if my blessings are gone, I will curse his name.  
Satan may test me, not tempt me, or go outside the rules of God's frame.  
I know nothing of what was arranged.  
I lose my wealth and children, and sores on my body bring great pain.  
What is confusing is that my friends all turn away.  
I know I must have sinned to deserve such strain.  
I cannot figure out what I did, so I ask God to refrain.  
God says the universe is bigger than the moral accounting you obtain.  
Justice and meaning cannot be reduced to reward and shame.  
I say, "I spoke of things I cannot explain."  
God's favor, I regain.  
My sores vanish, and I have new children and greater fame.  
I am freed by my honesty with God, not because I was tame.  
After all, aren't we all the same?  
Ah yeah ..... *a bit profane!*  
So, what's confusing you is the nature of my game.  
It is *Hell on Earth*, where bad things happen to people of good acclaim.  
Please allow me to introduce myself. Job is my name.

# The Entry

## The Death of the Reader

You are behind the wheel of a car, relaxing to music, navigating the winding turns in the road of life. In slow-motion, a stream of events unfolds before your eyes. An automobile with no driver approaches and veers into your lane, heading straight for your car. The empty vehicle looks haunted, even possessed, as it approaches.

Instantaneously, you see yourself as a baby, a teenager, an adult, a parent, then you are staring at the possessed car again as it hits you head-on.

You are now physically dead. You may also be dead spiritually and don't even realize it. You *think* you live in a no-judgment zone, but this is an illusion of contemporary Western society. Who were you when you died? How do you feel about it? Where do you think you will go in the afterlife?

The book, "*The Death of the Author*," argues that the author's intentions are irrelevant to a text's meaning, which the reader constructs for themselves. Therefore, in *Hell on Earth*, the author is an enigma, and you are the protagonist. The reader is a dead person who may continue to find meaning in the afterlife. Did you live up to your expectations and handle challenges well while living? Were you empathetic to those you saw suffering? Compare your life to those you will meet soon, as an outside observer looking in.

# The Journey's

## Gröps of Wrath

The ride to Plaszów concentration camp makes Elza feel inhuman. People are packed together like cows on their hind legs, banging on each other during the bumpy truck ride. Wooden slats on the blood-stained walls smell of urine and vomit. She is in disbelief. Last year, she was a seamstress of fine garments in Warsaw. Now she is a prisoner.

During the journey, a female prisoner is screaming incessantly. The truck pulls over, and an armed soldier opens the swing gate ramp. He walks up the incline and pushes through several people, then grabs the woman by the back collar. The sentry pulls her to the rear and throws the woman down the ramp and onto the road. He mockingly steps to the screaming woman's side and positions her for the rest to see his show.

The soldier then shoots her in the face and head. Nobody spoke after the gunshot. Even the crying children fell silent. Elza stared at the blood spreading beneath the woman's hair and understood that nothing from her old life still existed.

Some of the crowd look onward, and others turn away as he shouts, "seht die jüdische hündin" (behold the Jewish bitch). The bloody body is put in the back, the swing gate shuts and locks. The truck lurches forward in its final approach to the camp.

Looking through an opening in the slats, Elza's eyes gaze at the seemingly endless grey barracks passing by. The entrance gate is a dismal wooden frame flanked by barbed wire fencing. The top of the frame is arched, and the gate is framed by dual square stone buttresses, lending an aesthetic appeal to this otherwise gloomy place. Armed sentries stand in full grey German Heer uniforms and black leather boots. The guard checks the driver's papers. The gates creak

open. Beyond them stands a windowless wooden building, its walls pocked with bullet holes and stained with old blood.

When the truck reaches its destination, the rear swing gate opens. Sentries stand near the end of the ramp with rifles hanging from their shoulder straps on their hips and pointing towards the prisoners. Each passenger is interrogated, searched for any remaining personal possessions, and registered by a scribe.

The guards separate the families first, and then the women from the men. Mothers scream when their children are taken. The soldiers shove them with the stocks of their rifles and spew abuse in German. They inspect the group again. Hearty men are put into a huddle, presumably, for laborers. Frail men and unattractive women are divided into two other groups, the healthy and the weak. The weak group is shuttled to a wall and forced to line up against it. They are executed as a firing line in front of the group. Three attractive women in their twenties are put aside. The laborers are sent to a cattle car, and the healthy non-laborers are herded into barracks.

A sentry escorts Elza and two other women to a barracks with a shower and meager toiletries. She is then taken to a private room and told to remove all her clothing and stand naked in front of the escorts. She removed her clothes while the three men walked around her in silence. The scribe continued writing. An escort presents her with a selection of clean, simple garments to pick from. Her original clothes are taken away. They will be meeting Gröps in the morning and must be well-rested and groomed.

Morning arrives. Elza has a horrible nightmare. She sees the truck they came in stop again. A woman is dragged to the ramp. This time, the woman is Elza. She tries to scream that there has been a mistake, but no sound comes out. The pistol fires at her. The gunfire wakes her up in a cold sweat.

The room has a mirror, allowing her to arrange her hair in the morning. Later, she is escorted up to meet Gröps and have a light breakfast. It is a plain room with Spartan, sturdy wood furniture. There is a bookcase filled with tomes such as *Mein Kampf*, *God is Dead*, *The Cost of Discipleship*, and the poem collections by Wilfred Owen. The food is on a small buffet with a radio set at the end. Coffee, boiled eggs, and toast with elderberry jam are placed on white plates.

Elza wonders what a maid will do all day after cleaning this unremarkable flat in one hour. Gröps enters the room with an escort. He greets her with a smile and says, “Guten morgen, Fräulein Franko.” Even though she is Polish, she responds, “Guten morgen Hauptscharführer Gröps,” in perfect German. He smiles because she is probably the only maid candidate who will acknowledge his rank and be fluent in German.

Gröps is an imposing, tall man. He reaches out a large hand, offering to shake hers. It feels hairy on the back and coarse in the palm, contrasting with her soft and slender one. He signals “Mahlzeit”. The plates are already beckoning with food.

Gröps begins discussing books in German, a veiled attempt to determine her fluency. They talk about the tomes on the bookshelf. He asks, “Do you agree with Nietzsche’s view on the role of God in modern society?” She has never read Nietzsche but remembers the book title on the bookshelf and says, “I don’t think God is dead, and I believe in God” in German. My favorite genre is poetry. I prefer Wilfred Owen. He challenges the idea that war is noble or glorious. “The old lie: Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori” rejects classical patriotic ideals. Hitler is more pragmatic than the patriots of WWI.

Gröps looks for a ring discoloration on her left and right ring fingers, assuming her jewelry was confiscated, and sees none. Verheiratet?” Franko “Nein.” He shows her to his balcony overlooking the

complex. They hear random gunfire in the background. The pair goes back inside and is greeted by the scribe and the escort. The escort politely says, "Strip naked". She awkwardly removes them. The three men walk around her, inspecting her inviting body. Gröps whispers to the scribe, who writes some notes. She is asked to put on her clothes. The meeting ends, and she is led back to the room she slept in the night before.

Being alone, Elza has time to mull over her situation. If she is chosen to be Gröps maid, she will please him no matter how loathsome he is, but try to subvert when possible. The next day, the escort knocks at her door. She lets him in. He says, "You're fortunate, The Hauptscharführer likes educated women. He thinks you'll do." Elza smiles and asks, "What's next?" He says, "You are to report to Gröps quarters after your morning meal with the prisoners tomorrow. You will always eat in the morning with the prisoners, then report to Gröps flat. "

When Elza arrives in the morning, she is let in by the escort. No one else is in the living space. Dirty dishes, half-empty bottles, and puddles from melting ice covered the kitchen. The terrace has glass shards from a broken bottle of Jägermeister, and brass bullet shells lying randomly on the deck. The bed is unmade, and a woman's white silk stockings hang over the end of the mattress. The ornate headboard is brass with black lacquer appointments. There is a dark brown roll-top desk against the wall opposite the bed, adding to the dreariness.

Elza attacks the apartment methodically. She heats water, scrubs dishes, mops the floors, sweeps broken glass from the terrace, and remakes the bed. She puts a tiny hole in the toe of the stockings that will take time to notice. The toilet has a door underneath where the pot resides. She removes it and pours the urine over the terrace

railing. The open bathroom and bedroom closet doors are closed, and the foul odor slowly dissipates. She thinks Gröps is a disgusting pig because of the mess he left. By noon, the flat looks untouched, as though no drunken officer had lived there. She even aligns the drying dishes into perfect rows without thinking. Order. Symmetry. Precision is the ethos of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Reich. Elza thinks she instinctively knows how to stroke Gröps ego.

It is early afternoon as she stands on the terrace looking out over the camp. Prisoners in striped uniforms walk in different directions, often with armed soldier escorts. Each inmate has a Star of David badge in varying designs sewn on their uniform, signifying something unknown to her. She sees some of the incarcerated shoved and others struck by the sentries using the stocks of their rifles. Inmates enter a building with a red cross on the roof; they do not appear injured or sick. Still more go into a windowless building with a billowing smokestack and never seem to leave. Lifeless bodies are being hauled into the same building. When a breeze kicks up, a rancid stench blows by.

In mid-afternoon, Gröps returns with his scribe. He greets Elza and inspects the premises. Gröps, “Where did you empty the urine pot?” Elza, “I poured it over the terrace rail.” His nostrils flare with restrained anger.

Strolling into the kitchen, he sees the remaining dishes in precise, orderly rows on a towel. He is outraged at this sight and comes back into the main room to her. His face turning beet red, he bellows out “du mädchen” and slaps her on her left cheek, drawing blood with his fingernail. He turns away to keep his composure, and after a minute of silence, faces her again. This time comes a stern whispering voice, “Never dump the waste from the terrace, I walk there! Also, do not leave the dishes on the counter to air dry; finish them immediately with a hand towel.

My aide will now take you to the supply house to get dinner provisions. Go with him presently, return and cook a meal for two.” The aide, Fritz, brings her to the water closet to clean her cut face before bringing her to the supply house.

Fritz introduces her to the supply house staff and tells them, “Elza is Gröps new maid and will visit once or twice a day to take provisions to his quarters.” They all smile and proudly gesture with palms up to the best stock nearest to where each stands. She selects veal and supplies to make Wiener Schnitzel, premade sauerkraut, Frankfurter Braten, and replacement ice. Elza says, “We are out of Jägermeister.” A pudgy meat man goes to a room in the back and comes back with a new bottle. “Tell Gröps that this is the last bottle until next week’s shipment from Berlin. We do, however, still have beer in stock.”

Back at the flat Elza prepares the veal and forms the spaetzle with the cheese grater. She spits in the sauerkraut several times. The cookies are placed on a white plate on a small buffet near the simple table. Gröps arrives with a handsome and decorated dinner guest from Berlin named Rolf. They have been drinking beer and are in happy spirits when they arrive. They drink an aperitif while they wait for dinner.

There is a short-wave radio at the end of the buffet. They tune to a staticky broadcast from Berlin. Axis Sally is playing over the waves first. They laugh, and Rolf says, “Goebbels is brainwashing the dumb American troops with modern propaganda” as he gulps down a large serving of liquor. During dinner, they pick up a serious broadcast related to the Russian troop containment in Leningrad. Elza listens as best she can without letting on that she is interested in the news. By the time the desert is done, they have drunk more than half of the new bottle. During the broadcasts, Rolf constantly makes eye contact with Elza and brashly inspects her lovely body. As she whispers in

Gröps ear, “This is the last of the Jägermeister until next week”, Rolf inspects her cleavage.

Gröps gets a rifle, and the pair goes out to the terrace on the cool, misty night. They keep drinking from the bottle, ignoring her warning. Gröps loads the rifle and says, “They are harder to hit in this visibility, so they are worth two points tonight, and we each get two shots. What is your score anyway?” Elza understands what they are doing, but she is powerless to stop them.

Rolf goes first and aims at a distance in the deep fog. He shoots, and it sounds as if the bullet hits the dirt. Footsteps run away from the point where the bullet hits as the prisoner moves deeper into the fog. “Null for you, my friend,” says Gröps.

Several minutes later, people are walking towards the medical building. A prisoner is partially blocked by a sentry escort, making it a difficult shot. Gröps does not want to kill one of his own men, but being drunk, he attempts to hit the prisoner next to the German sentry. The bullet lands in front of the intended target. Gröps blames the guard for the missing.

Rolf tries to get tricky and says, “I get three points if I shoot one from behind my back.” He attempts and misses the target. Gröps snatches the rifle, loads it, and drops a prisoner with one shot. He shrieks exuberantly, “I am quick when opportunity knocks, and I win for tonight.” Rolf agrees, and they have another shot in celebration.

Finally, Rolf leaves, and they are alone as she finishes cleaning up dinner. Gröps is quite drunk and sneers, saying slowly, “Do not warn me that the liquor is running low!” Elza, “There still is beer in stock. Gröps, “this is not your concern”, and slams his fist on the table. Clean up the shells and the terrace, and you are dismissed once this is done.” When she is ready to leave, Gröps is snoring on a terrace chair.

Elza is tempted to kill him but refrains for now. Instead, she rinses the bullets in the sink in a feeble attempt to ruin them. She thinks to herself, how far will this merciless pig push me before I break?

As the weeks go on, the drunken beatings get worse than the initial face slapping. Gröps is pleased with her performance as his maid but hates her because she is a Jew. Elza's religion does not stop his sexual advances. The barracks women are dirty, smelly, and malnourished to the point where they look like skeletons with shaved heads. Elza eats some of Gröps leftovers, which keeps her nourished and fit. It also allows her to steal some food for the less fortunate prisoners. In the barracks during a morning meal of his leftovers, she learns her brother Ezra is also in the camp. He is being tested in the medical house. Knowing this brings her horror at what they may be doing to him.

One morning, Elza arrives at Gröps' empty flat to leftover coffee, so she indulges herself with some on the terrace. She starts to imagine the prisoners as *paper puppets* controlled like marionettes with invisible strings. The puppeteer is a man in a high watchtower above the clouds. He does not care about his paper puppets. He moves them sightlessly, between evil buildings, and eventually to the smokestack building, where their paper bodies burn. She wishes she could climb the tower like Jack climbed the beanstalk and cut the invisible strings.

Elza is occasionally invited to dinner, especially when Gröps is in an amorous mood. The first rape occurs when Gröps comes to dinner in a drunken rage. He is not mad at her, just lecherous. She comes to the table and serves his food, and he throws it on the floor. He then proceeds to pick her up with his massive arms and carries her into the bedroom, feet kicking. Elza screams, and he hits her eye with his fist, stunning her as he penetrates recklessly. She is in pain because he is so rough. Fortunately, he only lasts two minutes, and the initial agony is over for now, but the feeling of being violated remains.

Her perineum is slightly ripped and bleeding. She painfully walks to her barracks wearing the torn dress and carrying another. Her eye is swelling. She never dares to go back for some ice.

The next morning Gröps does not remember the antics of the previous night, but he is very mad that she left the sheet hanging on the bookcase. When she arrives, he sees her eye and is silent. He looks at the ground when breakfast is served. Elza asks, “Would you like water and pain pills from the bathroom cabinet?” He nods yes.

Weeks go on, and sexual assaults are frequent and less painful. When Rolf calls, she is to give herself to his pleasure as well, never knowing his last name. Elza is broken and resigned to being Gröps sex slave. Every day, she thinks of killing him or killing herself. She also broods about her brother Ezra’s incarceration. She is glad he is alive, but fears the outcome of the experiments conducted on him as a human subject.

One evening Rolf is over for dinner and drinking. After eating and before they retire to the terrace, Rolf grabs the rifle and rushes to the platform to get a quick kill and even the score. It is barely dusk, and Elza’s brother is walking to the medical building with a guard out of her sight while she cleans up. Rolf fires and kills Ezra unbeknownst to her. Gröps declares a tie and suggests celebrating with the company of Elza as a threesome.

They violate her in a drunken stupor and then fall asleep in bed with her. Once they start to snore, Elza creeps out of bed and cleans before she leaves. On her way to the barracks, she sees the dead body of her brother Ezra. Her heart starts racing, and she experiences shortness of breath, dizziness, and tremors in a panic shock due to her rape *and* the murder of her brother. Elza returns to Gröps quarters and fetches the rifle and bullets, loads the rifle, and then, without

thinking, points the rifle to shoot both men, only to pass out before firing.

Gröps wakes up and sees the rifle near Elza. He surmises what her intentions were and orders a sentry to take her to the barracks while he decides her fate. Gröps has bigger problems due to the failing German war campaign and therefore delays his decision on Elza's situation. A week after the murder of her brother, the Germans surrendered to the Allied forces, and the war was over. Gröps does not decide her fate; antisemitism does.

Elza returns home to the Warsaw ghettos. To her surprise, she is not readily accepted back into the folds of Polish society. She cannot obtain work as a seamstress even though her reputation is impeccable, for those who remember her. The ghetto is now a remnant of what it was, seemingly haunted by the ghosts of former residents killed in the camps. She can only find work cleaning the homes of wealthier gentiles, who hide their contempt for her better than the Nazis, but pay a meager wage.

The winter after the initial Nuremberg convictions, she is summoned to testify against Rolf. This seems like a respite from Poland. At the trials, she learns that Gröps escaped Europe and fled to Brazil. Her testimony forces her to relive in detail the past she wants to forget and question whether she should have pulled the trigger.

Reading the newspaper after her testimony, she sees light snow covering the ground. The paper says that the world celebrates the justice continuing to be meted out to Nazi war criminals in Nuremberg. She weeps with disdain at the media rhetoric, looking out the window as the snow turns to rain.

## Black Hookah Down

Shisha arrives in Somalia at the Port of Mogadishu. It is filled with bright colored sea containers stacked like a giant Lego model. They are flanked by deteriorating stone buildings that resemble old castles. The salty smell of the Indian Ocean lingers in the warm light breeze.

Shisha stepped onto the dock and felt his mother's embrace before he saw her face clearly. Her skin tone is a lighter brown than Shisha's, who is dark in Somali terms. She wore a faded slate-blue baati, holding mats under one arm. "You're late," she said softly. Not anger, something closer to relief. He nodded, reaching into his pocket. The money felt heavier than it should have. "We'll eat tonight," she added, as if trying to make the world smaller. From a distant mosque, the call to prayer rose, carrying over the broken stone walls of the city. They laid the mats down without speaking.

The pair walks from the port towards the Bakara Market. They arrive at their refuge, which features a façade of exposed grey and brown stone where the pockmarked plaster is missing, revealing unrepaired damage from the recent civil war.

Shisha sees this and remembers his time as a young boy hearing the shelling of his home and the dust crumbling on the inside walls from the shock of gunfire. He would sit in a ball, trembling in fear. The horror is what he remembers most, but he is now a hardened young man of eleven years.... No time for emotions.

When the shooting stopped, and he was sure it was over, Shisha would look out his windowless, shutterless upstairs room to see the ruin. Mother would stay downstairs, closer to the danger, protected only by barred open-air windows with closed wooden shutters. Sometimes, small rocks would blow into the living room under a gaping hole in the bottom of the front door. During the assaults, the

family would ration water to 100 milliliters daily. He was always thirsty during the war. His body needed water, his spirit desired the freedom to play in the ocean waves. The war and the sharks made this freedom out of reach

They enter the sparse abode. “Shisha, check upstairs to see if there is wood for the fire.” He climbs the access ladder near the wall in the front of the house through a square opening in the ceiling above, to the second floor. The fire pit contains only remnants of ash. Climbing down, he shouts, “No wood, Mom.” His younger brother, Kalif, lies on a rough mattress, staring at the mold-coated ceiling. Mother yells, “Shisha, go to Sahra Sambuusas and buy six meat sambuusas and three large water bottles. I put the money on the table.”

Shisha’s nickname is Hookah, and he is part of the Midgaan. His family descended from generations of hunters and warriors. Father was an ebony-colored man killed during the Civil War in battle. His nickname was Black Hookah because of his dark skin, and he enjoyed the Hookah. This military legacy gives Shisha (known as Hookah) an elevated social status amongst the Midgaan.

The next morning, Hookah is to report to Jama in an alley near the Bakara Market, used primarily by gun dealers. Jama is an officer of Al-Itihaad al-Islamiya (AIAD). Hookah performs various tasks for Jama and is paid well. Upon arrival, Jama is wired as he drinks steaming khat. Jama smiles, “Yesterday’s delivery was a smashing success. Today, you will go home and bring Kalif back to the market alley.” Hookah fetches Kalif, who is excited to be included. Upon return, the boys are instructed to make a delivery on a guarded pier. Kalif is to create a distraction, allowing Hookah to enter and deliver the package. Upon delivery, Hookah will jump off the pier into the ocean, where the water is deep enough to land and swim back,

avoiding detection by the guard. He will be paid triple due to the risk, and because it is a two-boy job.

At the location, Kalif hangs off the outside of the railing in front of the guard as a distraction. The guard runs out to pull Kalif back. Hookah slips behind the guard undetected to deliver the package, jumps off the pier as instructed, then swims to the beach stealthily and unharmed. Kalif casually joins him. They walk along the surf pumped up on the adrenaline from the excitement of their success, and happy to know how much money they will make. Hookah brags, "I am not afraid of the sharks, because I can swim faster than them." Kalif, "I can swim faster than you, Hookah." He is the same height as Hookah, even though he is a year younger. The boys walk by a buoy not far from the beach. Hookah dares his brother, "Swim to the buoy and back faster than the sharks, and I will give you two-thirds of our bounty, and you do not have to give your share to Mother."

Kalif hesitates, and his eyes show fear because he understands the potential risk. He calculates the distance and looks for fins. Kalif thinks about the money and buying baklava with the bounty because he has not had sweets since the Ramadan fast. Gaining courage, Kalif removes his shirt and runs into the wake towards the buoy. He dives into the ocean and swims towards the float. The water is choppy, and the current is running strong. He is pulled off target by the current, forcing him to swim against it to reach the mark. Kalif is panting heavily as he clings to the buoy and rests for a few minutes to catch his breath, kicking his feet to stay afloat. He eventually recovers and turns towards the beach. Behind him, a dark fin surfaces and slowly glides in the wake behind his kicking feet. In the shallow water, a tail fin emerges, thrashing as the shark suddenly accelerates. Kalif is submerged as the fins turn away and back out to sea. Blood trails in Kalif's wake on the water's surface as he washes towards the shore, unconscious and bleeding profusely from what remains of his left leg.

Hookah runs into the wake, dragging Kalif by the arm to the beach. He sees that his brother's leg has been torn off just below the knee. Blood streams, staining the sand. In a frenzy, he struggles to make a tourniquet, but it is useless—instantly drenched in blood. Kalif's open eyes stare lifelessly as the last of his pulse slips away.

Hookah's thoughts race. What will Mom say and how will she feel? What do I tell Jama? Am I responsible? He vomits on the beach next to the mess of bloody sand and lies still for a while, crying. Eventually, some men come by and shake him out of his shock. They take the boy and the body to a commercial area and summon a donkey-pulled cart. Hookah tells the driver that the dead body worked for Jama of the AIAI. Jama will pay the fare. The driver accepts in fear of incurring the wrath of the AIAI, and because he knows they have the shillings to pay him.

Upon arriving home, Mother sees Hookah, the cart, and the Kalif's bloody corpse and rushes to them. Hookah points to Kalif as his mother looks in. Screaming in horror, she throws herself on the body and sobs, holding the cold, blood-stained boy. Mother keeps repeating, "WHY Allah, why take poor innocent Kalif?" The driver lays the boy in the middle of the ground floor on a wool blanket that Hookah gets from Kalif's bed. As the driver leaves, he says, "I will go to the market and see Jama tomorrow afternoon for my fare."

His mother sits silently and sobs. Hookah goes up the ladder to contemplate the events and stares at his brother's body. His mind races, seeing the scene at the beach repeatedly with a pang of guilt each time the image starts. When he closed his eyes to sleep, he still saw Kalif holding the buoy not as he had been in life, but as he was in the moment before the current took him, breathing too hard, trying to win something that was never a game. No one eats that evening or the next morning.

At daybreak, Hookah approaches his mother sheepishly and recounts what happened without mentioning the dare. She has already obtained a bucket of water and is cleaning the blood off Kalif's body in preparation for the burial ceremony, which must happen this afternoon according to customs. "Shisha, go out and notify relatives, friends, and the sheik of the mosque."

In the afternoon, a crowd forms at the mosque. The sheik performs the Janaaso. Khalif's body is placed in a hole without a casket near the mosque in a section reserved for the dead. Hookah watches from a distance as the attendees cover his brother with grass and wood before the soil is placed on top. He is too young to attend the funeral but sees that Jama is among those present. His sorrow begins sinking further into measureless melancholy. He asks Allah, "How can the ocean offer access to a better world like the one I was in two days ago, yet yesterday take the life of my innocent younger brother?" The family's mourning lasts over a month.

After the mourning period, Hookah sees Jama in the market. Jama is remorseful about Kalif's death and tells him his mission was important, and Allah looks favorably on him. In a sympathetic gesture, Jama gives Hookah a promotion as Islamic Union lookout, a job usually for the older teenagers who run the fastest. It is the easiest job, and the pay is steady and good. He feels pride and relief from his severe sorrow and pangs of penitence. He will also get paid to watch the ocean for military activity and dream of escaping from his place on earth.

As a lookout, the ocean no longer looked like water to Hookah. It looked like a promise that always demanded payment later. At night, when he closed his eyes, he still saw Kalif holding the buoy—not as he had been in life, but as he was in the moment before the current

took him, breathing too hard, trying to win something that was never a game.

A year passes with regular work as a lookout. Mother, now scarcely eating, starts taking counterfeit tramadol pills to relieve her pain, only to develop a dependency. Hookah pays for the pills with his lookout work supplied by Jama. However, as American and UN troops infiltrate Mogadishu, the lookout work dries up. Mother, now distraught, emaciated, strung out, continues to wither away, eventually dying of starvation.

Hookah is left alone in one of the world's most dangerous cities. His money will run out soon. The boy squats in the family home for a few months but is kicked out as a new family takes occupancy. Without work, he scavenges for food and slowly approaches starvation.

Months pass, and a great commotion occurs near the Waaheen Hotel in central Mogadishu. An American military helicopter has crashed. People come from all over and surround it. Gunfire, dead civilians, and American soldiers fill the streets. The city has been in chaos for two days. During the commotion, Hookah runs into Jama.

Jama invites him to his home. They push through the crowds for several blocks, walking a few kilometers away from the action. At Jama's, khat tea is served. This is Hookah's first time using khat. After half the cup is finished, his heartbeat grows faster, and hot patches appear on his skin. Hookah is very happy to be with Jama. He always looked up to him as a role model after his father's death.

The conversation is exciting because Jama speaks of a new job opportunity, "It is better than being an outlook. The pay is better, and you will work with the Somali Navy if you want to do it." This conversation is exciting, so he asks Jama endless questions about this new job. They also talk about his mother's tragic death, and Jama

says, “I liked your mother and father very much. It is a sad thing that one family must bear so much tragedy. Why don’t you stay with me tonight on my spare cot?”

Hookah’s sleep is restless. In the morning, he has a headache, a dry mouth, and feels queasy. When Jama rises, he asks Hookah, “Do you want the new job we discussed last evening?” The word “YES” came out before he had time to understand what it meant.” Jama smiles, “We will embark on a journey tomorrow to the port city of Eyl.” Hookah is very excited about the news and the freedom to be away from Mogadishu and at sea.

The next morning, Jama leaves the house early and reappears after thirty minutes on an older Triumph Tiger motorcycle. It looks very fast. Jama parks in front of the house, enters, and greets Hookah with a smile. “It is a beautiful day, and we are cruising to Eyl on a powerful motorcycle. Our hair will blow in the wind...Have you ever been on one?” Hookah flicks his wrist and hand in a swift gesture of denial, a sheepish blush rising to his face. “That’s alright, you will love it...by the time we arrive, the ride will transform you into a swashbuckling seaman.” Hookah’s khat hangover is already waning due to his adrenaline rush.

Jama’s gear is already packed, and he offers Hookah an extra t-shirt and a torn denim jacket that are too big, but serviceable, adding, “There is a second backpack in the closet, take it and use it for the clothes, and any extra things you acquire.” Jama proceeds to heat some khat for them to drink before they leave. On the way out of the Bakara Market area, they stop by a stand and grab two Doolsho cakes and bottles of scarce fresh water for breakfast on the road.

Jama tells Hookah, “The trip will take two long days. It is twenty-four hours north. We will stop for petrol from war widows working street stalls on the road, and we will sleep under the stars, just outside of

Cadaado.... I know the perfect spot.” Hookah is impressed by Jama’s confidence and knowledge of the countryside. The trip is grueling. The weather is hot, dry, and dusty. The breeze feels good when they are moving. The motorcycle speed and acceleration exhilarate Hookah.

They take breaks every few hours near roadside stands, buy water, and urinate on the grass off the road, far away from the vendors. These reprieves make the trip easier on Hookah’s butt, allowing his blood to flow and nerves to decompress. The bright red sun sets over the Indian Ocean at the city of Dhuusamareeb, turning the hazy blue sky into shades of orange, grey, and lavender. It feels surreal.

They stop at an illuminated stand in Cadaado when night falls. Jama orders portions of Muqmad with dates, and they eat near the stand. After dinner, it is a short ride just north of Cadaado. They pull into the sleeping spot Jama described. A full moon is rising brightly to the east. The stars represent the possibilities of good things to come.

Jama unfurls two Darins on the ground and switches on a battery lantern. He gathers items around the site for a game of Shax. Hookah fears this game will allow Jama to learn more personal matters about Hookah’s life than Jama probably already knows.

The second day is much like the first: heat, wind, food, water, petrol, and a sore body. At dusk, they descend into a valley and curve around the northern banks of the range heading east. The blue-green Indian Ocean appears to their far left in the distance. A full moon rises brightly in unison with their approach. Hookah is sure this means he is at the turning point in his life he has been waiting for since the war.

When the moon is high, they can see the fires by the beach. The scene in the distance is hypnotic to Hookah. The air is permeated with the scent of ocean salt, smoke, and cooking meat. There are

several blazes set about twenty-five meters apart. Each inferno is surrounded by men or boys wearing a checked keffiyeh. Some are red, others blue, or black. Every bonfire seems to have a keffiyeh color code.

When they arrive, there are two massive, weathered old white cargo ships stranded and landlocked on the beach with the name of each vessel written in large Kanji logograms. The firelight reflects off the remaining white paint that has not rusted away. Hookah sees the ships as a gift from Allah. There are several speedboats moored nearby and rocking gently in the waves.

A man in a black keffiyeh emerges. He has an AK-47 machine gun strapped over his shoulder, hanging across his back, the barrel and stock peering out from the sides of his thin frame. He waves to Jama, who returns the gesture. Jama and the man shake hands in a way Hookah does not recognize, suggesting a deeper affiliation. Jama introduces Hookah to Mohammad.

Mohammad escorts the pair to the black keffiyeh blaze. The men at this fire are older than Hookah. Mohammad introduces him to the group and says Hookah will be joining the trainees. The men greet him and return to eating, laughing, and listening to a member beating a Darbuka drum.

Hookah is then taken to the red keffiyeh fire and is asked to join the group and eat some goat meat. The red fire is listening to a battery-operated CD unit playing American rap music. This fire is mostly boys his age, who are watchful as he and Mohammed approach. A boy is ordered to bring meat from a makeshift wood-burning rotisserie grill. Hookah is offered a stick of meat. Hungry, he clutches the stick and tepidly nibbles at the flank, then devours the rest, almost choking on it. The serving boy leaves and returns with a cup of sugarcane rum mixed with Kaht.

The red keffiyehs observe him with curiosity to see how he will respond. The music stops for a moment. He takes a deep swig of the concoction, and it burns his mouth and throat. He gags, coughs, and spits some out, his eyes tearing rapidly. The boys laugh in unison at the spectacle as the music and talking resume. This firewater makes him wonder if the moon was playing tricks on his mind.

Hookah finishes the cup. As the drink kicks in, the campfire seems like a dream for a while. Suddenly, without knowing what is happening, he feels like he is spinning around, making him nauseous. The spins persist, and he knows he is going to vomit. He walks down the beach like the drunken sailor he is becoming. Away from all the fires, he pukes in the sand. Feeling better now except for a raw throat and dry mouth, he rejoins the red team, where no one has noticed his absence.

An hour later, the red and blue teams file into the ship nearest their fire and lie in berths situated at the back of the steerage. Some have no bedding, but ample blankets, pads, and pillows, allowing comfort for those sleeping on the floor of the hull. Hookah grabs a blanket from a nook and lies covered on the ship's floor, using his backpack as a pillow. The blue keffiyehs file in and take the open sleeping compartments in the front of the hull. The waves outside provide a soothing rhythm, enticing drowsiness, and then sleep. At night, when the ship's hull creaked under the sleeping bodies, Hookah found himself repeating the same dream. *I told him I could swim faster than the sharks.*

Morning arrives, and like Peter Pan's Lost Boys popping out of Hangman's Tree, the boys climb out of the ship and gather near small fires heating cauldrons in the sand. The blue team is cooking the morning meal for the entire group, a watery sorghum porridge ladled into half coconut shells. Hookah is anxious to eat and help tame his

rum and khat hangover. The boys are drinking khat, and so does he. After breakfast, Hookah feels energized.

Mohammad comes by and says to him, “You should say goodbye to Jama.” They meet him at his motorcycle, where Mohammad hands Jama a substantial roll of shillings, which he shoves in his pants pocket. The sight of the cash makes Hookah’s stomach sink. Jama says, “Goodbye, my little friend, may Allah bless you.” Jama then revs his bike and rides away. Hookah convinces himself that the large sum of cash was probably for the War Lord's efforts inland and had nothing to do with his delivery to Mohammad.

Anxiety sets in as Hookah is not sure if he will ever see Jama, his surrogate father, again. In the early afternoon, Mohammad walks Hookah down the beach and explains what the colors of the ranks mean. “Black is for ranking elders, blue is for team leaders, and red is for apprentices. We are a band of corsairs reporting to the mainland warlords. Jama is a warlord. We are the Navy of Somalia. Most of the members lost work during the civil war and became homeless like you. They needed a means to survive and came to us. We are like a family.”

Then Mohammad talks about the initiation. “Your first task is to undergo the Corsair initiation. Today, you will receive two lashes from the whip before the ceremony. This evening, at the fires, you will repeat an oath, I will teach you today, and then you will be branded with the symbol of Akofena on your right shoulder blade. Afokena is the sword of war. It is crossed swords representing bravery. After the branding, you will drink a hearty cup of rum and khat to relieve your pain, and everyone will toast to you.”

The whipping is sharply painful and numbing at the same time. To Hookah, it feels like a viper's fangs and venom piercing his body. It is so intense that there is a brief involuntary jerking of muscles in his

lower back where the wounds remain. Mohammad applies salve to the open wounds and shares the written oath. He says, “Rest today and memorize the short pledge. Before the ceremony, you will be given khat tea and rum to ease the trauma of the branding.

Darkness sets in, and the fires blaze, cooking meat just like the night before. This evening, there is no rap music, just the drums from the black fire. After eating, the ceremony begins with Hookah repeating the words “Treat corsairs with respect, no rape, no robbing, and no killing hostages unless they are a threat to you.”

Once the oath is over, Mohammad puts the branding iron into the fire until the heat stamp on the tip glows bright orange. Hookah removes his shirt, and Mohammad applies the brand to his right shoulder blade and rocks it back and forth. The contact causes a raging, burning pain in his back, shooting through his nerves and down his spine to the whip wounds. He smells his own scorched flesh and falls to the sand in shock. The impact of the sand brings him out of his stupor, and he slowly gets up to cheers. Rum and khat are poured for all, and the crowd gets rowdy again. Soothing drums beat from the black fire, but his entire back is aching in searing agony. The drinks help with the pain. He sleeps poorly on his left side overnight. Whenever he moves, his body throbs, and he has nightmares of a world on fire.

The brand creates a third-degree burn, which takes a month to heal despite his youth, because the wound is never properly dressed. The whiplash takes only two painful weeks to subside. Even as he heals, Hookah is forced to labor, deepening his injuries with every movement. Tasks include working on speedboats, gathering local plants for cooking, carrying halal-slaughtered goats, and cleaning weapons. He does not see any action at sea for two months while he heals and learns the intricacies of the apprenticeship.

Finally, Hookah is called up for a mission to apprehend a Greek oil tanker sailing from Saudi Arabia through the Gulf of Aden to Mumbai, India. The ship will pass near the island of Socotra. They plan to hide their speedboats on the beach south of the head of Socotra and scout from the eastern tip. A blue keffiyeh is the assigned lookout.

Around noon, the lookout reports back to Mohammed, “A tanker flying the Greek flag is twenty minutes away.” Hookah memorizes the information the lookout reports to Mohammad. The pirates jump into the five speedboats, six men and boys in each boat, all armed with machine guns. The tanker has access ladders on both sides. The pirates have ropes tied to hooks, extra petrol, and radios on each speedboat. They take off around the end of Socotra and head to the mouth of the Arabian Sea to intercept the cargo tanker.

Corsair’s speedboats overtake the vessel, parallel to the hull. Rope hooks are thrown up the access ladder, and the black pirates climb aboard unresisted. Bearing their guns, they take the crew and captain hostage. Thirty renegades of all colors are now on board the ship, armed and dangerous. Mohammed takes the captain to the radio transmitter. He has him notify the owners that the ship has been hijacked and they are requesting a ransom of one million US dollars to be wired to an AIAI bank account. Upon verification of receipt, they will release the ship and crew unharmed. Three hours go by with no response. It is very hot on the deck, and Hookah is sweating. One of the crew members pisses his pants, another prays perpetually, while a third woefully whimpers. The pirates wander about, warning the crew to be still with their machine guns.

A cracking noise wakes up the receiver on the captain’s deck. Mohammad converses with the voice on the other end. He seems very apprehensive about the news. He orders his men, “Move the

tanker crew to the hull below.” He gathers the black corsairs and quietly instructs them, “Prepare to disembark and put the extra petrol in the three best boats, take the slower ones back to the north tip of Socotra, remove the engines, and put them into the three fast boats, leave the hulls in plain sight on the coast.”

The pirates disperse and begin carrying out Mohammad's orders. In the distance, military ships approach the tanker. A grey US Navy corvette is rapidly approaching the tanker, guns prepared and flying the US flag. The pirates climb down the rope ladder onto the speedboats. They know their speedboats are faster than the navy corvette, and the navy will not shoot them anyway if the boat is cleared, so they do not fire on the navy.

Due to his low rank, Hookah is the last to climb down on the port side facing the mouth of the sea, where the Navy is waiting. The Navy's presence causes him to lose concentration, and his machine gun trigger gets caught on a knot in the rope. It fires harmlessly into the water. The shot startles Hookah, and he falls towards the ocean. His hook catches the ladder tethering him to the ship, his feet dragging in the strong current. It is impossible to climb back up. He does not know if this predicament is a memory or a punishment. The difference no longer matters as he watches fins begin to converge on him.

In minutes, a Dutch combat support ship sees him and begins a rescue approach. As he drifts, the sharks leisurely start to move in for some human flesh. Hookah kicks a few away, buying time before a shark takes a chunk out of his calf. The bleeding attracts more sharks, but the Dutch ship intervenes and thwarts the pending carnage. Although he loses a lot of blood and most of his right calf, Hookah is provided with modern medical assistance and will only be crippled for life. The U.S. and Dutch governments chose not to prosecute

Hookah for piracy and repatriate him to Mogadishu after several months of modern medical care.

Upon his return to Mogadishu, Hookah goes to Jama's home to see him. Jama is happy he is still alive and wants to help. They both know that Hookah's family suffered immensely on Earth due to forces mostly outside their control. They also believe those who give up their life defending Islam become martyrs and will go straight to Jannah upon death. His father is an example, Jama will follow when he dies, and so will Hookah. Jama knows that Hookah's permanent injury will remind him each day of his brother's fate, and to question why he was spared. This will motivate him to be fully radicalized over time.

The AIAI is slowly deteriorating. Jama sees this in the diminishing success rate of pirate ransoms. He has a personal relationship with the Houthis tribe and supports their efforts as an opposition movement to the Saudi-backed Yemeni president, Ali Abdullah Saleh. Since Jama feels somewhat responsible for Hookah's fate, he arranges for Hookah to be made his deputy liaison to the emerging Houthi opposition. Hookah accepts Jama's plan, concealing his reservations. Jama had once said the sea made boys into men. Hookah now understood that it did not make anything. It only swept away what came before.

Jama considers Iranian oil funding to be the future. It may be more reliable than pirate ransoms someday. The two will continue as family bound for Jannah. They are the only two people in this world who share reciprocal trust. Jama has full faith in Hookah because he has no one else. Hookah can never *fully* trust Jama in return because he suspects Jama sold him to the pirates. Jama does not know this. What would stop Jama from betraying Hookah again?

Their bond is based on ethics born of abject poverty. The offer makes Hookah feel temporary relief from his seemingly endless cycle of starvation, terrorist salvation, and the prevailing economics, which Hookah has accepted as his fate.

## I Left My Heart in San Francisco

Perry watches in surreal anticipation from above as the man he recently met weeps and slowly removes a black hooded mask with a choker collar from a naked and lifeless body. He senses his worst fear is about to be revealed. Is this just another one of the many nightmares he has recently experienced? Could he be looking at his future or his past? Yet for some reason, he feels at peace with the scene. Surprisingly, a serene sense of relief.

Harvey Leche locks his office at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music precisely at three. Weekend bag over his shoulder, he hurried toward his waiting BMW, where two friends were already smoking cigarettes. The threesome gets in, and Harvey steers the beamer on a long descent down Bush Street towards the Embarcadero Center. A few turns and they arrive at the Cigna Insurance Building. Harvey pulls into a parking spot and uses his console car phone to call Perry. “We are on Pine, and I am in front of California Bank & Trust with my flashers on. Please be quick.”

Inside the car are three attractive men around thirty years of age. As Perry enters, the radio announcer says, “It is going to be a mild sunny weekend in the Bay Area. Rainer, the symphony flutist, is squashed into the back seat beside Elton, an irreverent Pacific Exchange trader. Harvey says, “This is Perry”. As he starts the car, Perry squeezes into the passenger seat. They all nod, and the group heads south. Harvey lights a joint and passes it around to the group. The car smells like a slightly skunky mixture of weed and Polo cologne. Harvey turns off the air conditioner and cracks the window, letting the wind overtake the smoke with the backdrop of Boy George singing *Do You Really Want to Hurt Me* on the radio. After the joint is done and the window closed, everyone is relaxed and talkative.

Perry, “Let’s go to the Saloon in the North Beach district. It is nearby and on the way. The music is fantastic, but the neighborhood is dicey. I think the Dynatones are playing an early show.” The group nods, so Harvey obliges them as Perry navigates. When they get close, the car is solicited by prostitutes walking Grant Street. An inebriated group makes a raucous exit through the front door. Perry smiles sarcastically and says, “I hear drunks who stumble out of this tavern risk being shanghaied and taken to sea at the wharf.” Laughter ensues.

The Saloon is a dive bar with characters of all kinds. Some have beer bellies and big grey beards, and others look homeless. The crowd is eclectic, with cowboys and upscale Asian people. The newly formed bunch stays for a beer and a set. The music is great blues, but it is too loud to talk. Harvey is visibly nervous about his console car phone being stolen in North Beach.

Back in the car, everyone can talk. Elton,” That place gave me an inspiration for the weekend. We should call ourselves the *Beats* this weekend in honor of the new movie, *What Happened to Kerouac?* Have you all seen the film?” They all nod yes in unison. We should each assume a beat personality for this weekend from a character in *On the Road*. Elton, “I must be Dean Moriarty. Elton, “I was arrested once when I was eighteen, and my dad had my record expunged. Is anyone more qualified?” Rainer, “Imagine a stock trader playing a gay car thief for the weekend.” Harvey, “I will be Sal Paradise since I brought this all together.” Rainer says, “Perry, you are Ed Dunkel, and I will be Carlo Marx.”

The group proceeds from the Saloon to their main destination at Baker Beach. The stunning home sits at the end of a cul-de-sac. At the top of the circle are stairs to Baker Beach. They see the open gate from the road, exposing a large driveway with a three-car garage. The house is a two-story mission-style home that sits perched overlooking

the beach, flanked by the Pacific Ocean, the Golden Gate Bridge, and the red sunset. Harvey pulls into the driveway and watches his passengers from the mirror, gawking in amazement. He smiles at himself in satisfaction.

The host is Tommy, a fine daddy of about forty years. He takes them upstairs, where there are four bedrooms. Tommy says, "Harvey and I are in the master this weekend, and another couple is in the small room at the end. You gents, can choose your rooms from the remaining two." One room has two beds, and the other has a single. Elton runs to the single bed and says, "First-come, first-served." Rainer and Perry roll their eyes and take the room with two beds.

The *Beats* unload and return downstairs for drinks on the patio. Everyone is sipping libations when the other couple returns. Tommy, "Harvey, Elton, Perry, and Rainer, this is Willie and Teeks." Willie, "Everyone thinks we are twins, but we only met a year ago." The *Beats* help Willy and Teeks put the groceries away. Perry thinks of the couple as the *Thompson Twins*. Willy looks like Tom Bailey with asymmetrical red hair, and Teeks looks like Alannah Currie with crazy blonde hair. The *Beats* let the *Thompson Twins* in on their weekend Kerouac ruse, and they are amused. Darkness sets in. The group decides to go out for dinner at Pacific Cafe and then to The EndUp nightclub.

The EndUp has a thirty-minute wait to enter. The queue looks like an audition for *A Chorus Line*. The *Beats* pay the cover and enter a cacophony of sensory experiences. Pulsating music with songs like *Obsession, YMCA, and I Want Your Sex* " echoes as strobe lights change color and move around the dance floor. People are tripping on ecstasy and snorting lines of coke in the bathroom. The scene is chaotic and surreal, resembling a tribal dance illuminated by flashing lights.

Elvis finds a companion of the tight jean ilk. Harvey and Tommy dance together next to the *Thomson Twins*. Rainer and Perry go outside for fresh air and talk. Perry finds Rainer both witty and demure. They both like jazz and eat only low-fat foods.

After an hour of conversation, they go inside and see the group collecting near the door, planning to go to Aunt Charlie's Lounge. Rainer wants to go home because he was out late the previous evening. Perry also had a hard week and wanted to leave. Tommy gives them the house keys and says, "Put them on the porch under the rock by the door after your taxi departs. The driveway gate is open." The group members head their separate ways. Back at the house, Rainer and Perry enjoy another drink on the patio overlooking the Pacific, illuminated by the moonlight.

In the morning, the smell of coffee drifts upstairs, beckoning everyone to follow the aroma to the first floor. Tommy and Harvey are cooking, and the *Thomson Twins* are at the dining table waiting for breakfast. They all realize that Elton is missing.

The home is immaculately arranged with natural-colored five-inch hardwood floors and marble tile in the kitchen and entrance. Most of the furniture is contemporary. The daytime views through the large glass windows are stunning and resemble a Thomas McNight painting. It will be a great beach day once the early morning fog burns off.

Tommy wheels a cart piled with umbrellas, coolers, bocce balls, and cold brews. As they are leaving, Elton shows up. Tommy says, "Elton, come to Baker Beach and lock the door you leave," handing him the house key.

The cohort heads to the end of the cul-de-sac and onto Baker Beach. It is approaching noon, and the beach is crowded. People wearing

ornate dresses are playing drag beach volleyball. As the group walks towards the waves, Perry catches glimmers of same-sex pairs showing various forms of affection. Near the waterline, they walk in the direction of the Golden Gate Bridge towards a section where many bathe nude in a makeshift compound.

Tommy and Harvey work the crowd on the beach while Perry and Rainer each read a book in their chairs and sip beer discreetly. The *Thompson Twins* dig two holes in the sand and start rolling the bocce balls towards the holes. Elton eventually finds the group and recounts his adventures of the previous evening. Tommy and Harvey return satisfied with the party invitations they received for the evening. The day is perfect.

After the beach, the group orders take-out sushi and sake for dinner. While dining, Tommy lets everyone know they are all invited to a party within walking distance. The admission is one bottle of vin du pays. After sushi, Harvey volunteers to make a wine run.

Everyone places their order and starts showering while Tommy and Harvey shop. Elton takes a cold-water shower in the hall and applies Aloe on his sunburned body. The *Thompson Twins* use the hall shower next and wash together. Perry enters the second bedroom shower. He notices Rainer walks into the bathroom with only a towel while Perry begins to lather. After a minute, he sees Rainer peering at him in the mirror reflection. Their eyes lock, and Perry returns a welcoming smile and a nod. Rainer slowly enters the door, unwraps his towel, and places it on the hook. They make gentle love in the shower with Perry being the receiver. The encounter is short with no words spoken. Rainer rinses off, and Perry finishes his shower. The persistent patter of the water hides any commotion.

When Tommy and Harvey return, the guests are sitting outside, people watching from rockers on the patio. Rainer, in true Carlo

Marx fashion, writes a poem and recites it to the group. “The full moon begins its ascent, announcing a sensuous summer night. The tuna in my tummy was good to the last bite. The sake in Dean’s blood helps make his sunburn feel alright. The group Sal brought together makes our prospects very bright. When everyone is done, Rainer says, “Ed, I mean Perry, and I will clean up the dinner mess and go to the party later as long as Ed doesn’t ditch me along the way.” Both the humor and gesture make Tommy smile, and the group departs with bottles in hand.

Rainer heats the remaining sake and pours two more glasses. They listen to music lying together on the couch, drinking the hot spirit. The sake goes straight through their veins and into their heads. One thing leads to another. After an hour of devilry, they go to the party.

Sunday comes too fast with a repeat of Saturday at the beach, shortened by an afternoon departure for work on Monday. Perry meets Harvey for lunch at Zuni Café near the conservatory the following Wednesday. Harvey asks. “Perry, what do you think of Rainer?” “I like him a lot, and we may hang out.” Harvey scoffs knowingly but does not pry any further, satisfied that he brought the right people together over the weekend.

At work, Perry is assigned to the Cigna home office in Philadelphia for two months. While he is away, Rainer and Perry communicate by making expensive long-distance calls on corded push-button phones. Perry makes plans to fly to San Francisco and stay with Rainer for a long weekend a month later.

His first night back on the left coast is a Friday, and Rainer gives Perry free tickets to attend the San Francisco symphony’s performance of French-inspired masterpieces, including Bolero, Carmen, and La Mamma Morta. Bolero is about love, Carmen is a femme fatale, and La Mamma Morta is a tragic aria about death. Perry attends the after-

show party and meets many orchestra performers. Some of them make aggressive passes at him. They spend Saturday at Pier 39 and Chinatown, then visit Sausalito and Tiburon on Sunday. Summer becomes autumn. Autumn turns into holidays spent together. On New Year's Day, Perry moves into Rainer's Victorian in the Mission.

One day in May, Perry gets blamed for his teammates' mistakes. Feeling down, he skips the gym and goes out to the bar with the office crowd to vent. He has too many cocktails, gets drunk, and ends up in the Castro district with a few remaining work associates. They are all getting laid by men in the bathhouse, so Perry obliges a stranger, taking the receiving role. During the encounter, each thrust from the stranger feels like another moment in which life has dealt him an unfair hand. This gives him a weird sense of revenge at the cruelties of his life and the events of the day.

Perry wakes up the next morning feeling hungover and very guilty. He decides that because of the incident, he should try to change jobs to avoid being put in that embarrassing situation again. About two weeks later, he catches the flu.

Summer comes, and Rainer's performance schedule lightens. Perry receives word that he has an interview with Transamerica Insurance in San Francisco for a position better than his current job. This news picks him up. He comes home to Rainer with a bottle of champagne to celebrate. As he enters, he announces, "Rainer, all my good fortune is because of our union and your support." Rainer is touched, and he gives him a big hug.

The next step for Perry is to apply for health insurance from Transamerica. This requires a blood test to obtain coverage. Perry takes the test and waits for the results before resigning from Cigna to start the new job. It seems like the results take too long to get back. Seven days later, the test shows he is HIV positive, and therefore, he

is denied coverage but is given the option to keep the position. Transamerica cannot legally deny him the job because of a pre-existing illness. He declines the offer to keep his current active Cigna health insurance.

This presents Perry with an ethical dilemma. Perry realizes he must tell Rainer he is positive because Rainer could be infected, and he must explain why he is not taking the job at Transamerica. His fear of transmitting HIV to Rainer causes him to become withdrawn and ultra-sensitive to any sensations in his body, which now seems like a prison cell. He is sick from the guilt and shame over his one drunken indiscretion.

Eventually, Perry broaches the subject reticently, “Rainer, I got the results for the Transamerica health insurance, and the results are positive for Aids. I don’t know how I got it since we are exclusive, but I suggest you get tested. I will get a second test just to be sure.” Rainer says nothing and leaves the room, isolating himself in his office. When he returns, “I know it was not me, and I have no reason to believe I am positive except for my relations with you.” After that barb, Perry walks around feeling that he is about to vomit at any moment, but he never does.

Rainer is asymptomatic, as is Perry, but he does get a test. Rainer insists that his only lover other than Perry was his last. He moved to another city, and they are not on speaking terms. Perry suspects it was the night in the bathhouse, but it is not certain.

It becomes an emotional and romantic stalemate. They stay together depressed. Perry no longer attends performances or goes to orchestra parties. They stop going on dates and sit inside reading or staring out the window. Now, both prisoners of a death sentence disease they don’t fully understand or feel they deserve.

Eventually, Rainer begins to show symptoms. The flutist loses weight and gets tired easily. Kaposi's sarcoma lesions appear as purplish spots on his face and genital area. He develops a chronic respiratory infection, forcing him to take a leave of absence from the symphony orchestra. Rainer will never return from this leave of absence.

Perry is sentenced to watching the love of his life die slowly and miserably for many months. At night, Perry dreams about stabbing the anonymous hook-up man in the bath house from behind and taking the same knife and stabbing Rainer in the heart. Both men drip black blood. His dreams have turned from beautiful scenes symbolic of the symphony music he listened to so frequently into a dark hell. He particularly experiences a recurring vision of *The Two Gentlemen from Verona*. "To die is to be banished from myself, and Rainer is myself. Banished from him is self from self, a deadly banishment!" He now believes his death is a metaphor for his banishment from Rainer.

In January, Perry gets a job with Cigna in Philadelphia. He is asymptomatic but can also maintain insurance since he never leaves Cigna. He moves from San Francisco, a changed man, but not for the better. He is deranged from the trauma of the past year and has dreams that Rainer knows he killed him. Perry is now angry at God, and at night has recurring nightmares where his heart bleeds black from the knife wound. This mental state results in Perry going on a sex bender, infecting many unnamed men as a way of lashing out at his cruel encounter at the bathhouse and God's gay curse.

Perry can be seen on Delancy Street at night, picking up men cruising the Rittenhouse Square area to hook up. Cars drive by the well-known blocks haunted by the footloose and slow down. Glances and head gestures are exchanged, and the driver opens the door or passes

until another car comes by. The dance goes on into the wee hours of the night and is almost always the same game with a different person.

Online bulletin boards are now becoming mainstream. There is a bulletin board conversation for everything, including gay hook-ups, and there are choices for all types of sexual proclivities. Perry starts to think about dabbling in erotic asphyxiation sex. He is cautiously intrigued due to the intense pleasure it promises and because he may have a death wish from his guilt.

One night in late February, Perry makes a date on an online bulletin board to meet a man at the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel for breath play. He arrives in the lobby early and waits for his hook-up. The man will be dressed in a black leather full-length coat, boots, and a Fedora hat, making it easy to identify him in the big lobby. Upon arrival, the hook-up is a handsome Russian KGB operative look-alike.

Perry is pleased at what he sees, so he waves, and the man approaches him. "Hello Perry, I am Boris, and you are *hot*." "You are also easy on the eyes if I don't mind saying. I like your dark attire." Quickly shaking hands, Boris's gloves still on, they make approving eye contact. Boris, "I will go pay for the room at the desk. While I check in, would you go up to the bar and order a drink? I will meet you when I am done." Perry, I am up for a Stoli on the rocks. What do you want? Boris, "I'll have the same, since that goes with my attire." Perry, "I will meet you at the *rendezvous* point."

The drinks are served as Boris enters from the hotel lobby through the door to the Palm Restaurant bar. Conveniently, there are two stools available, and Perry is sitting on one. The bartender hands Boris his drink. The pair exchanges small talk to further spark the connection. Perry buys a second round.

While the bartender is serving the other side of the bar, Boris says, "Have you ever done this before?" "No, it is a fantasy of mine about to come true, I hope." "I have done it several times, and it is the best orgasm you can imagine if you take it right to the limit. Would you mind if I did you first?" "Sure, just let me know what you are doing, so I can do the same for you." After the second drink, they take the elevator to the room.

Once in the room, Boris throws his hat on the dresser, takes off his boots, and puts his Jacket in the closet. He takes out a black leather hood and a Sony Walkman, which he switches on to play sultry music. Perry produces a small tube of KY jelly. He places it on the right nightstand and slips off his shoes.

Boris comes around the bed and approaches him from behind, gently wrapping his arms across Perry's midsection. Perry pushes Boris's hands down to his zipper. Boris removes one hand from the embrace and pulls his shirt over his head. When both shirts are removed, Perry turns toward Boris and kisses him deeply. After a time, they both get naked. Boris massages Perry's shoulders to help relax him. Perry acknowledges he is ready by handing Boris the jelly.

"Perry, how long do you usually take to orgasm?" "About fifteen minutes." Boris gently places a black leather suffocation hood over Perry's head and lightly tightens the collar. They start at a slow rhythm to Ravel's Bolero playing on the Walkman. Rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat, art-a-tat, followed by the solo flute and piccolo exchange over the drum. Soon after violas and harp join the solo horn, the drum tempo quickens, guiding their rhythm. Cellos enter the mix, intensifying the interplay. Boris senses Perry is ready and asks, "Is it OK to choke now?" Perry gives him the thumbs up, and Boris pulls tight. Shortly after the choke, Perry screams in ecstasy, asking for more in a muffled

voice. Boris obliges, pulling tighter, but in a few moments, Perry goes limp.

Boris loosens the collar and tries to revive Perry in vain by pounding his chest violently. Tired, he lies beside Perry, weeping and staring at the ceiling in shock, wondering what the police will think and what the situation could do to his career. When he finally removes the mask, Perry's eyes are still open, staring blankly. Boris gently shuts his eyelids with his index finger.

His heart starts to race, and he has trouble catching his breath, as a sharp pain pierces his chest. Sweat begins to glisten from his pores. Sensing impending doom, he hastily thinks about his next move. He remembers paying cash for the room. Boris was an alias anyway, and he had the brim of his hat down at check-in for discretion. So, the Font Desk Attendant did not get a good look at him. Because he never came, there is no DNA. His breathing and heartbeat begin slowing down.

Boris thinks they have the room until late the next morning, and he could discreetly exit the hotel and leave Perry for the maids to discover. The hotel will never know there were two guests in the room and will therefore assume it was a suicide if he leaves Perry's belt around his neck and takes the hood.

Working methodically, Boris wipes every surface he has touched. He takes the hood, loops Perry's belt around his neck, pockets the lubricant, and slips down the fire stairs before dawn.