

The Fifth Ivy

“Look, there’s something really big in the water out there!” squeals the blonde-haired nurse, but she isn’t fooling anyone in the ICU. This includes Mom and Dad who are not impressed. They stand beside my bed looking down at me. Mom on my right side holding my hand. Dad on the left, bunched beside the medicine bags and I.V. machine. Angel guardians, the two of them, standing vigil. It has been a very long day. The past few hours have involved a rather complicated procedure to correct several abnormalities in my brain. “Rather complicated” might be an understatement. Maybe, I don’t really know.

My doctor says the brain is so complex that it largely remains a mystery to the medical world and that they never really know how it’s going to react in any given situation, that each situation is unique.

Prior to the surgery, I pictured in my mind the stretching of the scalp, the cutting of the skull, the manipulation of the brain tissue. Now that all of this is done the back of my head feels like a sea of large, churning objects.

The nurse looks away from the window and turns her attention to me. “How are you feeling, Clay?”

“Mm.”

“Just remember to breathe. You been out for ten hours so it’s important to remember to breathe. When you have been out that long sometimes your brain forgets.”

My doctor comes in at that moment.

“When do you think he can come home?” asks Mom.

“It’s hard to say right now. Maybe Monday depending on how well he does this weekend. I’ll be in Sunday afternoon to

check on him and make a final decision then.”

Mom asks a big grabbag full of other questions and finally stops, apparently satisfied for the moment. The doctor leaves. And because visiting hours for family are over in the ICU, Mom and Dad leave soon afterward as well.

“All right, young man, I’m going to hook you to some stuff that will help you sleep.” The nurse fiddles with the machine. “Then you’ll understand...” I am obviously susceptible to this stuff because that is the last thing I hear before I am off to dreamland.

In the next moment...

I was in a cell. The cell was almost bare except for a toilet, sink, mirror, and bed. I was already standing in front of the mirror. I stared at my reflection.

There was a knock at the door. Without waiting for a response, a man opened it. “Hurry up, your appointments in 15 minutes on the dot. On the dot means on the dot.” So I finished. There was not much I could do in the way of grooming with only a washcloth hanging over the side of the sink and a toothbrush and comb sitting on the other side. I gave myself a quick sponge bath. Then I noticed a strange tattoo on my neck. I leaned toward the mirror for a better look. In bright red ink were the numbers 76001120666.

I shrugged and donned the black suit and shoes that were lying on the bed because I assumed these were the clothes I was supposed to wear. I exited the room and passed into a long hall. The man was sitting behind a desk. He looked up from a ledger when I appeared. He pointed down a long silver hallway, “Hurry.” Everything had a cold metallic look to it. As I passed down the hall, I encountered a line of gaunt men and women and children in similar black suits sitting on silver chairs against one side of the hallway. On the opposite side

was a line of evenly spaced white doorways. Above each of these was a long, thin screen. And above each of these screens were small signs. Above the first doorway, "a-c," the second doorway, "d-f," and so on. I stopped in front of the "g-i" door.

No sooner have I sat down then a woman in a black suit exited "g-i" with a folder. She left. She did not look happy. Neon green digital lettering appeared. "Occupant 76001120666 may now enter," said a slightly robotic female voice. My memory usually isn't that great, but somehow, I remembered that tattooed number on my neck as clearly as if I had photographic memory. I stood a little unsure, hesitating.

"Next!" yelled an impatient and very human voice beyond the still open door. I entered a small, cramped, and stuffy office that seemed very out of place here. A man in a faded brown suit sat behind the desk. Directly behind him was a door to another room.

"Have a seat," he said as he dug out a file from a box beside his chair. He plopped the file on his desk and flipped it open. He was one of the most bored characters I have ever seen. He sighed. "Okay Clay Ivy, what do we got here. Clay Ivy. So Mr. Ivy," he looked directly at me, " ...where are you?" At that, I fell into a slumber where I sat.

When I opened my eyes

I was lying flat on my back staring up into a clear, blue sky. The bluest blue I've ever seen. I got to my feet. An appraisal of the immediate environment showed nothing. Literally nothing. I seemed to be smack in the middle of an orange, empty desert. The earth was so dry it was cracked, but it really wasn't hot. In fact, there was a cool breeze blowing from the west. That is when I saw that in the far distance in that direction there was a large body of water. I blinked.

When I unblinked...

I was back in the office with Brown Suit Man. He acted like nothing at all amiss had just happened.

“Alrighty, this is your resume. Not much to it. Order picker.”

“Highschool job. Greenhouse.”

The man grunted. “Is that why it says ‘works at a greenhouse during high school’?”

“Er.”

He threw the folder in another box. “Come closer.”

I got up and approached the desk.

“Lean over the desk toward me.”

I leaned over the desk a little.

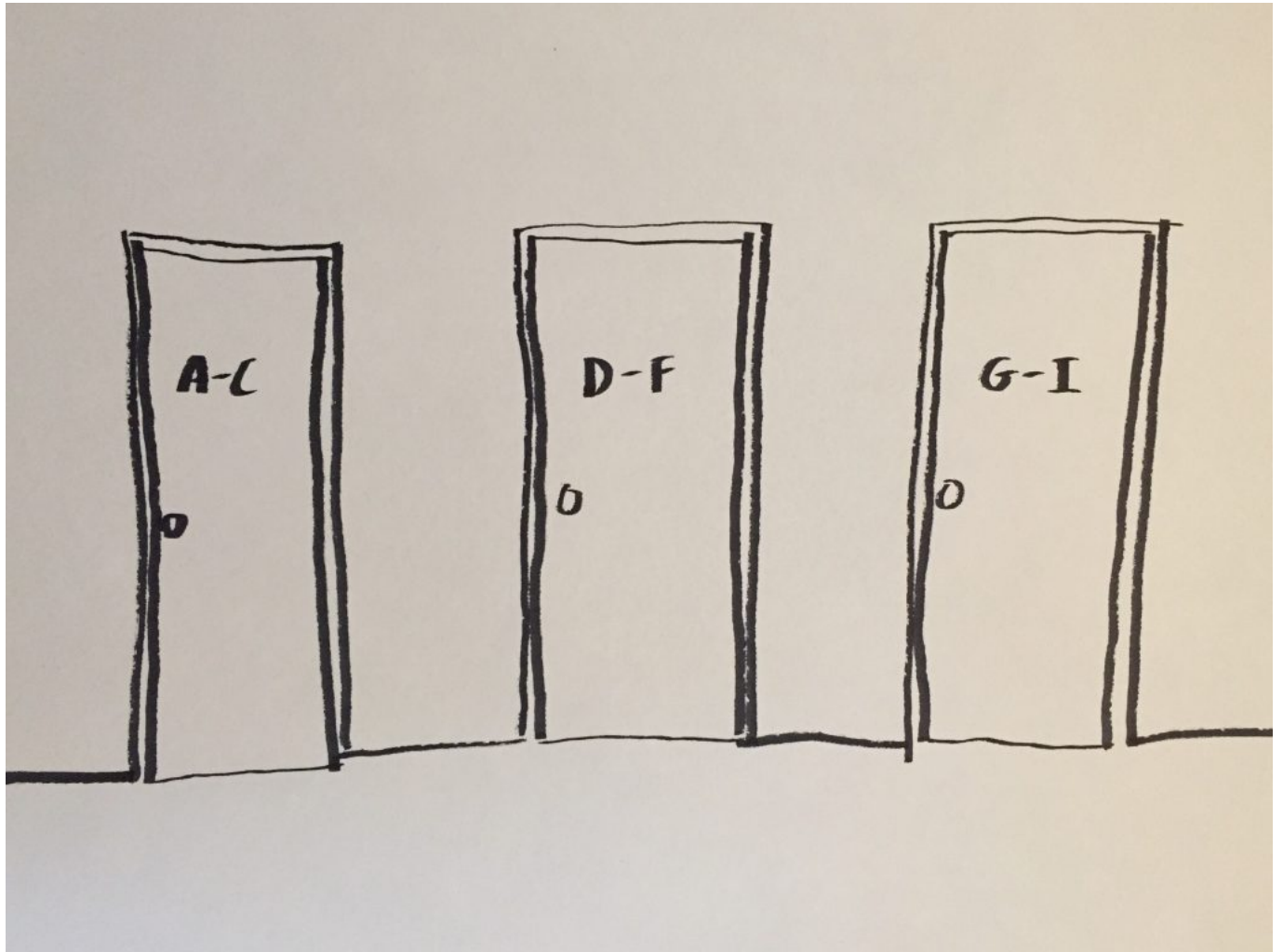
“Closer.”

He did this until we were practically face to face. He placed two fingers on my neck. He glanced at the fresh tattoo grunting approval. “Okay, stand up straight.” He fingered through a stack of debit-like cards and handed me one. The front of it bore my name and number. “Guard that with your life and carry it with you at all times. I repeat, don’t lose it.”

Brown Suit Man checked his folder again. “For now, I’m placing you as an assistant.”

“An assistant? An assistant to whom?”

“To whom, to whom he says, so correct. That would be Francine Verom. You will be her assistant. Ahhh, Francine, our very own in-house curmudgeon. You shall see right about now.”



I blinked and suddenly

I was back in the orange desert. This time the blonde-haired nurse was there.

“Look” she said pointing into the distance.

“How did you get here? Where are we?”

“Look where I’m pointing.” She pointed in the direction of the water in the distance.

“The sea over there? That’s a sea, right?”

“Yeah. That over there is where a hospital sits. Your hospital. By the water. You will be a patient in that hospital and I am your nurse. We won’t find it there, but it is there at another time.”

“Will be, right?”

“Will be, are. Both, in a way. We’re there right now in the future—the real future. And in the real future beyond that, you are 706001120666 and I am 55924319666.”

I blinked and then...

I was back in the office with Brown Suit Man. He coughed and proceeded. “Remember that name, Francine.” The blonde-haired nurse rather unceremoniously burst into the room.

“Speak of the devil,” Said Brown Suit Man apparently unsurprised. “Francine,” he told me. “Clay will be your other assistant,” he told her.

Francine ignored the comment and me entirely, scanning the office. “This is disgraceful. Clean your office.”

Brown Suit Man just smiled.

Francine glared at him and abruptly departed. It seemed strange to me that she should enter and leave without really doing anything, but Brown Suit Man didn’t seem to care.

“Is she the boss?” I asked.

“She thinks so. Okay, Mr. Ivy. Take this folder. Tomorrow you’ll give it to the guys in the Medical Ward when you go down there. 7 a.m. sharp. They’ll put a sensor right about here.” He placed two fingers right below his left ear. “Only on you.”

“A sensor? What exactly is that?”

“It’s just a teeny tiny chip they put under your skin, so they can keep track of you. Nothing to worry about.”

“Everyone here has one?”

“Most.” Then he indicated the folder in my hands. “Tonight

you'll probably want to go over the rules and regulations of the place, stipulations and such. Okaaaay, have a nice day now."

I opened the door. Brown Suit Man was looking for another folder then added, "Oh, a piece of advice about working with Francine. She doesn't know as much as she thinks." I nodded. And opened the door.

I must have blinked

as I was passing through the door because I exited into the orange desert.

"So is everything clear now?" asked Francine.

"No, not even slightly."

"You know you're traveling from time to time to time, right?"

"Yeah, I figured that had something to do with it. What's to understand?"

"Well, it's complicated."

"Okay, well?" I blinked away.

When I open my eyes again

I am in my hospital bed. Francine, mom, and dad are standing on either side of my bed. My parents are overjoyed at my waking, but they are clearly drained. The calendar over the bed indicates that it has been almost three weeks since I first entered into the ICU room. I can't speak for some reason.

I am very drowsy and rest my eyes again.

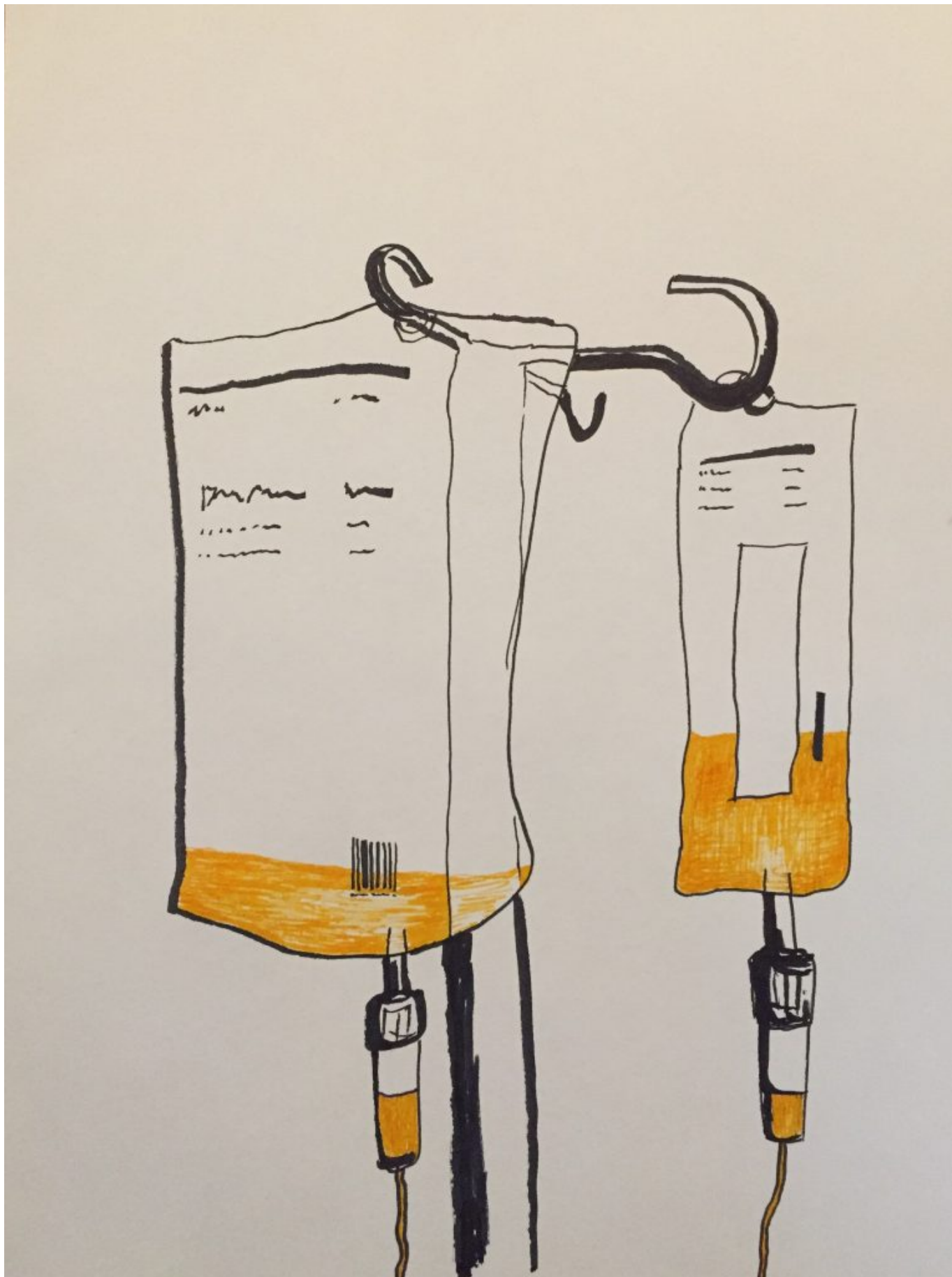
"His feet are really swollen," says dad, "I bet it feels good to have them rubbed."

“Surely it does,” replies Mom, “especially with your cold hands.”

“I wish he could tell me himself.”

“It’s probably best that we keep quiet for now anyway.”

Their words grow increasingly muffled. After a while, I open my eyes. Mom and Dad have gone for the day and Francine is there injecting a glowing yellow liquid into the I.V. machine. I am soon gone again.



I was still on the threshold of Brown Suit Man's door.
I turned to ask him what in the world is going on, but he is

looking for another folder and no longer listening. As I retraced my steps down the hallway, I heard the female robot voice saying "76001121666 may now enter." Francine was standing at the end of the hallway where it intersects with another hallway. She is looking at the contents of a folder. As I am about to pass her she mutters, "Do you understand?"

And then I am in the hospital. It is morning.

"Well. Morning!" says the doctor. I try to respond but I still can't talk. "Yeah, you can't talk right now. You weren't breathing real well so we put in a trach a couple weeks ago. Right now, you're breathing through your neck."

Dad holds up a cardboard cutout with the alphabet written on it. "I made this so you can say stuff to us. Just point out what you want to say."

"We have devices to make it easier to communicate," says the doctor. "But that's great for now, though."

"See this is the space button," says Dad pointing to a small space bar icon at the bottom.

WHATS GOING ON? I point.

"You had a brain surgery about a month ago and now you're just getting better," said Mom.

"How are you feeling right now, Clay? Do you have any pain?"

SCARED

"Oh, Don't be scared. We're right here," says Mom.

"And we're not going anywhere," adds Dad.

DONT TRUST ANYONE

"What do you mean?" says Dad.

I was getting frustrated. How could they possibly not know?
DONT KNOW WHO TO TRUST

“Really?” said Dad.

“Not even us?” says Mom.

“He may be talking about hallucinations and having strange dreams,” says the doctor. “It happens to brain patients. A lot of really strange stuff can happen when you tamper with the brain. It starts playing tricks.”

Mom took my hand and knelt face to face with me. “Clay,” she says with tears in her eyes. “You may not know what is real, you may not know who you can trust, but know that you can always trust God. He’s always real.”

After a while, they leave and I am alone with Francine. “Do you understand?”

No, I think, of course not.

She fiddles with the machine and I doze off again.

And then I returned to the orange desert.

Francine and I spent the next few hours journeying toward the water. I didn’t know why she was so intent on this, but it was water, which was better than a dry desert any day. When we got near the water which appeared to be a kind of harbor, we found there were steep red ridges bordering it. We carefully descended. As we did so, a gust of wind blew against us. I beheld that under the waters below swam the shadows of several huge creatures. When we were about halfway down we ventured alongside a narrow rock formation that jutted out into the middle of the harbor. Beside it was docked a large and very strange ship.

“Are we getting on that ship?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Francine sighed. “Sit down.”

“Where?”

“On that ledge behind you.” I sat down. “Okay, Clay...Where to start, where to start. Many years from now, a scientist, that man you just met—”

“That dude in the future in the brown suit?”

“That’s him.”

“He’s a scientist?”

“Yes. Anyway, the year after you meet him he will discover the secret of time travel. It’s through dreams. It’s all very complicated, really. Anyway, radioactivity is key. I won’t pretend to know everything about it, but he has brought it here to this time. He’s been back here numerous times in order to change the future. He will keep on doing this until he engineers a future that works for him. Making more copies of himself as he does so. Our task is to rid the ship of nuclear waste and end it.”

“Why? Why is that necessary?” It also occurred to me that if jumping to a time meant making another copy of yourself, this had to mean that there should be four of me here since I had been here four times now.

“It’s essential partly so our existence will remain on one line. You may not realize it, but he’s created a dozen alternate universes already and all of them are suffering from life-altering nuclear fallout because of his work. Enough chit-chat.”

We descended and boarded the ship. It was strangely noiseless

and seemingly deserted. We ventured to the middle of the boat where there sat many barrels of something or other. Francine walked beside me across the deck. "I've done this many times before. Just do what I do and you won't get hurt." I then wondered where all the other Francines were.

"Where are the other mes and all the other yous?" I asked.

Francine did not seem to hear my question. "Now listen, there's some stuff you have to do if you don't want to fall into the nuclear waste. But, like I said, you'll be all right if you just do what I do." As we stood speaking the floor in front of us began to lower until the barrels disappeared. In its place was a boiling, glowing, steaming pool of liquid fire. The pool was at least 40 feet from side to side. I was hesitant. "Francine, that guy in the brown suit told me that you don't know as much as you think. What exactly do you think he meant by that?"

"He said that?" She thought. "Well, he clearly knows I'm on to him."

Francine got a good run at the pool and suddenly jumped. She almost floated over the pool in slow motion. She gracefully landed on a small ledge on the other side. And then I saw a door on that ledge that looked so familiar. She turned and cried something I couldn't quite make out. Then I saw what seemed to be human hands reaching up at me from the ooze. And for the first time, I also noticed a surrealistic crowd gathered around the gyrating pool, obscured by the murky fumes.

Francine was desperately shouting at me. I could not make out what she was saying. And then Brown Suit Man was standing beside me saying, "This is what I call the Pond of Lost Souls. See that ledge on the other side? You can get there. To cross it you just need to get a good run and then jump."

"Is that what Francine wants?"

“Yes, but she doesn’t want you to get to that ledge.”

I did not know why Brown Suit Man was apparently helping me. But I ran and jumped. Things looked great as I soared halfway across the pool. But then Francine spoke and I heard her as clearly as if she was in my head. “Oh, the futility of it all. I don’t think you’re going to make it, Clay.”

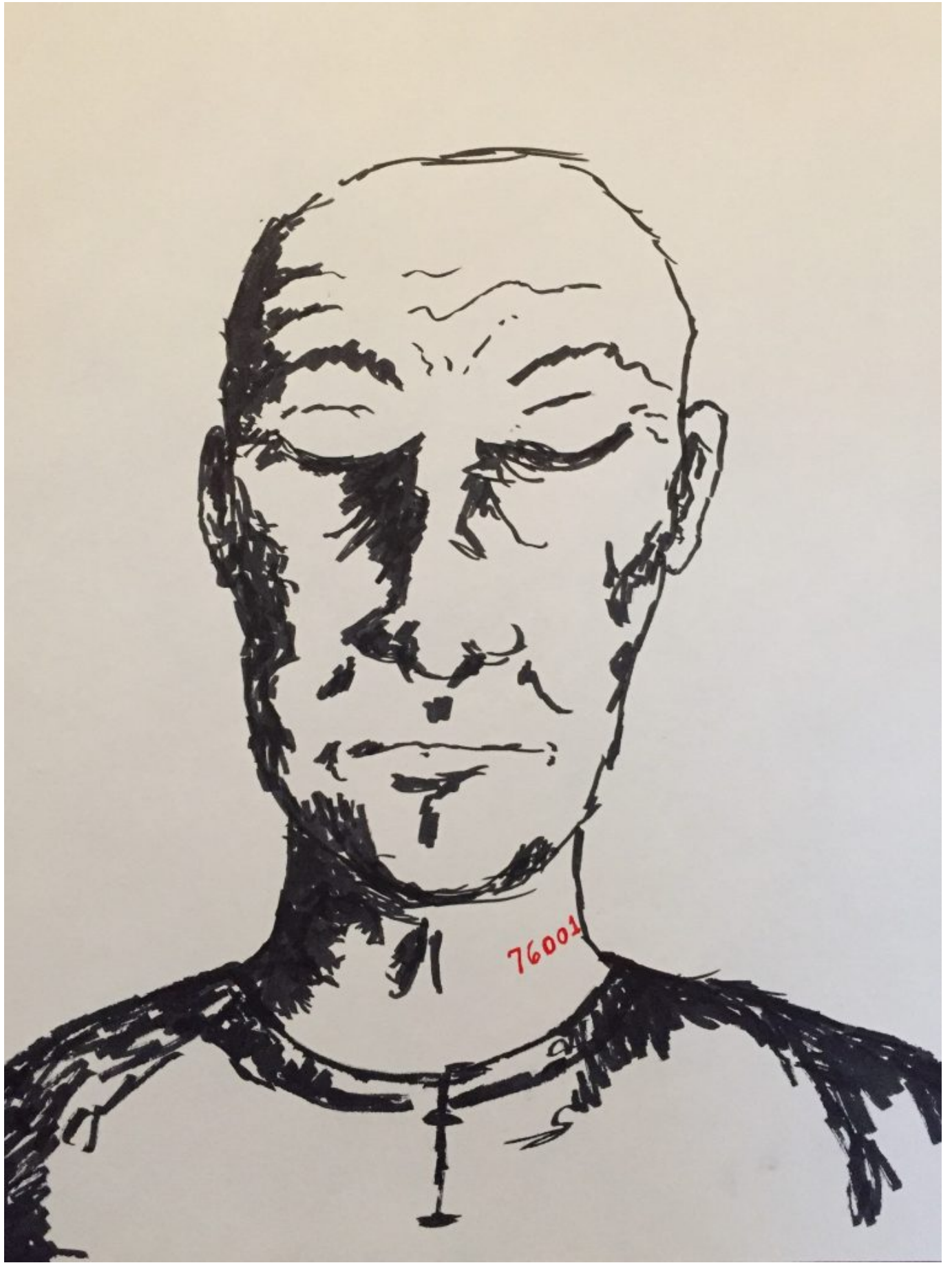
In my heart, I believed she was right. It was then that I slowly began to descend toward the glowing waste.

The still not quite seen surrealistic figures cried to me from the billowing fumes, “Clay, you have to believe!”

“Why won’t you listen to me?” cried one of the voices.

“It’s over,” I said giving up.

I slowly sank toward the fiery waste. Francine had gone through the door, thinking that I was no more, but Brown Suit Man and the shadows in the fumes continued watching, hoping. And it was surely mere seconds before entering its boiling depths that I saw that the fiery pool was inhabited by all manner of men and women and boys and girls. Then I understood. We had all been fooled, lured into Francine’s grand scam. I suddenly believed. And then I understood even more. I slowly began to rise.



And then I was walking down the hallway...

in what I believed was the far future. In the shining black mirrors of the flooring, the waves of the harbor crashed and the shadows of the enormous beasts swam.

I approached the doorway and knew, knew that I would find a former me talking to Brown Suit Man on the other side. I opened the door. Brown Suit Man did not seem surprised in the slightest to see me. The other me, on the other hand, was speechless.

"Ivy Number Four," he said in greeting. He indicated the me sitting in the chair, "Meet Ivy Number Two. I knew you would make it."

"Unless I miss my guess," I, Ivy Four, replied, "Francine should be coming through that door behind you."

"I know."

"And she says you're bad."

"I know that too...And while I did know you were coming, I am very proud of you. Very few make the crossing."

The door burst open and a smiling Francine entered. Behind her swirled the pool of fire and Ivy Three was slowly drifting toward the molten hands.

"Speak of the devil," Said Brown Suit Man. "Francine, Clay is my assistant now so you can keep your gloating today."

Francine glared at him and at both of me and abruptly departed the way she came.

"Leave the door open," he told her as she exited.

Francine's smile was long gone and then *she* was gone as well. She had literally vanished. Once on the platform, Brown Suit Man turned to me. "You can go now. Take the others with you."

The three of us stepped out onto the landing. Ivy Three landed beside us and did not seem surprised at all to see us.

"Where'd she go?" asked Three.

"Oh, She's off doing her thing again. Don't worry. She will be dealt with eventually."

"So, when exactly is this?" asked Four.

"If you're asking about a time, it isn't. There has been no time travel involved. Francine likes to make stuff up.

"So that copy thing she was talking about?"

"Not a thing. Not like she meant, anyway."

All three mes had so many more questions.

"It's time for you all to get going," said Brown Suit Man.

Together we ascended. As we did so we blended into one. The fiery waste swirled further and further below me as I continued to ascend. The wind blew across me as I soared over the strange ship, over the shadows of the large creatures in the water, over the orange desert. I passed silently across the sea to eternal safety.

A voice spoke to me in the wind. "Where are you going?"

"Home."

"Go."

"This has to be a dream. But even if it is, I will choose to go."

I am still very weak...

but feel worlds better. "Good news," says Mom. "The doctor

says we can take you home.”

I still can't speak.

“That's all right,” she said. “Just rest.”

“You need to fight this,” Dad said continuing to whisper to me and pat me on the hand.

“At home,” says Mom. I fall asleep.

When I awake, I am still in this literal state of being. A nurse who isn't Francine is helping me from a wheelchair into the waiting car as Dad helps.

“Everything's gonna be fine; you look great,” says Mom.

Soon we are moving away, away from the enormous shadows in the water, away from all Francines, away, away into an entirely new state of being. I believe, as Brown Suit Man would say, it is the fifth Ivy. As we turn a corner I see the looming hospital one last time. In an upper window, I see a figure in a brown suit staring down at the world. It may be my imagination, but I think he is smiling.

July, 2068 – Remembering the Writer's Flood of 2018

It came unexpectedly during a particularly stagnant summer. Some say that the writers were to blame, but there was actually plenty of blame deserved by a wide array of sources. It cannot be denied, though, that the writers got the whole catastrophe going that fateful day.

They were at a complete loss as to what to say. The lot of them gathered in the park banging their heads on the side of the huge Witty Tank of Words. From dawn till dusk, from dusk till dawn they beat upon its sides begging for it to relinquish its life-giving liquid of language and punctuation. No one noticed that as they pounded on its witty walls, periods and ellipses began oozing from its seams. The gathered writers began becoming alarmed when this slow ooze turned into exclamation points suddenly loudly popping out into the crowd with loud sounds like screams, howls, and yells.

Suddenly the witty sides of the tank burst completely asunder and all manner of verbiage and grammatical technicalities spewed forth, ensnaring even the hapless billions of longsuffering readers in chaotic waves.

The enormous blob of grammar that rolled through the middle of town was encased in every punctuation known to mankind. Surviving witnesses say commas, periods, semi-colons, jots, and tittles were apparently the most common. As the outer case of punctuation fell off, the alphabet of over 7,000 different languages shot through the gaps like water from fire hoses. The ultra-powerful streams felled a number of schools, libraries, and government buildings.

There was much carnage and mayhem that day, my friends.

There were many a run-on sentence that went on and on and on for miles, bewildering everyone.

One college professor was slain when a tidal wave of misspelled words fell on hees howze.

Three enormous waves of LOLs, JKs, and ROFLs slammed into the side of a car of a teenager who was texting while driving.

Tidal waves of a multiplicity of languages wreaked havoc in many different neighborhoods. One woman said ten strands of what she thought were Mandarin dialects plowed through her

garden. A family eating a picnic said a German stream plowed through the park, taking their bratwurst and sauer kraut with it. Two boys said they learned to count to ten in French after it floated down the creek in which they were playing.

Onlooking readers groaned as a wave of puns struck a chicken farm. It was poultry in motion.

Several writers drowned in an ever-deepening cesspool of commas.

More than a hundred fragment sentences streams. Just stopped mid-thought. In the middle of the street.

A steaming black mess of profanity in the form of @#\$%& streamed into the river, turning it as black as night.

At long last, an army of editors came in to save the day. It took them three months to clean up the mess. Even after most of it was cleared, all over town people were stuck to hashtags, question marks hung off the eaves of houses, nouns were smashed into verbs. It took a team of linguists a month to extricate a boardroom of council people from a congealed mass of really long, complicated sentences that didn't say anything.

In the end, most of the chaotic mess was dumped into the already blackened river. It would be over 20 years before vowels returned to its fsh and rcks.

As for the rest, the editors made a new, sturdier Witty Tank of Words. Only this time they called it Witty Tank of Wise Words knowing full well that that would fix the problem forever and for all time. (Sarcasm had been restored.)

The carnage was over, but the smell of newsprint and gigabytes lingered in the air for years. They say that sometimes during particularly stormy weather long dead languages and hieroglyphics still float to the surface of the raging river.

The Winter Journey

Day 1 – Departure.

The wind whipped with an urgency that had been absent the past few weeks. The cold worked its way through the air, seeking any exposed skin it could find. The winter had been long and surprisingly fierce, bringing with it a yardstick of snow. School had been out for what felt like months, giving the small town of Anson Cove a seemingly permanent air of celebration. As the breeze stirred a final, powerful gust, the tall traveler turned and gazed sadly at the small town that had been his home. Away in the distance, the enthusiastic voices of children ebbed and flowed in song. They were singing to him. It was their goodbye – their farewell and well wishes for his journey north. He hesitated, attempting to convince himself that he did not have to go. Pushing those thoughts aside, he put his back to the voices and began to walk.

Day 2 – A new beginning.

The first day had been hard. Every step had been a battle. He knew it was the right decision. He knew he really had no other choice. That knowledge didn't make it any easier though.

After a full day of walking, he rose early and had put many miles behind him before the sun had made its bright and happy appearance. The day had dawned golden and clear. The air was still cold, but that was no problem. In truth, he loved the cold and could have lived in this chill forever. Today would be better, he thought. He lowered the bill of his hat to shield his eyes from the wind, and plowed ahead through the mounds of snow that lay before him.

Day 6 – Music in the night.

Winter's end was imminent. He could feel the warmth working through his limbs as he made his way along the forest path. Even now, in the dead of night, the cold was less than it had been a few days ago in the full heat of the sun. His options were few. He had no choice but to press on and make it north. He had no choice but to keep going. He sang that night, trying to push away the fears and the doubts that filled his mind. His friends from Anson Cove had taught him a beautiful song, so he sang it loud. His lonely voice filling the woods with melody.

Day 14 – The harsh truth.

Winter was dead. He knew that could only mean one thing. The realization that he would not make it north filled him with a sadness so deep he struggled to keep moving. As far as his eyes could see, the snow was melting. Little green shoots of grass poked their way through the blanket of white, reaching desperately for the sun. The forest animals were busy now. They flitted and crawled, jumped and chattered in, around, and on the trees. It was everything he could do to keep moving. He felt tired and weak. His hat kept sliding down his head, moving with the moisture on his brow. This trip had taken its toll and he had lost so much weight. Desperate for rest and shade from the sun, he crawled beneath the canopy of a giant, weathered oak tree. The bark was rough against his back, but the sun did not reach him here and for that he was thankful.

Day 22 – Despair.

It was over. His trip, which had begun with so much hope and

promise, was nearing its end. He would never make it north. The last week had been the most difficult of his life. He was deathly thin and pale beyond words. His face was white; whiter than the snow that sat in small little clumps that dotted the landscape around him. The plan had been a good one: Head north. Stay ahead of the spring. He had hoped the winter would last a few weeks longer than usual, seeing how strong it had been. Instead, the seasons had changed early this year, and that had made the journey north impossibly difficult. He had never planned a trip such as this and mistakes had been made from the very beginning. His friends in Anson Cove had done all they could to encourage him. Especially the children. But it had all been in vain. These would be his final days. He knew the truth of that deep down. With a final, stubborn surge of energy, he quickened his pace.

Day 23 – The end.

He had found a small outcrop of rocks the previous night that offered a cool respite from the heat. The view from his final resting place was breathtaking. The leaves on the trees were a brighter shade of green he had ever seen. The birds, in joyful abandon, chirped out to everyone who could hear. The grass swayed playfully in the gentle southern wind. The sun, in all its life-giving glory, beamed warmth and light in every direction. If this was the end, it was as good of an ending as he could imagine. That made him smile.

His body was spent and wasting away. It would not be long now. He sensed the final moments peeking around the corner, yet he was at peace, knowing that he had been blessed with a good life. He had made so many friends during his days in Anson Cove. Those children had welcomed him into their lives completely. He was their friend. Their tears as he had said his goodbyes broke his heart yet filled him with such courage and strength. He would miss them all terribly.

He could feel the tug of death and knew he had only moments left. He chose to greet it with a song. A song he had learned from the children who were his dearest friends in the world. A song they had written about him. Summoning the last stores of willpower he possessed, he raised his head and sang with all the joy and love he could muster, "Frosty the snowman was a jolly happy soul!"

The First Cousin of Introspection

Sometimes there are strange things that go down here on this green earth that seem logical at the moment but really aren't later on. Take the day I found myself. I have a friend named Ezra and a cousin named Sandra. They helped me that day. Mostly Sandra. Actually almost entirely Sandra. Truth be told, Ezra was mostly a useless element of this part of the story. There we were that day—the three of us—just standing on the lawn outside my landlord's house. Sandra had been "fixin'" to leave for the past half hour. We three stood there talking about everything and nothing.

"I don't really get the whole second cousins and first cousins once removed thing," I was saying.

"Okay, it's like this, we—you and I—we're first cousins, right?" said Sandra. "Now say you get married and have a daughter. I and that daughter will be first cousins once removed. Then when I get married and have a daughter—"

"What's the deal with you all only having only daughters?" asked Ezra. "I object to this rabid sexism."

“Just an example. Give him a boy, I don’t care. Anyway, if I have a daughter—or son—my kid and your kid will be second cousins.”

“What if you and I got married and had a girl?” I asked. “Would that make her my first daughter once removed?”

“No, that would make her your abomination once removed. Hey, look at that lady up there.”

My landlord’s neighbor stood on her upstairs balcony railing staring down at the ground as if there were no more tomorrow. Then she took a dive. She hit the pavement on her walk pretty hard and blood and brains splattered everywhere. There was little doubt that she was dead, dead as the proverbial doornail. The three of us gawked for what seemed an eternity. No one moved or spoke.

When the police arrived all three of us were still standing on the lawn looking like dazed idiots. I don’t know that by personal eyewitness experience. Sandra later told me that by the time the police arrived, she and Ezra had come back to reality and that in the fullness of time, the police briefly questioned all three of us. Sandra was just fine everything considering and answered the questions like a normal innocent bystander. Ezra threw up and then answered the questions between spitting out the bitter aftertaste. I on the other hand wasn’t talking. The investigating police guys thought that made me seem guilty of something so they hauled me into the police station. In the police interrogation room Sergeant McKenzie looked into my eyes. “Shock, that’s what it is, shock. Seeing a person kill themselves like that is pretty traumatic if you ain’t used to it.” So he took me to the hospital. A still shaken up Sandra and Ezra came with us.

At the hospital Dr. Bob studied me. “Hmmm, he appears to be in shock.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” said McKenzie.

"I just said he appears to be in shock. He's not really in shock, I don't think. He's almost in a deep state of introspection like he's thinking so intensely about something that...Has his family been notified and consulted?"

"He doesn't have much of any living family. Only his cousin. She's out in the waiting room. She and a friend were with him when the incident happened. There both pretty shook up to, but pretty much okay. I asked her if he had any preexisting conditions."

"Did he?"

"She said she's known him his whole life and he's never had much besides a cold now and then."

"M,kay. He seems fine. I think that case you were talking about just triggered something. Sometimes that all it takes to set something off. He'll be fine, though. I imagine the best we can do is just let him sleep it off." The two left.

My brain squiggled and churned. As I thought my thoughts, there were thoughts in thoughts and more thoughts creating periphery thoughts, and they chiseled out nooks of thoughts. I opened my eyes and there was my girlfriend, Peg. I frowned.

"What's wrong?" Peg asked. "Just rest for a bit. I think they want you to stay in bed for a while." She pressed the Nurse Call button. Momentarily a nurse came into the room.

"He's awake."

The nurse put her arm on my shoulders and gently forced me to sit on the bed. She held up three fingers. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Three."

"What's your name?"

I told her.

"What's your occupation?"

“Zoologist.”

“Zoologist? One of those people that works at the zoo?” said Peg.

“Well...there’s more to it than that, but sure. I’m a Zoologist. At least I want to work with animals. It’s always been kind of a dream of mine. Anyway, I think it’s time to do it.”

“You talking about what you wanted to do when you were a kid? I thought you were way past that phase.” asked Sandra.

“It just come to me all of a sudden that I need a big change, you know, for me.”

That is when I walked in the door. This other man, I instinctively knew he was me and that this other me was a zoologist. He swerved, dipped and zoomed across the room. Then he turned back and charged straight for us. Sandra and Ezra recoiled in disgust. This man who was me stopped and glared at the nurse who screamed and fled the room. You would think that someone would have come to see what all the hubbub was about, but no one did. I, the other man who I decided to call Bill, suddenly smiled and stuck out my hand. “Howdy, I’m a zookeeper.” I smiled back and shook his hand because I figured that was good enough.

“Why are you here?” said Sandra.

“Just accept it,” said Ezra. “We both of us are waiters, just waiters.”

“I think not. My brain waves declare it!” I, Bill, said.

“Sandra, Ezra, dudes, you’re embarrassing me. It’s not polite to embarrass a body in their own story.”

“Let’s just get you home—just you, just regular you,” said Sandra.

“Sorry, Bill.”

I, Bill, placed a “business” card on the bed. It was an index card with nothing on it but a penciled-in phone number. Mostly I, Bill, just got a kick out of it because it made me feel professional. “Call me.”

After everyone had gone, I got dressed. When we left the room the hysterical nurse was nowhere in sight and business was going on as usual. Bill was gone as well. In the car I brought up Bill and neither of them knew who I was talking about. For the next couple of days, the restaurant managerial staff where I worked let me recuperate because they thought I needed it. Little did they know that this would provide my story with yet another convenient plot device.

Ezra didn't cotton to my being off since he was the head waiter and therefore my boss—plus he knew I was just fine. And he was also jealous because he and Sandra had also been traumatized but didn't get any “recuperation” time off. He had mumbled that life was so bloody unfair and that a body that vomits needs to have some getting better time. Anyway, it was a relaxing two days. On the first day, I called myself, the zoologist who worked at the zoo. There was a momentary fumbling sound then my whispering voice on the other end: “This is Bill...Dr. Bill.”

“I can barely hear you. Are you sick?”

“I'm hiding,” I told myself.

“From who?”

“Sandra. She scares me.”

I blew a raspberry. “I just called to set up a time to come have a talky talk with the other protagonist of this story. At least I think you are. Sandra would say you're the villain or at best a rough-edged antihero. Sandra, sorry, but she will probably be there too.”

I, Bill, screamed.

"Bill?" I said.

There was only ranting, raving, and carrying on. "I think you fail to grasp the situation."

"What do you mean."

"Sandra. She made her position quite clear, you know, by her tone and stuff. Well, okay, you know where the zoo is?"

I said I did.

"You all can meet me at the possum exhibit."

"The what?"

"O-P-O-S-S-U-M. Don't forget that O. This is the American one. When you write it in your story, it will be acceptable just to say possum since many readers aren't familiar with the O thing."

"I am. I remember reading about those O's a time or two."

"They have a few at the zoo. Meet me there at, say, 10:00 in the morning on Friday. That's the day after tomorrow."

"It's a good thing you told me that because I never learned the days of the week...Bill?" Too late, a dial tone. I was sorry he hadn't heard my sarcasm. I sat in a lot of empty space which typically isn't good idea to have for a long time for a good short story. That's what happened though. I can't deny that. For the rest of that first day and all of the second day, I watched a whole passel of nature shows. Bright and early on the third day, Ezra personally drove me to work.

I scoffed. "Well this isn't gonna work." He looked at me and smiled but didn't say anything. Five minutes later we were standing in the grille area. I was not happy. I was so upset that some might have a bunch of curse words here, but I don't curse at all so I'll just do a string of exclamation points:

!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Ezra balanced a tray on two fingers and spun it around like a basketball. "This is a tray. You put food on it."

"I know how it works, but thanks."

Sandra—the night manager—came in and asked us if we were getting to work or just planning to sit on semi-colons, and also to say she was about to be sign out since the day manager was in. Ezra just looked at Sandra and smiled.

"Fine. Later suckaaaaas," Sandra said. I don't know why she said that since typically I don't make characters say uncharacteristic things for them and that is uncharacteristic for her. Anyway, at that moment, Shawn, the day manager came in.

"Hey!" Shawn said loudly. He was short and talked really loud to make himself look taller and meaner. "There are more tables out there! Go!" I couldn't help but notice he was also using exclamation points proving that we really did have something in common after all.

"Sorry dudes—and dudette—can't do this anymore. Now, if you'll excuse me I gotta meet someone in a couple of hours." I rudely brushed past Shawn. Sandra and Ezra followed. We exited as three busloads of hyper kids on a fieldtrip entered the lot.

"So you're quitting just like that?" Sandra asked. She tried to snap her finger but it just thudded. "When you write your story I better be really snapping, you here?"

"Just like that, I'm quitting just like that." I snapped in her face. "I've found myself, Sandra, Ezra. It's the new me."

Sandra jerked her head. "You were saying you had to meet someone. Who?"

"The new me. You remember that guy who you didn't like? In the

rough draft he was in a helicopter but I changed that because it was so stupid and it never happened that way.”

“Dr. Bob?”

“It wasn’t a medical doctor. You know, that zoo guy?”

“Ugh, still?”

“Thought we’d seen the last of him,” said Ezra. “Course villains usually don’t go away unless you kill them. There are exceptions, though.”

“You know what? Forget it, go,” Sandra said.

“I’d go with you but I’m keeping my job,” added Ezra. “You can take my car. Just pick me up at four,” added Ezra.

“Roger.”

“And another roger”

“What?”

“Two rogers. Roger, roger.”

“Roger, roger.”

“Anyway, I hope you find whatever it is your looking for.”

“It’s probably best you don’t come, Ez. At the beginning I said you were mostly a useless element of the story, anyway.”

“Wow, thanks. Who needs enemies when you got friends, know what I’m saying?” After a miffed Ezra had gone, Sandra sighed. “Get in. I’m coming with you.”

“You’re a champ. Told Bill you’d probably be there, anyway.”

For the next couple of hours, we hung out at a restaurant across the street from the zoo. Twenty minutes or so in the three busloads of kids pulled into the zoo parking lot.

“I am so glad we’re not there yet,” said Sandra.

At 10:00ish I was looking for the possums with an O. They were inside the marsupial house, which was empty and pretty dark and crammed full of mysterious question marks. The horde of kids hadn't come yet or had already left. I spotted myself standing beside a window looking at the ugly little guys—the possums, not the kids. I walked behind myself, reading the information sign aloud: “Opossum. A nocturnal marsupial found in certain parts of South, Central, and North America.”

“Masterpiece of a description, don't you think,” I, Bill said. “I wrote it myself. Not really, but I plan to. I do plan to. If I weren't a fictional character. That's where you come in, Mr. non-fictional character.” The both of me stood watching the small beasts for a few minutes.

“I half expected to find a screaming horde of school kids in here,” non-fiction me said.

I, Bill, finally sighed. “I need to tell you the rest of the story.”

“The rest of the story? What story? You haven't told me anything.” I scoffed, smiled and looked at Sandra for approval of my contempt. She was ignoring us and just watched the possums with a scowl.

“I'll tell it now.”

“Go to it, Paul Harvey.”

“It all started just this morning. That's when I became a fictional character” I started. “And that's when I saw a lady kill herself. It's not like she was my best friend or anything. We had talked though, definitely talked and flirted and all that. She made me brownies now and then. We would sit on her steps and talk about Lost and Seinfeld. Never really got around to all the romantic stuff, though. Anyway when I saw her all dead and head all bashed in, it really did something. I had always banked on there being more time and I didn't expect there to be no more time, ever, you know. I

didn't expect there to be a time when I didn't have a choice in the matter."

"So now what happens?"

"Now that you found me, we walk away as one and you are me. The ending of a book and beginning of a new chapter."

I thought about this. "Is this a joke?"

"I'd say so," said Sandra. "Your making your readers think there is someone else there when really it's just you."

"But I've always said he's just me."

"Listen, this other guy—"

"Bill."

"Bill. He's not you. You are you. Maybe God wants you to be a zoologist, I don't know. I just think you're trying to force yourself into something else and you need to stop and think about it and you need to mull it over and most importantly practice some wise and godly discernment."

"Wow. That was a long and awkward sentence. Probably a run-on and needs to be separated into at least two sentences, maybe three or four."

I, Bill, stared at the possums with an o. "So how about it?"

"I don't know. Sandra makes some good points."

"Look," said Bill. "I know you're feeling scared and a little unsure that you're doing the right thing. This is what's right. Right for you."

"That last sentence was a fragment, but sometimes fragments are good and effective writing devices so I'll allow it." I watched myself. Sandra looked at me partly as if I'd gone mad, mostly with pity and love. "You know life is more important

than knee-jerk reactions, right.”

“Did I say otherwise?” I said.

“No, you felt it, though, gotta agree with Sandy there” I, Bill, said. “And that’s just fine, just thinking about your situation and how you might improve it. That’s what I got to do, myself, change right stinkin’ now and I’m not even gonna put a period after this because I’m such a rebel”

Sandra grabbed my head and turned it towards herself. “Right now, I know that you may not know what to think and you may not know what’s real. You’re my cousin, Dennis, my one and only living relative and I would never lie to you. You have to think of more than yourself. Changing right now just won’t work. And if you don’t believe in me or anyone else, believe that God will help you to think it out.”

The both of me were uneasy. I looked at the ground, closed my eyes tight, then I looked at Bill. He was gone with every noun, verb, and adjective that constituted his existence. Sandra and I and the possums with an O were alone. We weren’t yet out of the marsupial house when Sandra said, “I’m glad that’s all done.”

“You have no idea. The plot almost got sidetracked. Back when we were at the hospital, I imagined myself a girlfriend named Peg for a little bit.”

In later years I became a writer/teacher and married a girl who wasn’t named Peg. And Ezra did achieve meaning to this story by marrying Sandra and making me lots of first cousins once removeds who grew up with my kids, their second cousins, and joined forces to save the world.

The Reclusive Possum

The narrow window was level with the turf. Paul found himself staring out of this window because he was bored, bored, bored. He watched a squirrel hop across the grass toward the surrounding wood. The little creature was as confident as if he was on his neighborhood sidewalk. Step on a crack and break your mother's back, he thought for it. He coughed and sat up straight. On the chair beside his desk was a gigantic stack of Bro. Ross' books Paul had read at least a dozen times each.



The bored reader sighed. After a mighty stretch, he sighed again. And went to his own small bookcase beneath the narrow window. He brushed his hands over the dusty tomes. It often gave him comfort, and sometimes inspiration. But not now. Both were a no-show. Mostly. He still felt some pride in them. Paul was proud of the books he still owned. Among these top-tier items were his near complete collection of C.S. Lewis and

J.R.R. Tolkien works. All of this was a bit too bookish for a boy of 21, he knew that. Until two years ago, he'd spend most of his time that wasn't studying for college or working to pay for it in front of the T.V. or computer.

Through the small overhang beyond the window, he saw that the wind had picked up and was blowing across the field. He could see the squirrel making a mad dash to a tree as the rain increased. Surprisingly, the usually graceful creature stumbled at the roots, falling and hitting his head rather hard on the trunk. Like a champ, he regained his composure and proceeded to the dry safety of a secret tree-cave in the branches. Except for the clumps of grass, the field was now relatively empty.

He knew that Bro. Ross would be coming soon. It was unfortunate, because the man did not like Tolkien. Paul didn't cotton to folks who didn't cotton to Tolkien. Kidding. Bro. Ross was just fine for an older fellow. And he still had a very good library of books. He even had a great collection of 23 versions of the Bible, most of which he read every week. Paul had always looked up to him. Plus, he was in charge.



Everyone here took turns working in pairs to do necessary tasks. Today he and Bro. Ross would be doing something—he didn't know what it would be, but he definitely knew it was something because that is what it always ended up being. The dreaded "knock" rapped against the hollow door. Bro. Ross and his ancient face was behind the knock.

"Now before you say anything, anything whatsoever," said Paul, "know that anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law."

"I'll take my chances. You smell that smell?"

"What, the smell of something dying? I assumed it was you."

"That smell, my young friend, is a dead possum in the basement. You think it smells bad here, wait till you get a whiff up close and personal."

"I don't think so. I'm staying as far away from that odor as possible."

"No you're not. It's our turn. C'mon, it's in the basement, won't be that big a deal." Without waiting for a reply he turned and headed down the hall.

Paul followed. "Seriously, though, it's been smelling up the place for several days and we're the ones who have to do something about it?"

"To tell you the truth, some of us couldn't really tell. I definitely couldn't. Horrible sense of smell."

"I've still complained. I never would have thought that was dead possum smell. Smells more like old sewage."

"Nevertheless, I Didn't really smell it until I checked the furnace in the basement a few minutes ago. Holy cow, it stunk down there!"

"Ah, the epicenter, as it were."

"Epicenter. Fancy words for a teenager. That's why just reading books is not such a bad thing."

As they passed down the dark and rusty hall, a door opened. Jason poked his head out and set a box beside the door.

"I'll be taking this to the kitchen." In a previous life, Jason and his wife, Jennifer, were clearly a well to do middle aged couple. Paul knew this because after evening church service they had often taken him and other congregants out to an amazingly nice restaurant and out on the town—their treat. One time they had taken a short flight about the city on their private airplane as they watched the Super Bowl. Paul wasn't sure how they coped with these new conditions, but it was what it was and they seemed relatively content.

Bro. Ross told him what they were doing, about the dead possum and all that. "Just a sec, I'll come with you. I want to see

this thing.” He went back in to tell his wife and then the three headed downstairs. Bro. Ross urged him to bring his box. On the way down, Bro. Ross thrust his forefinger into the air with exaggerated drama. “Hear this, hear this now: And we shall love the pursuit, and the pursuit shall be our own.” The other two laughed slightly, mostly politely.

“Kind of dramatic,” said Jason.

“What does that even mean?” asked Paul.

“That’s from one of my poems,” said Bro. Ross, “I’m putting it into the novel I’m writing. Pretty artsy, don’t you think?”

“Excellent,” said Paul. “You know who else put poetry in their stuff? Tolkien! You, my friend, are imitating the master.”

“Uh, no. I don’t imitate hacks.”

“Hack? I’ll show you some hacking.”

“Guys, guys, calm down. Just don’t waste too much paper, bro. Ross,” said Jason.

“You’ll be happy to know I’m not using any. It’s in my head.” Bro. Ross continued as if he had not been interrupted. “You might take it—my quote—in the context of the story. In the story it refers to the pursuit of truth. In the case of the guy in my story, a detective, it means discovering what you see as not true be actually the truth.”

“That’s weird,” said Paul. “If it’s not true, it’s not true. Something that is not true can’t ever be true. That only works if you don’t believe in objective truth.”

“That also might work if you think something is true or not true, but actually turns out to be the complete opposite. That’s the angle I’m going for. None of that relativity stuff.”

"I see. That didn't seem right for a former pastor."

"It's good to clear up straw men like that. Otherwise, it creates friction where it's really not deserved."

"Well, aren't we a verbose bunch," Jason broke in. "Bro. Ross, don't talk about any more deep stuff right now or we'll never get this done."

Bro. Ross had his hand on the basement door. "Good idea. Okay, you guys might want to hold your breaths or hold your noses or something. It gets pretty bad from here on out."

"I hate holding my breath," said Jason. "Sometimes I get all panicky just thinking about it. I'm especially fond of air."

"Let's just be men about this thing," said Jason.

The three men ascended the basement stairs. The body of the possum lay at the bottom near the wall.



"Ah, the reclusive possum!" said Paul.

"Well, that's interesting," said Bro. Ross.

"What's wrong?" said Jason

"I could have sworn it was over by that wall. Anyway, hold your box so I can get this in," Ross commanded Jason. Just over the opening of the box, Bro. Ross slid the animal off the shovel. It somehow missed the target and fell with a plop at his feet. He screamed like a little girl and then laughed it off nervously. "That was a little startling."

Bro. Ross gingerly turned the animal over with the shovel.

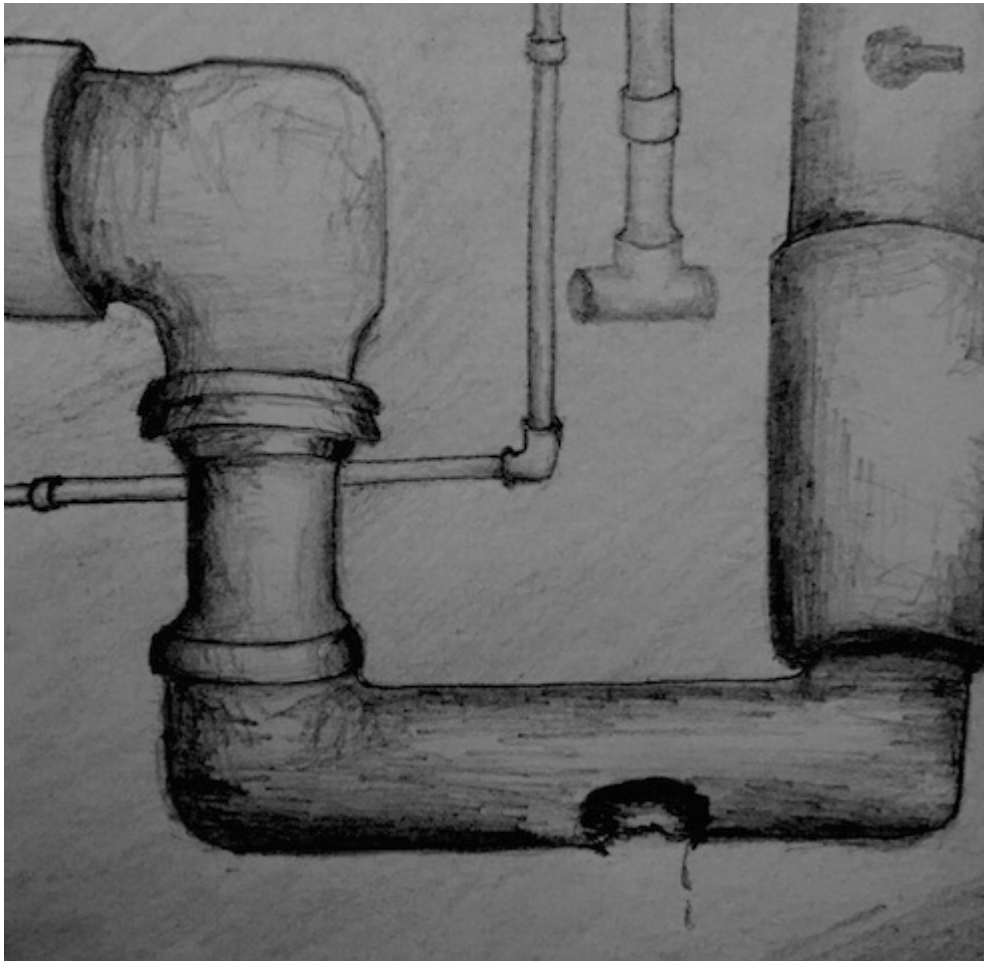
Paul and Jason shuddered at the sight of the razor sharp fangs and the cavernous mouth gaping up at them. They were both certain that at any moment the creature would come to life and tear the three of them to shreds.

"Watch it! Those things can kill a dog, you know," said Paul. "That is, live ones can. I have a really bad feeling it's not exactly dead."

"Just mostly, dead, right?" said Jason.

"I read that possum's do emit a smell when playing dead but the smell isn't all that bad. I think what we smell is that poop and urine trickling out of the ground over there."

"Yeah, it's the sanitation system. Some of the boys were going to check that out tomorrow."



“However you look at it, this guy’s one of the deadest things I’ve ever seen,” said Bro. Ross. He was frustrated and still embarrassed about his girl-scream.

“Look!” shouted Paul. The possum’s tail dangled out of the top of the box and swayed almost sentiently back and forth. It attached itself to a bedframe sitting against the wall. “You can’t tell me that that tail is attached to a dead thing.”

“I’m sure it’s just reflexes or nerves or something like that,” said Jason.

“Of course, that’s it,” said Bro. Ross. To Paul’s horror he raised the shovel and began pounding the tail. It soon uncoiled itself.

Bro. Ross ran up the steps and opened a rear trap door for Jason. Ross quickly opened the back door through which the

wind blew. They left the underground bunker.

“Go! Go! Go!” shouted Bro.

Paul held Jason back. “Listen, I’ve read that possum’s are super good at playing dead. I don’t know that this guy’s really gone.

Maybe we ought to—“

Bro. Ross and Jason both sighed heavily.

“Look, we’ll just put him in that big ditch in the woods,” said Bro Ross. “It’s not like we’re going to bury him. If he’s alive—which he’s not—he can always get out of the ditch as easy as you please.” The three walked through the woods. They all new exactly the hole Bro. Ross was talking about. It was actually an old trench dug by the enemy during the first war but long abandoned. Now they used it as a carefully disguised rubbish hole.

When they came upon the ditch there were two human bodies near the bottom: two soldiers. Soldier One had clearly stabbed Soldier Two to death. However, Soldier Two had also clearly not gone down without a fight. The other lay on his stomach near the top of the opposing edge of the ditch. A stream of now dried blood ran down to the bottom.

None of the three were all that surprised. It had been a week since they had heard a lot of gunfire and heavy artillery in the near distance. They all knew something was going on in the valley.

Bro. Ross left them. He walked around the hole and hunkered down by Soldier Two for a closer inspection.

“Yep, dead as a doornail, my friends. Got him right in the cheek. Went out the other side of his head. Must have bled out.” Then he walked a little further on to where the trees cleared and the descent into the valley begun.

"I'm just gonna..." said Jason. Paul released the box as Jason lowered and tipped it. The possum rolled to the bottom of the hole, its head nestling against the shoulder of Soldier Two. Then they joined Bro. Ross. Down in the valley was the scene of a battle: Uprturned earth, deep tank tracks, bodies, and many birds picking the scraps of the week-old battle victims. The once green valley was all decimated. Directly at the bottom from where they stood, the huge blackberry bushes where the group had spent hours was now lifeless, having been beaten into the ground by the rolling tanks.

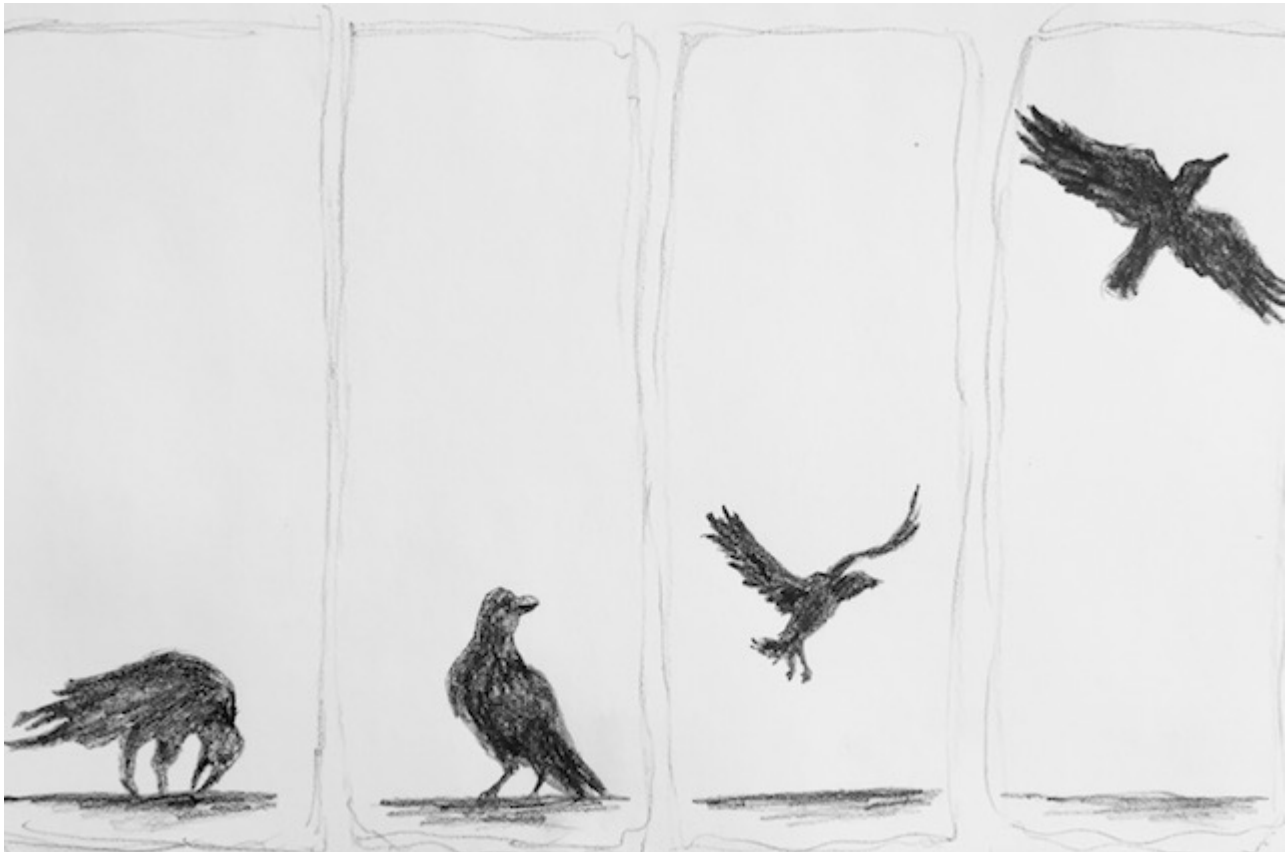
"Well, no more blackberries for a while," said Jason.

"Or ever," replied Paul. "There won't be anything left at the end of this war."

"Seventh war," added Bro. Ross. "Things are actually not all that bad, considering."

"That's easy for you to say," said Jason. "The rest of us? We've been going through an electronics hangover for two years. Two years! No computers, no T.V., no smartphones, no batteries...no airplanes. I really miss my airplanes."

Bro. Ross made no reply. The trio stood in silence for several more minutes. Then they descended into the reeking, war-torn valley to check for survivors. They looked for several hours. They found nothing except the birds and a few wild dogs eating the decomposing bodies.



"You'd think someone would collect their dead," said Jason.

"You'd think," replied Bro. Ross. "That's the way it is these days. No one cares about the dead, only the living. It may be risky, but tomorrow we'll plan to do something with them."

The three trudged up the hill. The two human bodies remain where they lay. The possum was gone.

"Guess you were right, Paul," said Bro. Ross. "Don't let it go to your head. C'mon, the girls will have supper ready soon."

"I guess there is hope," said Jason.

"Yeah, probably," added Paul. Paul imagined the possum crawling out of the ditch. It had splashed in the nearby pool and sloshed its way to safety. In his mind's eye it disappeared into the thick holly bushes that stood in its way. Something was resurfacing from the depths of his heart and mind, reviving. He felt that surely there would be a future

resurrection.