

Chad had momentarily forgotten the name of the trucker who picked him up, and once again reprimanded himself for it. It was a good thing too, because Chad was about six steps away from complete collapse. Spring had come early that year. The oppressive sun had begun to suck the life out of Chad about three miles outside of Bettertown, Georgia. Aside from the good fortune of a ride that didn't include the awkward "no oral sex or sex of any kind" conversation, Chad was treated to countless rock-n-roll stories from...

...Wayne - his name was Wayne.

Like a good deal of the truckers Chad had met on his journey, Wayne had a past. His past life as a roadie for countless screaming eighties hair bands included a lot of sex, drugs and debauchery. Wayne wasn't too interested in where Chad came from. Rather, he needed an inert audience who actually existed. Chad noticed that a lot of the people who choose the road often craved company.

Wayne was a large guy with a deep, booming voice. Actually, calling Wayne 'large' was being polite. He was a huge man - fat but also just enormous. His hands looked like they could crush Chad effortlessly. Chad couldn't be sure because they were both seated, but Wayne probably towered over him too. In his younger, thinner days, Chad could imagine the guy as someone suitable as a roadie.

"Them dudes in...what was the name...some sorta royalty sounding thing...?"

"Um...Cinderella?" Chad ventured. "No, Queen something or other."

"Nope. Ah, it'll come to me. Anyway, those boys were insane. Especially the guitarist. Dude got an inhuman amount of poon."

Chad silently winced at the word. It wasn't that he was adverse to colorful terms for female genitalia, but rather it was the way Wayne delivered the word. It was gross and creepy. Chad imagined Wayne's sex life was pretty barren. Poor guy.

Wait! Chad thought to himself. *I haven't gotten laid in about seven months either!*

The slow stab of pain in his jaw was getting better. After several hours of horrible spasms as the nerve grew back, the enamel wasn't so bad. The same process several months before had earned Chad a deformed canine. Reforming the tooth into something that didn't look like a jagged piece of broken bone took weeks. Wayne's stories of feminine conquest and the electricity of live music faded into a murmur as Chad's thoughts drifted.

About twenty years prior, Chad was enjoying all the irresponsible whims of a typical teenager. He only realized that in hindsight, of course. Chad also opted to conveniently forget all the times of misery and loneliness due to his father's nomadic nature. Frank Warner was a stubborn, yet intelligent man who died with a prominent beer belly and a head that was losing the battle with hair loss.

Chad's mother had died from breast cancer when he was a small boy. He felt fortunate for all his memories of her - memories unhampered by the Warner's sometimes turbulent marriage. Whatever his faults, Frank Warner loved his family, though he was never very accomplished at expressing it. His wife's death left a wound in his life that would never properly heal. Chad's memories of failed romances and near-misses at a new marriage were mixed in equally with thoughts of constant new surroundings.

New schools. New friends that never had a chance to gel into best friends.

Frank Warner's migration into the public sector earned him a substantial amount of money. The two-person Warner clan of Frank and Chad had settled into a humble house several miles away from the software developer his dad worked at. For the first time in his young life, Chad enjoyed stability.

He made friends, attended local heavy metal shows and lost his virginity. The Midwest would forever hold powerful memories - both good and bad. The euphoria brought on by vigorous sex with an orgasmic country girl coincided with the arrival of Jim. Jim Baker.

Jim Baker was someone Chad never liked. The closer his father and Jim were as comrades, the more he hated the man's presence. Frank Warner's refusal to find a wife led to assumptions in Chad's high school about



his father's sexuality. Jim and Frank's odd friendship (the two were hanging out together constantly for awhile) only fueled speculation.

Chad knew both men were hetero, especially Jim. The man had a carnivorous appetite that he would discuss constantly. Frank's attempts to bring Chad in as a third member of their drunken, overly intellectual Friday debates only drove Chad toward casual marijuana consumption. That was a drug that would shatter Frank's usual calm demeanor and transform him into a shrieking demon. Chad always found it hypocritical.

Frank and Jim's slurred words would tell stories of amateur archeology. Chad would tolerate these tales just long enough to allow a smooth passage into teenage Friday night hijinks. He despised Jim's thinly concealed jabs at Chad. It was hostile and childish, and Chad hated Frank's ability to chuckle it off awkwardly.

"So your dad and I are flying down route 20 screaming and celebrating. You don't know how large of a find this was! It was an original manuscript. The worth was..."

"Countless!" Frank finished Jim sentence, spilling a bit of his drink from the octagonal glass he was currently getting shit faced from.

"Yeah!" Jim cackled. "And halfway home we start to get in a fight about what we're going to do with it!"
Gawd damn, Chad thought he looks so much like Charles Manson!

"I wanted to sell it. Asshole here wanted to study it." Frank pointed a wobbly, accusing finger at Jim, who was standing in the middle of the living room narrating.

"We argued on the side of the road for hours. We were screaming - SCREAMING - at each other! Finally, out of total frustration, your dad here tears the book in half. I was fucking shocked!"

"The look on his face was priceless. You know that painting *The Scream*?"

"No," Chad shook his head. In later years the work of Munch would hold special meaning

"Well, then *Home Alone*. He was standing there with his mouth hanging open as I yanked the book out of its case and tossed him half the pages. Then I got in the car and drove off, spraying his skinny ass with dirt and gravel."

"You straight up left him?" Chad perked up, mopey hair hanging over his eyes. The countless round buttons advertising his taste in music clattered together on his blue jean jacket.

"Yeah!" Jim snarled in overexaggerated disgust. "I had to walk six miles to the next exit and saw the car idling on the side of the road with Frank standing beside it. He looked like he was going to kill me if I said anything, so I just got in and we drove all the way back to Illinois in silence." Jim let out a horse chuckle and polished off his scotch.

"So what happened to the halves of the manuscript?" Chad realized that asking what the manuscript actually would earn him another hour of celibacy.

The two grown men looked at each other for a long moment and then let out a wild chorus of laughs.

"I'm not saying where my half is because this jagoff would steal in."

"If I had to bet, you don't even keep it in the house." Jim teetered on his quest to the kitchen to retrieve more booze.

"Nope!" Frank called after him. "And I'll bust your wrinkly ass if you don't come back with the fuck'n bottle!"

Chad excused himself and walked through the clattering, broken screen door to enjoy an evening with his friend, Mark and his girlfriend, Amy. Mark usually ended up leaving in frustration when Chad and Amy's lust won over simple politeness. The 'bros before ho's' mantra kept Chad from slipping into a world with zero buddy interaction.

The three of them would wonder around the train tracks until dark. They would share liquor swiped from one of their collective parents and smoke shitty refer. Under the cool summer skies at night, Chad and Amy would share gut wrenching orgasms and talk about things that felt wise at the time, but were just silly and pretentious in hindsight. Chad had lost contact with them in the following years, but that night held a special



significance for him. It was his final night under the thin delusion of normalcy.

On Saturday, everything changed, and it changed explosively.

Chad's memories faded into a fleeting brush with sleep. He woke up to the here and now. Bright streamers of light and the steady thump of tires on asphalt jarred away his sleepy memories. They were in Atlanta. The city looked beautiful at night. It was alive with speeding banners of light bounced from glimmering, octagonal buildings.

"Sorry I dozed off, man." Chad struggled upright.

"Ah, it's cool. Ah'd probably put a glass eye to sleep!"

"Not that," Chad's voice sounded thin and weak. "I was just so tired from walking in the sun so long. Spring feels early this year."

"Tell me about it," Wayne sipped at his cola - the seventh can of empty calories that day.

Chad braced himself and took a deep breath. Wayne's stop was in the industrial district. If a city were a living entity, then the industrial district was a spot of cancer. Seedy strip clubs and massage parlors interrupted the depressing concrete cubes of brown and gray office buildings. There were about six fast food places along that stretch of road. At night it was a very dangerous place to be wondering alone and almost penniless.

For Chad, alone and almost penniless seemed to be a recurring theme in life.

Wayne's charity seemed to be without a ceiling. Not only did he treat Chad to a round of beers and even a table dance at the closest strip club, but he also gave him forty bucks. He thanked the big man and vigorously shook his hand. From there, Chad's good fortune would need to be self generated.

The hotel next door was a dirt-caked shit hole. The rooms smelled of musty cigarettes and body funk. Mock orgasms, the drone of multiple televisions and the far off shouts of an argument drifted through drywall. Tonight Chad was treated to the steady drum of a hooker (his neighbor) taking a never ending train of cock. Her bed frame threatened to shatter from the motion.

"Oh....Ooooh...Oh....Oh," came her rhythmic chant. Her performance lacked any real passion for the art. It was laughable until Chad realized he was being kept awake.

His brainless member was standing at full attention as he laid in bed, clad only in boxers. The bedspread felt slightly moist and thoroughly revolting. On the television was some antiquated cop show that was interrupted constantly by fits of snow and static. Next door the hooker's john grunted and another \$250 was earned. Chad took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He tried to force his thoughts away from his current, sad situation.

He wanted something to drink or something to get him high. He wanted to bury his dick into some girl - any girl. But more than anything, Chad wanted to feel like he wasn't so alone in the world. The terrible claw of depression snuck up on him and took hold with monstrous force. He curled into a ball and groaned in misery, forcing himself to sleep among the acrid funk of the carpet and the noisy crackle of the

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The journey was meandering and Jim had no real clue where to go. That was becoming evident, as was Christy's increasingly pointed observations.

"You don't know where the FUCK you're going!" she shrieked, causing Jim to almost wreck the dirty earth-toned recreational vehicle. His foul mood has beginning to show in his driving as they took a corner way too fast. The bread box on wheels groaned and came heart-jarringly close to tipping over into a ditch. It had been at least half and hour since they had seen anything but swampy overgrown grass and trees. The smell of the



paper mill mixed with the sharp funk of marshes.

“Dammit, Christy! You’re going to make me fucking crash!”

They found themselves on a long stretch of road. It was the promise of farm land and sparse gas stations run by the scariest of red neck. At least that was Jim’s perception of the whole thing. Unfortunately, Christy and he seemed to agree. Jim fought back a sinister smile at the thought of the irony. *We just aren’t meant to get along!*

Then again, he could hardly blame her. Jim’s constant obsession with the End of Days caused him to be distracted. Distraction leads to a blurring of his focus. Chad was nowhere on his radar and after the previous nights sex, Jim had lost a bit of his edge. The fire in his belly seeped warmth into his face and hands. Jim Baker was turning red.

Christy scrutinized the pages of her sleazy gossip magazine. Her passive interest in Hollywood scandal was something Jim thought her above intellectually. It was an escapist avenue that granted them some valuable moments of silence, though. For a long stretch of that road, the only sound in the rusted r.v. were glossy pages whistling over one another. Finally, Christy stirred and took in a breath. *The strain was obviously too much for Chisty to bear!* thought Jim.

In actually, she had been spending the last fifteen minutes formulating the best verbal strategy.

“You know, when I said I’d go on this silly pilgrimage with you, I didn’t know you’d turn into an intolerable prick.”

“Yeah, I gotta say you’re not exactly a fucking day on the beach either, Sweetness.” His tone was even and punctuated by flecks of spittle. The bruise over his left eye from a fight several days ago with a man twice his size started to throb again.

The magazine took flight in a sudden flurry of motion. Jim fought to keep the vehicle on a straight trajectory as the toned abdominals and plump titties of Hollywood’s chosen flashed by.

“I gave up *everything!* My folks were right about you!”

Jim responded with a front kick to the brakes. He put his entire weight into the action. The r.v. lurched and send everything not secured in the back smashing forward with a loud clash.

“Real fucking mature, Jim! Give me whiplash and break all of our crappy shit! *You’re such a fucking asshole!*”

Her voice raised to a broken shriek. His right eardrum flinched under the assault. Christy didn’t give him time to reply. The skirmish continued in greater volume.

“*I can’t put pencil to paper any more around you!*” Tears were starting to well up in her eyes. I gave up school for you! I gave up *Everything!*“

In the midst of her outburst, the vision came to Jim with startling clarity. It pulled his senses North...and a bit West but way more North. Then came the sudden burst of euphoria and the touch of the *Bringer*. Jim pressed that name out of his mind. From what small information he took from their short interactions, He *hated* that name. In Jim’s mind, the Entity transcended gender. ‘It’ was too disrespectful.

Jim scurried out of his seat after a short battle with his seat belt. He frantically searched for the road atlas. Several pages were nearly torn free as he searched.

“There!” He grinned like a mad man and stabbed a skinny finger into the paper.

Jim stomped on the gas and the vehicle angrily leapt forward. Christy was pressed back into her seat with a surprised shout. A new stretch of morning silence was initiated. This time Jim spoke first.

“You hungry? I was thinking maybe Cracker Barrel.”

“Fine,” she spoke quickly. Some of the whip sting had gone.

Cracker Barrel, Jim thought to himself, always a *treaty*.

The unspoken Treaty of Cracker Barrel was that Christy could order anything she wanted on the menu. In turn, Jim was forbidden to comment on how wretched her order is or how fat her ass will get as a result of



consumption. So far, it had postponed many a heated argument.

Jim stabbed at his fried chicken salad and pretended not to be staring at Christy eat. The sea of brown gravy swallowing up two biscuits was enough to make him wretch. He hated the smell. He hated how she ate it. He hated the smacking, slurping sounds. The rage wanted to be let loose in a destructive tantrum. He imagined the very walls trembling with the release of energy.

I could easily do it! Jim thought, impaling a lump of greasy breast and spilling a cherry tomato's red intestines. *I could splinter the fucking floors and turned organs to jelly! I know the formula. I know how to amplify it. I know...*

"Are you okay?" Christy looked up from her meal, an uneasy look on her face as she studied her husband.

"Yeah, I'm okay," Jim gobbled up a limp piece of iceberg lettuce. "Just anxious to get back on the road."

A thin smile sliced across her face. It was that same beautiful, magical grin that made him weak with lust so long ago.

"You talked to *Him* again didn't you?"

"Briefly," Jim whispered, unable to conceal his own grin. His uneven teeth gleamed. "No words though this time. But I felt His presence! He told me to go North for awhile and then West. After that I...*We'll*...start to feel pull."

The couple quickly finished their meal, dropped \$15.00 on the table and hurried outside. Silence prevailed for the remainder of the day's trip, but this time it was sharp with exhilaration and big expectations.

Chad was feeling the pull. It always began as a nervous twitch in his stomach and then his skin began to go cold. The hairs on his arms were mildly electrified. His right eye felt dry again. Chad was walking. The sun was promising to be unpleasant again, but stealing a car just felt like bad timing. He suddenly regretted his decision. The pull was strong and too far away for walking.

Right on cue from the *All Powerful Director God* (one of his Dad's quotes), the sky darkened. The clouds bloated with blue and grey bruises before vomiting a steady column of rain. Chad cursed under the onslaught and continue to walk forward. He knew stopping was pointless. He was about to be miserable for a long period of time and that was thought.

Luckily, his previous nights failure with getting intoxicated had worked in his favor. He had the forethought to pay attention to the weather forecast and prepare accordingly. Anything that could be destroyed or diminished had been wrapped in garbage bags. The process involved stealing some from various trash cans outside of shopping centers. Six O'clock was the magic hour when the trash bags are changed and the shop owner go home. The bags are usually somewhat free of refuse. Chad cleans them in gas station rest rooms, where he also gives himself a quick paper towel bath.

These are the joys of the road. Chad said that to himself because he was free of company. The rain roared down and the sky let off a shotgun blast. Lightning forked down some miles ahead. Chad pushed his head forward and walked into the downpour.

His mesh bookbag seemed to gain density and mass. His shoulder muscles ached. Rain beat down, sealing his large T-shirt to his slender chest like a second skin. His jeans were water logged and heavy. His socks were a swamp. Chad Warner was completely miserable.

"Don't dwell on what makes you miserable," Raja always said. Chad's former mentor and teacher said that every time Chad seemed broken down. In those days, not long after he woke, Chad's mood would spiral downward into a bleak, dark hole. He felt like a sock puppet thrown lifeless to the floor.

"When you dwell on what makes you miserable, you give it power. You are the one feeding it, Chad.



You nourish it. You can do the same with what brings you joy. You can do the same with what brings you enlightenment.”

Chad would nod and close his eyes to fight back the flood of tears. At that moment in life, Chad was twenty-three. The adjustments and initial loss should have been behind him. He reprimanded himself constantly for being so depressed all the time.

Raja would nod back to Chad, then go into the kitchen and return with some herbal tea.

The memory of that tea almost brought a smile to Chad’s face. It was so unforgivably sappy and ‘faggy’. It was something Chad would never tell another human about. The sweet pungent smell of Raja’s tea floating into his memory, strong enough so that he Chad could almost smell it. He had searched every organic grocery store he came across for that tea and could never find it. Chad missed Raja. He missed Randy too.

But mostly he missed sex. It occupied his thoughts to an insane degree. Chad felt like every second of the day - both sleeping and waking - were spent focused solely on the thought of sex he wasn’t getting. He felt like it was going to drive him insane.

Well, that and this goddamn rain!

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Years before, when Chad awoke from his coma, his life became a temporary whirlwind of interviews and fan letters. The questionable nature of the events that led up to Chad’s six year slumber was fodder for crazed u.f.o. conspirators and tabloids. The media and the public in general lost interest in the story several years into Chad’s coma. Frank Warner had been found dead in an empty building that had been Jack’s Carpet Emporium a month prior. His son was found crumpled in the adjacent corner unconscious with a loaded gun in his hand.

Blood stains found at the scene could not be matched to either Frank or Chad. The stains and a third set of footprints were the only physical evidence of Chad’s alleged victim. Police investigators descended on the Warner household like hungry lions. The media held constant vigil outside, seeking interviews with anyone who alleged either friendship or relation to the Warners.

The ensuing court battle between Randy Swartz and Paula Elseworth lasted almost two full years. Paula was Frank’s only immediate relative. Frank’s will spelled out that his lifelong friend and fellow soldier would be Chad’s legal guardian in the event of Frank’s death. Paula contested it until Chad turned 18. The media frenzy had dwindled not long after Chad’s birthday.

Randy moved Chad’s still form into his humble home in Ohio. Two years in and Frank’s life savings was squandered on his son’s health care. Randy retired from the car factory that had been his employer for over twenty years and spent the next four years as Chad’s caretaker. All of the unpleasant, inconvenient and just plain gross tasks fell to him. His days and nights were spent in the lonely company of someone who couldn’t laugh his jokes or turn crimson when teased about Chad’s teenage sex life.

He would sometimes spend hours observing the still form of his best friend’s son, trying to sift through his memories of what connected the self confident young man he remembered to the sallow form withered up in bed. Chad breathed on his own, and his eyes flickered under their lids. With the exception of an infrequent twitch or spasm, the person in his home was dead.

The world around Chad and Randy had grown bored with the story. No one cared any longer about the mystery that put Chad’s father in the grave and his son in a vegetative state. When Chad suddenly awoke, the whirlwind conjured itself again - this time with even more strength. The story was reproduced in countless newspapers and on television. Aged police investigators reversed their retirement to harass Randy and Chad about details of that night six years ago.

Those details were lost forever to the general population. Chad told everyone he met that he could not



remember one second of that night, which only made the hungry media beast want the information more. Chad's already complicated life was occupied by cameramen and would be gossip hounds. Women would try to seduce knowledge out of him. The most memorable was when a stripper asked him who he shot while her shaved vagina hovered inches from his face.

It ruined his nineteenth birthday.

Chaos shrouded the pair of Randy Swartz and Chad Warner as they tried desperately to go about their awkward lives. The surreal quality of everything they were going through, and the fact that so many years separated the two, kept them from speaking much. Randy's small house became a safe haven from the crazy world outside. They avoided the t.v. news like a disease. Their home phone was replaced with cell phones that were discarded the second someone unwelcome learned the number.

But, like all storms, the media maelstrom subsided and people lost interest. Chad's paranoia kept him from enjoying the benefits new fame could bring. He had stacks of letters from adoring young women. Many contained naked pictures. His inability to call these girls and vent his sexual frustration felt like a cruel joke.

Every once-in-awhile someone would recognize Chad and ask him about his past. He would smile politely and claim ignorance. However, Chad Warner was lying. He recalled every fact with sharp clarity. Every second was cataloged in his mind that led up to that terrible night - the night that changed everything for him. He remembered, and in the small confines of the room that held his sleeping form for so many years, Chad seethed with hate for the man who caused all this pain.

"Jim," Chad hissed into the darkness on his eve of his twentieth birthday. "I swear I'll fucking find you."

More currently, fate was being unkind to Chad. The rain continued to unleash its fury down on him for hours on end. He walked with no shelter and no travelers to take pity on him and offer a ride. Once a pickup truck roared past, sending a surge of brackish water onto his already soaked pants. The laughter of the two base-ball-cap-wearing jackasses who occupied the vehicle followed. For a moment he considered a volley of insults, but the last time he attempted something like that, it ended in a pretty severe beating.

Never use the gift against a non-user, Raja had told him time and time again. Chad had been forced to fend off two violent alpha males with only his fists. The pair left him bloody and breathing in short gasps on the side of a different lonely road which looked surprisingly like the one he was on currently.

The rain abated, slowing to a shower and then to a misty drizzle. Finally it stopped all together. The bright afternoon sun heated the highway and sent up clouds of stifling humidity. Chad groaned at the new, unwelcome sensation. The long grass of the south reached for the sun, waving lazily in the hot wind.

He grunted out loud, taking in a deep breath to quell his simmering anger. *Raja, when did all this peace and love shit ever work anyway?*

The red pickup was almost out of earshot when Chad made his choice.

"Fuuuuuuuuuck You! Buuuuuutt Fuuuuuuckeeers!"

For a moment Chad thought the pair would just let the comment slide, but the truck suddenly stopped with a screech of breaks a small tornado of rain water on the road. Chad could hear a slight grinding noise as the truck was hastily thrown into reverse and it backed up in an erratic arc. Chad dropped his bookbag to the side of the road, took a long, victorious breath (as Raja called it) and summoned the power. He wouldn't need much. They just needed to be closer.

The Ford symbol on the cab stopped several feet in front of Chad, who was standing perfectly still with his hands down at his sides. In the bright afternoon, the thick chested man standing six-foot-two who was lurching out of his truck didn't see the aura radiating from Chad's hands. The man's partner, a bearded man wearing camouflage as a fashion statement who was working his way from the passenger's seat neglected to notice as well.

"You got something to fucking say to me, pussy?" The driver barked. His red shirt pulled tight over his



toned chest matched the color of his truck.

“I think I already said it,” Chad said evenly, letting the mana course through his blood stream and collect at his fingertips. “I said ‘Fuck You’ and then I suggested that you enjoy fucking men in the ass.”

Chad nodded towards the hillbilly wearing earth tones and smelling like two days of moldy body odor.

“In fact, I bet you just let one off in Homeboy’s ass there.”

The driver’s face puckered into a snarl. He stepped forward, almost within range. Almost...

“I’m gonna have to fuck you up for that, faggot!”

“You’re not my type.”

“Mother Fu...”

Chad closed the distance with a lunge, his left hand snapping out in front of the driver’s face. His right palm opened, releasing an orb of glistening blue and greens. It exploded into Mr. Camo’s face, sending him flopping to the ground. The driver received the brunt of the trauma and twin jets of pain shot down his optic nerves, setting his brain on fire. He howled with a shriek that betrayed his previously macho demeanor.

The two men thrashed and groaned in the dirt, screaming an unintelligible string of curses that defied translation. Words could not express what they were feeling. The physical discomfort was dwarfed by the mental assault as Chad’s incantation ricocheted inside their heads. A kaleidoscope of memories were unleashed, too many and too powerful to suppress. Voices in a long dead language no human tongue could utter hissed potent curses.

Mr. Red Shirt passed out with a sigh. His buddy soon followed, collapsing on the gravel, flailing himself unconscious. Chad casually walked over to both men and checked their pulse, relieved that his trick hadn’t done any serious damage. He dragged them into the ditch and then further into the tall grass near the road. The task left his shoulders and calves throbbing with pain. After taking both mens’ wallets, Chad laid the driver on his stomach, undid the man’s Harley Davidson belt buckle and pulled down his jeans. He did the same with his friend and positioned them both in an awkward pose.

“There,” Chad managed a smile as rivers of sweat poured down his face and chest. “Now you *are* butt fuckers.”

The truck was humming to itself as Chad grabbed his bookbag and plopped himself into the driver’s seat. The vehicle protested as he put it in gear and drove North. Chad couldn’t resist a smug grin as he perched one skinny elbow out the open window, enjoying the cliché country music blaring on the radio and cool breeze in his hair.

For Jim and Christy Baker, the ride was not so serene. Approximately two-hundred-and-fifty miles south of where Chad was liberating the red Ford, Christy was cursing loudly at the injustice of having to drive. Her blond hair, which was perfectly styled earlier that morning, had begun to decompose into a ragged mess that hung over her blue eyes. Jim concentrated as hard as he could to block out the intermittent yelps of anguish and the erratic jolts of the r.v.

“Dammit!” she snarled, nearly capsizing their vehicle around a sharp corner. “You know I hate driving, Jim!”

Seated in what appeared from the outside to be a serene lotus position, Jim Baker was working himself deeper into his own subconscious. His eyes flickered underneath his eyelids. The wiry hairs of his dark beard bounced as he muttered incantations. It sounded like absurd gibberish to Christy. Refusing to adjust her driving to snaking road caused Jim and all the contents of their trailer to tumble wildly to the left.

“Christy this won’t work unless you calm down!” Jim hissed, beads of spittle stippling his beard. “I need to concentrate and you’re about to get us fucking killed, Woman!”

“You know I hate driving!”

“Do you want to meet Him or don’t you? If you don’t calm down and stop poisoning me with your negative



bullshit, I'll never figure out the right code."

She muttered something under her breath, swiped a stray rope of hair from her eyes and decreased their rate of speed to something a bit more sane. Jim resumed his seated position on the couch behind Christy and closed his eyes. Spirals of color slowly formed under his eyelids, spinning in lazy, concentric circles. The incantation required equal amounts of force and finesse. If Jim couldn't manifest a sphere that was equally strong on all sides, this wouldn't work.

As his mind sank through the layers of doubt and blockage, he felt the slipstream open up to him. It crackled with so much intelligence and power that concentrating on the task at hand became difficult. Jim had to fight distraction from an ocean of countless voices. Some were harsh, others mild and soothing. But *He* dominated all. Jim could feel the Brinnger's silent satisfaction with the equation Jim was concocting. Both beings knew it was not ready yet, but with zealot-like devotion, the goal could be met. The excitement of it all made Jim's heart flutter in his chest.

He winced at the sharp pain in his ribs. There was still a bullet lodged in there from all those years ago. Jim worked through the pain, smiling at the thought of young Warner's terrified face when the plan came to fruition. The entire world would share that same dazed, horrified look, but it was Chad's despair that brought Jim the most comfort.

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The pull was definitely getting stronger. Chad could feel it spinning invisible fingers over his skin, prickling the hair on the back of his neck. He was hot and sweaty, and the grumble in his stomach was getting worse. Chad had been fighting the temptation of food for over an hour now. His plummeting blood sugar and the uneasy, cold feeling in his stomach were conspiring to drive him crazy.

The day was creeping into mid afternoon. Mr. Macho Red Shirt and his new lover Mr. Camo were about to wake up from their nap soon. Chad's ride joyride would soon be interrupted by either police sirens or a lack of fuel. The gauge was nearing empty and he didn't dare use his meager resources to fuel a car when fueling the body was so much more important.

Chad took the first next exit, parking the truck at a gas station and walking across the street to a Wendys restaurant. He felt eyes on him, though none were human. The Others were beginning to take notice of his activities. Chad could feel their hate-filled stares through the cloud of ether. As he walked inside the fast food joint, he looked up into the sky to observe the swirling cloud of iridescent forms. The pushed and tore at the Hymen, screaming silently.

Parting with some of his cash was unbearable, but so was the hunger in his gut. His hands were shaking by the time he sat down alone to eat. Chad sipped his soda, enjoying the cold sensation of sugar and carbonation. *It's the small things*, he reassured himself. As his stomach took on the heavy meal, Chad's mind wondered. He thought about Chucky. She usually found him when he was at his most desperate, and it was often around this area of the states. Like Chad, she was a traveler, though one could only guess at her motivations.

Midway through his enormous iced beverage came the thought of Kiki. That probably wasn't her real name, but most folks in the U.S. had trouble pronouncing her born name. Raja had told Chad to be weary of her. The pair had met at a party Raja was throwing. It amazed Chad how many people know and loved that man. Chad's father had mad Raja promise, on numerous occasions, to take care of Chad in the event of Frank Warner's death. The moment Randy had mentioned the man to Chad, he came knocking at the door. Coincidences like that gave the man an unearthly aura.

Raja was a short, pensive man with thinning black hair and thick glasses. His expression was one of calm enlightenment and wry humor. He always had a joke or a story for any situation. People gravitated to him, but he deserved the attention. The man operated with no agenda other than to enjoy life and help people. Chad



respected him and desperately missed their contact.

When Chad took leave of Randy for those two years, he didn't know what to expect of his tutelage.

"There's not a whole lot more I can tell you," Randy admitted with a shrug, taking a sip of the beer that seemed to regenerate on a constant cycle in his hand. "Raja will fill in a lot of the holes. Your dad and he were really close."

"Then why did I never hear of him?" Chad grumbled. At the time, his life was just starting to maintain some equilibrium. He was making friends who didn't care about his notoriety and Chad was angry about the new ripple.

"Can't shed any light on that one my friend. Believe me, ten minutes at Raja's place and you won't be pissed any more, my friend!" Randy chuckled and killed the beer with a mighty swallow. "Plus he knows a LOT of girls...I mean A LOT!"

And that he did. Chad's training was difficult, but the rewards more than made up for it. Kiki (that name sill sounded ridiculous) was a tall Indian girl with beautiful hair, teeth and a body that made Chad almost weep. The first time their eyes met he felt a static shock that flared from his loins up into his spine. She was breathtaking, sultry and funny. Chad loved her sparkling laugh. They talked over drinks, letting the party melt away around them.

Raja pulled Chad to the side, grabbing a sleeve and pulling him down within earshot.

"Be careful, Chad," He grinned, breath smelling like liquor. "She is truly evil. She's like...an opiate. Anything that feels that good can't be good for you."

"For real," Chad replied, not taking his eyes off of her as she chatted with her friends across the room. Raja called that group 'Imps'. It stood for Indian American Princesses, though Chad was perplexed where the 'M' came from. "Have you and her...?"

"No no!" Raja grinned a mouthful of perfectly straight white teeth. His accept became more and more pronounced as the night went on. "But I have seen more than my share of men become broken shells because of that woman. Be careful. Don't fall in love, okay."

"You got it!" Chad clapped his teacher on the shoulder and headed back into the lion's den.

Raja was right. Raja was always right.

Chad got lost in the landscape of her beautiful body. He feasted on the perfect globes of her breasts and thrilled at the excitement as she writhed and cooed when he went down on her. They fucked like animals for weeks, until her attention wandered. She soon began to ignore his calls and soon after Chad had become a ghost in her past - one she wouldn't even acknowledge.

"You were right," Chad admitted after several sleepless nights.

"It is a good thing," Raja pushed some of the awesome tea at him with a kind smile. "She was distracting you from your studies. I can't disappoint Mr. Frank Warner and fail his son can I? Look at the bright side - you got laid, right?"

The comment brought a burst of laughter from Chad. That was such an anti-Raja thing to say. It had the desired effect though, and Chad sipped his tea, enjoying the pungent mixture of herbs. He felt better. That same day, he and Raja continued from where they had previously left off. The pair made their way to the patio that overlooked a beautiful expanse of trees in the countryside of Ohio.

The patio was one of Chad's favorite rooms in Raja's huge home. It was occupied by intricately carved statues and whimsical paintings. The sound of an artificial waterfall filled the room, along with the thick smell of incense. Chad sat himself in lotus position on the mat Raja had left for him.

"Close your eyes and let the worries of this world fade away. They only bind you. Refuse to nurture the negative. Take a deep, victorious breath and fill your lungs. Let it energize you. Slowly let it out from the back of your throat."

As Chad sank deeper into the slipstream, he felt the *Gift* well up inside his chest. It trickled down his limbs



and wormed its way through his bloodstream. Each day of their practice brought more intensity. Soon Chad was manifesting the power in thin blue spirals that oozed through his fingerprints and crackled to life. His mind raced at the potential of it all, and for a small moment, he was at peace.

Returning to the time at hand, Chad attempted to make himself look as human as possible in the bathroom of Wendy's. He hung his dirty clothes from the stall door and did his best to bathe from the sink, ignoring the occasional knock at the door. Once he was done he examined his reflection and saw the same ragged person that appeared in the mirror pre-bath.

Sighing at the futility of it all, Chad hoisted up his backpack and headed out into the fading heat of the southern afternoon sun. As he worked his way down the road, Chad held out his thumb to indicate he needed a ride and thought of the men he left unconscious several hours ago. They would wake with an equal mixture of bliss and horror at the suggested position they had been left in. It was possible that someone saw them along side the road and called the police.

The idea of a police investigation into the matter didn't concern Chad. The pair would have no recollection

