

CRUCIFIXION RELOADED

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To Jamey and all those who ever suffered from bullying, to Györgyi Tarcali and Hannah Remmel for all their help, to Lady Gaga for being born this way.

THE BIRTH

Sally's Gospel

Sally stopped in the middle of the bustling bazaar to find out that she had lost her way. Men and women hurried by her heading towards their own destination without noticing her. She walked to the palm trees growing in the corner of the square to find refuge from the scorching southern sun. A wind awoke, blowing sand from the desert encircling the city. All she knew was that she was somewhere close to the equator, a word she had just learned from her mother. She stopped in the shade of the trees and felt much better.

She sat down and started drawing in the sand. Her parents told her to wait wherever she was if they were to lose each other, so Sally being a good girl, obeyed. Restlessness was awakening inside her, but she tried not to pay attention to it. Minutes flew by slowly sinking into boredom, so when a tiny black bug appeared, digging itself out from beneath the sand and hurrying away toward a side alley, Sally rejoiced. The bug scampered away with its black armor glistening in the light. An urge awoke in her that compelled her to follow it. As she distanced herself from the bazaar, the voices gradually subsided behind her. Underneath the silence, she heard a continuous high-pitched whistle, the sound of the sun shining down onto the world.

“Wait for me, Mr. Bug. Don't leave me alone,” she said.

The bug didn't seem to listen and continued its fleet away from the giant that was larger than the sun itself.

Sally looked up at the buildings lining the alley, so different than the ones at home. It seemed to her that they were made of the sand itself, growing out of the ground, simple cubes, differing only in height. The alley gradually grew narrower until she couldn't even spread her arms. Wooden crates blocked the way, and the bug disappeared beneath them. Through the silence, a voice emerged, speaking in English with a strange and somewhat comical accent.

“Hiz child iz comming, bi pripered, de time haz com for hiz return. All sinnerz show repent before itz too late...”

There was something strange in the man's voice, and the curiosity bugging Sally didn't leave her alone. She grabbed the top of the bottom box and pulled herself up then climbed onto the top one to jump down to the other side. As she approached the end of the alley, the voice of humanity reemerged from the silence.

It was the confidence with which the man spoke that attracted Sally, not his words. Sally stepped out of the hidden alley onto a busy road with tourists streaming in all directions like ants in delirium.

The source of the voice appeared, a man standing on top of a crate. The potato bag he was wearing was his sole garment. He was bald and his skull shined as the drops of sweat reflected the beams of the sun beating down onto the world persistently. His beard flowed down onto the pavement and was covered with sand. His eyeballs protruded a little, and his left one remained still. He gesticulated wildly with his arms. His thin legs quivered as they balanced on top of the box. As he spoke, he jumped on and off the crate constantly pointing toward the sky and begging the passers-by to listen.

“Bevaaare,” he screamed. “Birdz fall from the vild blue yonder, floodz destroying whole cities, eartquakes shatter face of earth and cause nucler pover plants to seep poison into Godz zoil! The end is near. He vill return to destroy the sinnerz and bring the pure onez to heaven!”

She looked at the adults hurrying away and didn't understand why they weren't listening to the warnings of this poor, disgruntled man.

“Fase the sky and show ripent. You hav bin varned.”

Sally did as she was told. She looked right into the burning sun, and she could see something moving. The sun expanded for a

moment as an old man standing on a cloud dashed out of it. Sally rubbed her eyes as her sight gradually returned.

Two officers stepped to the man, one of them talking to the beggar in a language so different than her own, like magic words of an ancient spell. Sally only understood one word, a name, John, or at least this is what she thought she had heard.

“Offizer, I cannot remain silent. The Mezziah is comming to the world. Angel told me.”

Sally believed John. Miracles do happen, angels exist, anything is possible.

The policeman spoke, and John answered, “The end of the world is near, I varn vorld to be prepared.”

The officer placed his hand onto John who pushed it away, but the policeman did not give up and grabbed his arm once more, forcing it behind his back this time, making John kneel to the ground.

“Leave alone,” screamed John as he tried to break free, but the policeman reached for his handcuffs and closed them with a click around his wrist.

“Don’t do this to me. Leave alone,” he shouted once more.

The officer pushed John down the alley. Everything slowed down except for Sally and John whose head turned around unnaturally. Sally could hear as his vertebral column snapped until his face looked at Sally while his body faced the opposite direction.

“The Mezziah is coming, Zally, be prepared,” said John.

Sally fell to the ground and started crying, not because she was scared but because she knew that the beggar was right, and no one was listening to his warnings.

Sally felt hands grab her waist and raise her into the air. She opened her eyes and saw her father.

“Oh my God, Sally. I told you to wait for us wherever we lost each other and not to wonder off.”

Sally was happy to see her father, but the tears pouring down her face were for the joy of something else.

“Sweetheart, don’t cry. Everything will be alright. I’m here, no one will hurt you.”

“I know, father...” she said sobbing.

“Then what’s the matter?”

Sally’s father placed his daughter down, caressed her soft hair, and hugged her one more time.

“No, everything is fine.”

“Then why are you crying?” he said with a look of concern.

“I’m just happy,” she said as her stream of tears dried out. She smiled in a way that only those can who see the golden gates of heaven opening.

“Me too, darling, me too,” said her father and was glad that he had found his daughter.

“The Mezziah is coming, father, the Mezziah is returning.”

“The what? Where did you learn this word?”

“He is coming, father...”

“Of course, sweetheart,” said her father but didn’t care to understand the true meaning of her words.

Angela’s Gospel

“In which room?”

“In room 101. The first one to the left,” said Angela looking at the college student blush and hurry away. She sat back behind the counter. The next donor would come in about an hour, and Angela knew that she could take her well-deserved nap soon. The door closed behind the student, and she was left alone. The rays of the sun shone through the glass facade and were reflected by the white tiles of the entrance hall.

A car sped away before the center, disrupting the stillness like a stone falling into the pond. It took time for Angie to settle once more.

The door of room 101 opened a few minutes later, and the college student appeared, placing the cup bearing his semen onto the platter on the other side of the waiting room. A hand reached out through the window, and the little cup disappeared. The college student stopped by the counter, and Angie gave him the money. The boy hurried away with a look of both embarrassment and pride as the entrance doors closed behind him silently.

Angela sat back into her seat and lay back, enjoying the coolness of the air-conditioner. She pushed herself away from the desk and stopped the chair so that she could stare out one of the huge tinted windows that covered the front of the center, the surface facing the outside a mirror, the one facing Angela a see-through window. The leaves of the palm trees lining the beach moved as a gust of wind rushed away heading toward the body-filled beach.

Everything was white in the center giving the place an air of optimistic futurism, not only the tiles but the rows of plastic chairs, her uniform, and desk too.

She closed her eyes as the rays caressed her face, just the way her mother did every night when Angela was a child. Years after her death Angie could still hear her mother humming, and the tune soothed her.

Angie heard the entrance doors slide open, and her eyelids sprung apart abruptly, pretending as if she had just rested her eyes for a second and nothing more, but she didn't see anyone. She was very good at this, imitating work. Being a single mother is never easy and work was the only place where she could compensate the deprived sleep caused by the midnight feedings and diaper changes. A gust of wind blew through the open doors bringing the whisper of the palm trees inside, words Angie could not decipher. The entrance slid shut.

She lay back in her leather chair once more. She felt her eyelids grow heavy, and no matter how hard she tried, she could not keep them open. Suddenly she saw something that made her jump to the window. This would be a memory that would haunt her until the end of her life because she would never be able to decide whether what she saw was real or just a daydream.

A man standing on a tiny cloud descended from the sky. His white hair flowed in the wind just like the millions of rivers running all around the globe, emphasizing his eyes the color of all the oceans, and in revitalizing contrast with his nose similar to the rugged mountains covering the face of the world. As he grinned, his soft lips, like the pillows of the boudoir of the fanciest, most delectable courtesan of the Moulin Rouge, enclosed playfully his white teeth radiating like the glaciers of the north. His beard made of clouds cascaded to the ground. As he hopped off the tiny cloud, his white toga swayed a little, unclinking his dark brown leather sandals.

The door slid open, and the man entered. He opened his mouth to speak with a voice like the thunder of an infuriated storm. "Is this a sperm donor center?"

"Yes. May I help you?" asked Angela still thinking she was dreaming.

"I believe I have an appointment."

"This is impossible, our next guest arrives in forty minutes, I just checked."

“Then check again,” he said gesturing at the list of names. “Randy is the name.”

Angela sat back into her leather seat, shaking her head. She reached for the notebook, opened it, then followed her index finger down the list of names and stopped. She couldn't believe her eyes. She saw Randy, just the forename, written down on the paper with her own handwriting. She looked back at this unlikely citizen with bewilderment.

“But..but...this is impossible...”

“What is it, Angela? Don't you believe your own eyes?”

“There must be a logical explanation to this, there always is.”

“In this you are absolutely right,” said the man looking around. “I'm sorry, this is my first time in a place like this. Could you please show me around?”

“Of course...of course,” she said scratching her head.

Angie stood up and showed him the way. They entered into room 101. There was a white bed in the corner, a television on a simple desk before it, and a bookshelf at the opposite side. As Angela changed the sheets quickly, she continued, “Here are our magazines to help you concentrate. We have all sorts of magazines and videos, heterosexual, gay, lesbian, S&M, transvestite, foot fetish, everything. Choose whichever suits you. No one will be watching, so have fun. Here is the cup that you must try to fill, and that's it.”

“Thank you very much,” said the old man.

Angela hurried back to her seat feeling as if she were losing grip of reality, dreading that she was turning insane. She turned back toward the window. The tiny little cloud the man had arrived with was still hovering before the center.

She shook her head and faced the endless sea in the distance when she noticed that the light outside was changing. Angela looked up at the sun to see it was sparkling, its blinding surface shimmering like glitter. The sun began to tremble, faster and faster, until it shook out of control. The men and women passing by seemed unaware. The sun began to whirl round and round, then it stopped and exploded. For a second Angela went blind, but as her sight returned, she saw glitter covering the sky. The millions of tiny specks sank to the ground only to disappear before scintillating on the pavement for a few seconds.

An opening door disrupted Angela's amazement. She turned around and saw the old man emerge. He had the placid

expression of someone right after sex, an otherworldly calmness. His wisps of hair rose into the sky. The cup he was holding was filled with a fluid that twinkled like the sun a few moments before. The man placed the cup down onto the platter and walked by Angie giving her a wink. *Ting*. The doors slid open. He jumped onto the cloud, rose to the sky, and flew towards the sun that expanded and gobbled him up.

Angela scratched her head not knowing what to do or how to react. She then sat back behind her desk and vowed to sleep more.

Mary's Gospel

“You will feel something cold enter, but apart from that you shouldn't feel anything unpleasant. If you do, speak up.”

Mary lay back and tried to relax. She looked into Josephine's worried hazel eyes and smiled. Even in-between the present circumstance Mary was the stronger one. She felt the cold instrument touch her inner thigh that caused her to hiss. The probe slid up her vagina, and as soon as she grew accustomed it, she didn't feel a thing.

A dream was coming true, and there was nothing that could ruin this. The room decorated with pale-green tiles couldn't hide the fact that this was a hospital. The touch of white leather on her neck that felt cold before, now stuck to her skin.

The doctor disappeared under her skirt. The bright light coming from above blinded her and made her squint, so she closed her eyes and excluded all stimuli, trying to disembodify her spirit and sink into the cotton-like nothingness of anticipation.

Maybe this was a hospital room to others, but to her, this was the place where she would get the gift she most relished. Mary felt a sting that brought her back into the present, the probe slid out. The face of the gentle doctor reemerged from under her skirt and smiled, his moustache dancing over his upper lip as he spoke. “We are done.”

Mary sat up. “Already?”

The doctor nodded and turned to the sink to wash his hands. “Yes. Don't forget to attend the control examinations.”

“Of course not, doctor.”

The doctor stepped to the door, and before leaving, turned around. “Great, see you then.”

“Good-bye, doctor.”

The doctor nodded and left. The door closed with a click, and the silence gradually settled like specks of dust stirred up by a breeze. She turned toward Josephine, and they smiled in a way only those can who know that a miracle had just happened.

Mary’s blue eyes sparkled like the calm surface of a pond mirroring the rays of the afternoon summer sun. Josephine’s hazel eyes glowed like the fur of an otherworldly enchanted deer fleeing from all eyes, not to be seen by anyone, ever. Mary raised her arm to grab hold of Josephine’s hand and held it as if they were going to be petrified for eternity this way so that future generations would see them in this exact pose until the marble crumbles and returns back to the ground from where it came from. Mary stood up, and they hugged turning into one, not in the way that two people unite during sex, but in a way that two halves of a piece reunite after centuries of loneliness and never-ending dreadful search for the other. They didn’t say a word because there was nothing to say, only hope that the inception would be successful.

As they left the hospital, the afternoon sun sank under the horizon, and darkness embraced the world.

“You stay here, Mary. I’ll go and get the car,” said Josephine squeezing Mary’s shoulder.

Mary nodded and watched Josephine’s tall figure hurry away into the night. Josephine was so different than her, she always wore suits, and her blonde hair was primly cut short. Mary was quite the opposite, the waves in her hazel hair tumbled onto her shoulder freely. The dark blue dresses she usually wore was in contrast with her full red lips.

Mary stood under a street lamp that blinked a few times then went out. Darkness covered her like an ever-soft blanket. Fireflies arrived from nowhere and buzzed around her like tinkling stars before flying away into the night. The moon smiled down on the world just like a mother watching her dormant child.

The light returned, but Mary was surprised to see that it wasn’t the street light that emitted this natural luminescence. She looked down, and through her thin blue dress, something glowed like the sun itself warming her from within. Mary knew that the light was coming from her womb.

Josephine stopped the red convertible before Mary. She couldn’t believe her eyes for she too saw the sun burning inside

Mary's abdomen. The white light it emitted gradually turned into darker shades of red until it set under the horizon of the uterus to plant itself like a seed in a soil loosened by the days of rain.

"What happened, Josephine?" asked Mary knowing the answer already.

"It's a miracle, Mary, it's a miracle. There is no other explanation."

They smiled at each other for a few seconds surrounded by an unbreakable silence.

"Josephine," said Mary, "scoot over, I want to drive."

Josephine obeyed, and Mary jumped into the car with a heavenly agility as if a part of her were made of the clouds of heavens. Mary pressed down the clutch and put the car in first gear then held down the breaks and gave some gas to the engine. When the motor began revving high, she began releasing the clutch, giving gas until the rear tires burnt loose, releasing white smoke accompanied by the smell of burning rubber. She released the clutch and brakes at the same time, permitting the car to rocket away, giving out a deafening screech.

Mary enjoyed the cool breeze blowing against her face. The streetlights made the road burn in a calming orange. The many skyscrapers rose toward the sky, trying to reach the moon. Behind the many windows distinct lives resided, like many tiny planets orbiting around their circuits. In each window a singular world could be found, with its own laws, habits, and points of view.

Mary caressed her stomach. She was feeling something that one only feels when their dream comes true. It is a power that not only gives comfort, but an immense joy, a joy to be alive. They sped away through the city preparing itself to go to sleep, heading home to spend the night behind a glowing window just like the many floating away above them.

Hank's Gospel

Hank dried his hands and yawned as the fatigue of the many operations fell onto his shoulders. It was in these moments of complete solitude that he felt the burden he bears, and only now did he perceive the swiftness with which the years flew by. He was old, and the constant physical and psychic concentration drained his energies that were growing weaker each year. He stepped out into the blinding white corridor of the hospital. The hospital was

empty, all was silent. It was afternoon, the last child had been delivered successfully, so he returned to his room to relax.

He opened the door and sat down onto his bed covered by a light green sheet as if he were laying down onto an operation table to be dissected and examined like the corpses in the pathology. He looked at the painting hanging over his glass table, the ancient doctors leaning over and examining a body. All of them seemed like fathers, strict but always just. One of them was caressing his white goatee while the other looked at the wounds of the patient over his glasses lying on the tip of his nose, the others nodded in concordance.

As he dozed off, music entered into his brain like an unwanted intruder. It started with the violins and trombones sinking deeper and deeper into bitter sweetness only to be pierced by an oboe, a singular shriek cutting through the sweet sorrow and answered by the trumpets declaring the beginning of a new world. This perfect harmony was followed by a pause, a pause during which the globe turned around its axis to face the sun. The flutes and oboes tried to emerge from the silence but were lost in the deep murmur of the drums and cellos that suffocated their beauty to give place to insanity. From this derangement, the flutes tried to rise, rise from the mud that was pulling them deeper down.

“Doctor, we need your help,” said a nurse just barely loud enough to be heard over the symphony.

“What is it?” asked the doctor a little louder, the way that one talks when they listen to music through earphones, trying to over-scream the music only they can hear.

“The ambulance brought a mother in. Her cervix has disappeared. She is about to give birth any minute now.”

“What is this music?” asked Hank.

“What music?” asked the nurse a little confused.

Hank looked at the nurse and realized that only he could hear the tune and no one else. He hurried after the nurse through the abandoned white hallway, and the music continued growing stronger with every step.

The oboes emerged once more, this time backed up by the violins pulling the melody out of the mud that was determined not to give up. The trumpets joined the fight against the mud as the woman in labor appeared, her face distorted by the pain. The head of the child was already visible. The music became joyful for a moment as if everything would be alright, swimming in a sweet

tune that became stronger and stronger. The wind raised the melody and carried it over the swamp.

The head of the child was out, and now the shoulders were coming as well. The music was deafening, but no one heard it, only Hank. Black clouds floated over the melody bringing transient rain, but the music fought against it. The wind and black clouds battled for centuries until the wind, putting all its energy into the last gust, blew the clouds away. The sun revealed itself and shone down on the orchestra. Hope was born once more.

Through the raindrops rolling down the leaves, the light emerged as a rainbow to pierce through the world. The child slid out in slow motion as the trumpets returned, leading the music higher. The globe started trembling as the child was raised to the sky. They placed the baby onto the mother, and the music was sweet for a second only to give place to the glorious trumpets again that ruled over the world one last time. All the instruments started playing, and the music grew louder and louder until the old world cracked, and through it, the new one came to light, destroying everything that was wrong in the previous one and evolving into something incredible.

The music stopped, and the silence was interrupted by the cry of the child. The doctor smiled at them and felt in his heart a calmness that one only feels when they peek into the sun to see heaven itself, not the place existing in the imagination of many, but the heaven that was about to come to earth. Hank stared at the family not caring that the child had two mothers because he knew that this was simply another face of God.

He stepped to the mother, blew a kiss on her forehead, and left, longing to hear that ethereal music once more, knowing that someday everyone would.

THE CHILDHOOD

Mary's Gospel

Mary waved as Josephine drove away and disappeared behind the curve. She took a deep breath from the frisky air and stretched her arms toward the sky like the many oak trees lining the road in their neighborhood. The sprinklers rose above ground level, and water began falling just like a summer drizzle. As the rain fell onto the rose bushes growing in the yard and lining the path leading to their porch, each drop glittered like a diamond.

Mary looked at her garden, and even though she found it a little kitschy, she did not mind. She never thought she would be living the suburban dream. A few years ago she imagined she would rather commit suicide than live in a neighborhood like this, with the many homes painted in pastille colors, their residence a pale apricot, telling the neighbors that the ones living in the house were diverse, but not too unique to be freaks. The well-kept lawns showed the many hours spent to prove to the neighborhood that they were earnest people, prone to fit in and live the life like one of the many ants in this anthill.

Mary did not mind because all she wished for was boredom and normality now. She grew tired of the years of struggle against society, trying to change it, make the world a better place, convince others that people like Josephine and herself were humans. Yes, Mary grew tired of fighting, and now all she wanted was to fit in as much as possible into the Elysium yards of Suburbia with the constant scent of wisteria embracing her, caressing her, and soothing her. This was a sweet death, and she was ready to lose herself in it.

Mary closed the front door painted red and marveled at the newly renovated parquet still shining. She hurried up the stairs leading to the upper floor, the railing freshly painted white. At the top of the stairs, she turned right and almost tripped in a wrinkle in the beige woven carpet decorated by ethnical patterns. She adjusted the wrinkle and hurried into Neil's room. His white cradle stood before the window, and the morning rays caressed him with maternal providence.

Mary blew an invisible kiss onto his right shoulder. His curly dark hair framed his translucent eyes and his cheeks the color of the mildest rosé, just a tint mixed with light that one actually doesn't see but feels it linger about. Mary knew that this child was just like the tiny angels dancing around God's throne in heaven. Mary tiptoed out of the room and hurried downstairs.

At the bottom, she grabbed the prominence of the railing and, using the same impetus of her descent, she swung around it and entered her kitchen to wash the dishes and make everything turn back into its previous self, an undisturbed order one only sees in furnishing catalogues. She washed the dishes with her habitual perfection.

She dried the last plate and placed it into the cupboard. Silence. Mercifully, for the first time in weeks, Neil was still asleep. She jumped onto her white sofa facing the fireplace and reached for the eBook lying on the side table beneath the lilacs ruling over the white room with royal posture. She opened the leather casing and looked at the virtual screen so similar to paper.

She began reading her first sentence, tasting every word of it as if it were a portion of golden amber sent from the gods above when screaming trumpeted from upstairs, awakening her maternal instinct.

Neil was up, and this meant two things, he needed to be changed or to be fed. Marry hurried up the stairs with a heavy-heart even though she knew these lost minutes were only an unexpected gift that she did not actually deserve, so in all she hadn't lost anything, just something that wasn't hers. She entered into Neil's room.

She stepped to the cradle, and her blood froze in her veins. Neil was not there. The crying went on and on, always becoming stronger. She tried to identify its source, but there was no use because the voice was coming from all directions. She looked inside the wardrobe. No one. She peeked out into the corridor.

Empty. She searched for him under the hill of plush toys, but her child was nowhere.

She searched everywhere and scratched her head in disbelief. She closed her eyes and examined the sound realizing that it was muffled by something. It was as if it came from their bedroom on the other side. She hurried into their room, but no matter how hard she searched, Neil was nowhere to be found.

She hurried back into his room to hear that the voice was coming from inside the wall separating the two rooms. She stepped closer and saw that the blue tapestry was peeling here and there. She started ripping it off when the crying ceased for a second, then it returned, this time coming from behind her. She slowly turned around, and what she saw caused her to back against the wall.

“Hello, mother, it’s me. Don’t you recognize me?”

A huge spider was looking down onto Mary from the top corner of the room. It stretched two of its gigantic legs toward her face. She could feel its fur caress her cheeks. The spider filled the room, and instead of an arachnid’s head, it bore Neil’s baby face. The spider crawled down from the ceiling and walked to her. Mary tried to break free, but the legs of the spider closed in on her like a cell. The head was coming closer and closer until Neil opened his mouth and gobbled her up in a bite.

Mary opened her eyes and realized she had fallen asleep. Neil was crying upstairs, so she put the book back onto the side table. She found her child in the cradle, and by the smell, Mary knew he had to be changed.

As she threw the dirty diaper into the garbage, she smiled remembering her dream. She saw the pictures as if she were seeing them through a glass darkly. She sat down onto the white sofa right by the cradle, unbuttoned her shirt placing her nipple into her child’s mouth, and looked at the wall to see the tapestry missing in the exact place where she had ripped it off in her dream.

Josephine’s Gospel

“I am going to cut some wood.”

“Go ahead, Mary.”

The door closed leaving Josephine and Neil alone in the log cabin. The fire was crackling in the fireplace, illuminating the

hand-woven Persian rug with its pattern spiraling deeper and deeper, swirling into infinity. Josephine stepped to the window and looked at the burning autumn forest, a season that seemed to be inexistent in the city where, instead of four, there was only the never-ending summer. The ground outside was covered by the carpet of leaves and looked like the continuation of the one inside. The sun shining through the branches of the trees seemed to mirror the fireplace in the cozy room. Josephine watched Marry vanish into the motionless fire of the woods as if she were eaten away by the insatiable flames. The leaves fell here and there, their precipice could be heard over the stillness created by the absence of civilization. Even the log house seemed something so far way, something ancient, deriving from the time of the creation of Earth.

Neil was sitting on the carpet playing with his trains. Josephine was glad to see that in contrary to the views of society, he was happy and balanced. Of course some made fun of him, the ones that were afraid of difference, the dreadful difference that is lurking in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to jump out and destroy normality. If only they would have the courage to light a candle and see what the darkness conceals. They would find a human being that is no different than any other, lonely and afraid like the creature craving for the one ring. They left Neil alone after a while when they saw that he didn't react, not understanding what they couldn't, that having two mothers was normal, at least for him.

"Mother, can I go out and play?" asked Neil. Josephine looked at her son, his angel-like face turning thinner and more masculine, his curly hazel hair that he insisted to let grow, tumbling down onto his shoulders.

"Of course, sweetheart, just remain in sight."

Josephine stepped to the opposite window facing the valley and started doing the dishes. Neil walked to the great oak tree ruling over the forest with the leaves the colors of all shades of red, orange, and yellow. He sat down onto the rock at its feet.

Josephine opened the window to let the fresh morning air enter and cleanse the place from the smell of sleep. She felt the breeze blow on her damp hands and shivers ran up and down her body. It was a cooling sensation that chased away the remains of sleep still lingering around her movements like an aura pulling her back into the world of dreams, the world separated by death only

by a thin translucent foil that shatters into smithereens by the slightest caress. She dried the plates and placed them into the cupboard above.

A gentle tune entered through the window. The voice was not human, merging the two genders, bearing a careless musicality mixed with undisputed authority, the voice of the angels. She walked back to the sink and looked at Neil facing the woods and singing, motionless, deep in thought, his small body fragile in comparison to the immense valley.

“Neil,” she shouted, but he did not move. He was in a different world, in the world that resides within, and only the proprietor can enter. The body is a prison that withholds the soul, a prison without which the soul cannot survive.

The melody rose to the sky and washed through the woods. A pair of little blue jays sat down onto the branch of the tree and twittered away like new instruments of an emerging symphony. The bushes moved, and two scoffers hurried to sit down a few feet away, facing Neil.

Josephine could not believe her eyes and didn't dare move, fearing to disrupt this harmony that one only sees in cartoons. At the top of the slope rising to the sky, two dears galloped down to stop behind the scoffers. In a few minutes mice were followed by snakes, wolves, bears, and ducks. The fox was the last one to arrive. He sneaked to the animals and waited for admission. The animals just faced the slyest creature of the woods for a few seconds then invited him to join the circle. All of them were mesmerized by Neil, listening to the tune that caused the laws of nature to be suspended for a few minutes.

Josephine heard the back door creaking. She turned around to see Mary enter with a few logs in her hands.

“Shhh. Come quickly, you must see this.”

Mary put the logs by the fireplace and tiptoed to the window. She stopped and just listened to the tune, both of them thinking that this was how the first animals were brought to life to inhabit the planet.

The tune stopped. Neil stood up and patted each creature on his head. As he touched each animal, they fled back into the woods. He caressed the bears for last, and when they left, he was alone once more. He turned toward his parents and waved. The parents waved back.

“Something is definitely different about this child,” said Mary staring right into Neil’s eyes, through the present into the past.

“What do you mean?” asked Josephine.

“You know what I mean.”

Josephine looked at Mary knowing she was right, and because of this, she felt sorry for Neil. He was different, and Josephine blamed herself for this. She couldn’t bear the pain caused by the recognition and vowed not to accept the truth.

Mary’s Gospel

The lights are switched off in the auditorium. The suspense can be seen, connecting the singular beings with threads, each of them knowing that what they are about to experience will be something new.

A spotlight’s piercing light cuts right through the impenetrable cloth of darkness and falls upon a semi-translucent egg withheld by four muscular men standing at the back of the arena, wearing clothes made of human skin. They start toward the stage in the silence that no one dares to defy, not even with the sound of their breathing. The egg-bearers take each step unanimously carrying someone that is influencing the youth in their basic patterns of thinking, even if, like many say, this is not her goal, and she is really after fame.

The egg, as it hovers through the aisle leading to the stage, reflects the light and shines down on radiating faces looking up at the creature that annihilated the futility and emptiness of pop music.

They place the egg onto the stage. It lies there before the millions of eyes, perfectly still, like the egg of a dinosaur that seems to be destined to survive all, bearing a message deriving from the creation of the world. A black silhouette moves in the depths of the egg, a creature born from the shadows. Through the smooth surface, the contour of a hand appears that returns back into the egg, not to give up but to emerge once more with much greater power, piercing through the shell, causing it to hatch.

A woman steps out from the egg, she seems human, but she isn’t. The raincoat she is wearing is made of human skin. The hat makes her look like Carmen, the villain who is pursued around the world never to give up and only be satisfied when everything precious is in her hands. Her shoulders are not rounded on the

corner but unite into a pointy cone. Her disfigured cheeks make her seem like a woman who had been beaten unconscious the moment before and came back to the living this instant.

The music emerges from the speakers. The tune washes through the world like an unstoppable Tsunami that demands no victims. The dancers move to the rhythm like unconscious, defenseless corpses obeying the force of the waves. She takes her hat off, and, mounted high on her head, the ponytail sways, following the motion of the body. She is not a monster, but the queen of them all.

The music stops, and she hurries up to the great organ ruling over the arena. She starts playing, and the tune emerging brings to mind the melodies of the churches from long ago, giving this earthly piece of entertainment the glory of pristine transcendence. The holy music ceases, and she starts singing, freezing the waves as she descends the stairs. The waves tower above her waiting for her to arrive to the bottom.

When she steps down the last stoop, the rhythm returns. The water clashes together over her head, its unstoppable power making the spotlights crash onto the stage around her. The song ends, and only the buzzing and sparkling of the torn electrical wires in the ceiling can be heard and seen.

Mary looked away staring out the window with the images still burning freshly in her retinas. There was something not only in her appearance but also in her words. She seemed to be a vessel conveying a message on behalf of a greater power. Beyond the complexity of her being and the simplicity of her music, there was something ancient, a message that seemed so simple but until this day incomprehensible to humanity, awakening a subconscious notion of predestination and perseverance, announcing the grace that falls upon every being in the galaxy.

Mary had to say the words out loud and taste each word of freedom, knowing that one day these words would shatter a world and bring the land of God to Earth.

“A different lover is not a sin, believe capital H-i-m...”

“What are you mumbling, Mary?” asked Josephine walking into the living room with two cups of still ardent coffee. She placed the cups onto the table before them and sat down onto the white couch smiling at Mary and knowing exactly what she had said.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” said Mary caught in flagrante.

“Nothing, nothing?” said Josephine snickering. “You just quoted her words. You quoted the words of a pop song. Pop, the music that you hate so much, the music that causes the base of the world to crumble with its senselessness and emptiness.”

“I know, but she seems different.”

“Different? Oh, Mary, don’t be so naïve. She is just a pop star who wants to make a living and get rich by acting as if she had just escaped from an asylum. All she does is shock people not really conveying anything substantial, only empty gunshots of clichés and banalities that make any intellectual puke all over the room.”

“I don’t know. She seems to know something that others don’t...”

“How to make money with virtually no effort? Prancing around and singing without even knowing how to?”

Mary continued without acknowledging the scolding Josephine. “No. As if she knew that someone was about to arrive to redeem the words of her songs.”

“A messiah? She is a prophet, you mean?”

Mary nodded, “She has the same air of confidence pertaining to Neil...”

“You are crazy, sweetheart.”

Josephine reached for the remote and raised the volume to continue watching the awards ceremony. Mary turned back to the TV knowing that she was right. The messiah is coming, maybe he is already here in this house, and he will try to change the world for the better.

Neil was not entirely human. It was nothing distinct. It was his whole bearing that radiated a unique certainness that humanity is not evil and everything will turn for the better eventually. In his manners, one could see the essence of life. It was just a notion, nothing more, yet it was there, like words carved into stone, a message that cannot be shattered even if the rock itself is.

Andrew’s Gospel

“Mici! Where are you?”

Andrew looked around from the top of the stairs of their porch hoping that somewhere he would see his white Persian cat hurrying to enter, being done with her morning duties. Every morning she would arrive punctual for her breakfast, the only

time of day apart from dinner when anyone could caress her without suffering any type of penitence whatsoever.

“Mici!”

Andrew started worrying, dreading something horrible had happened. He walked down the stairs and checked under the organ bushes lining the path leading to their home the color of a pale raspberry. Bees were buzzing away over him, flying from one flower to the other. The sweet scent reminded Andrew of something unpleasant, invoking the smell of putrefaction and death he once felt when he found the corpse of their previous cat who was hit by a car and probably thrown into the bushes by a driver trying to hide the proof of his murder.

He stood up scratching his head and walked around the house to the back garden. They lived in the house on the corner, which was even more dangerous because it was surrounded by the road on two sides.

“Mici!”

No movement whatsoever. A breeze blew through the trees that whispered their secrets about time and loss to each other. He walked to the end of the yard and saw a fluffy tale in the green grass right by the trunk of the maple tree.

“Mici, there you are.”

Andrew headed to the tree but had to slow down because the tail was motionless for too long. The breeze brought the scent of iron with itself as he took each step as slowly as possible, postponing the moment of realization a few seconds further. He stopped as horror dashed across his face. He felt himself sinking deeper and deeper into the darkness inside him. He only sensed the environment that first turned fuzzy then started melting, dribbling to the ground. The sounds of the world were muffled, coming from farther and farther away until Andrew was standing in perfect silence and impenetrable darkness in a virtual space where only he and the corpse of Mici resided.

Andrew knelt down and examined Mici’s once snow-white fur now tinted red. Her intestines were protruding from her open abdomen, and Andrew still felt the heat emerging from the body. Andrew caressed her soft fur that made her resemble a beautiful snowflake falling carelessly from the sky to survive on the pavement for only a few seconds then melt into nothingness.

Mici was still warm, she was alive a few minutes before, she was taking her habitual morning stroll a few minutes before, she

was thinking about the delicious breakfast a few minutes before, but not anymore. Andrew examined the wound hoping to learn what caused her untimely departure from this world as if the knowledge would change anything. It could have been a car or a dog, Zeus from next door, Zeus, Mici's greatest enemy who came out victorious from their endless war. Andrew hoped that Mici fought until the end and died with a clear conscience knowing that she did not give up.

Andrew stared into the wound and saw a darkness so much different than the one surrounding him. It was like a miniature black hole that was draining life from Andrew. He thought if he would let go, he would vanish through it into the kingdom of the dead.

Andrew sensed someone stepping into the darkness surrounding him that was somewhere between life and death. That third being brought a light with itself that began its battle with the black hole in Mici's abdomen. Andrew was being pulled from two directions and feared he would be ripped apart. From the corner of his eyes he saw the figure draw closer and closer. The silhouette stopped by Andrew and placed its radiant hand on his shoulder pulling Andrew away from death.

Andrew looked up at the face of the pale angel with translucent eyes. The angel spoke, and its sweet voice echoed in the emptiness they were standing in.

"What happened?" asked the presence.

"She is dead," said Andrew. As he heard his own words, he understood them, he conceived that what happened was irrevocable. He sat down and tears started pouring down his face. He felt the taste of salt in his mouth.

"Did you love her?"

Andrew nodded. "She was everything to me, my only friend."

The angel smiled at him and raised its arm. Millions of hair-like strands made of the purest light emerged from the tip of his fingers, not simply glowing but burning into the darkness. The strands embraced the corpse and started spinning round and round turning Mici into a shining cocoon. The motion of the wires stopped, and the seed-like cocoon rose from the ground and hovered in midair for a second then landed to the ground. The cocoon collapsed within itself turning into the silhouette of a cat that was so familiar to Andrew. The glowing cat sat down and licked her paw then reached behind her ear.

Andrew heard a high-pitched whistle that slowly grew deafening. The light of the glowing silhouette was growing stronger, brighter than the sun itself until it exploded, blowing away the realm of darkness around him. Andrew found himself in the back yard once more.

Mici was sitting on the grass, and when she saw Andrew, she gave out a purr and hopped into the boy's lap. Andrew kissed her then turned to the angel still standing behind him. It was a boy with skin the color of the moon and the eyes paler than the skin of the dead. His curly hair was swaying in the breeze, and his upper lip was decorated by a faint tint of a moustache.

"Who are you? Mici was dead..." said Andrew in awe.

"She wasn't, you were dreaming..." said the boy, but Andrew knew he was lying.

"Only one person can resurrect the dead, my parents told me, his name is..."

A closing backdoor disrupted this conversation just before Andrew could pronounce the name.

"What are you talking about, Andrew?" asked a stern but loving voice.

"He brought back Mici from the dead," said Andrew pointing toward the boy with his little fingers.

"Don't be silly, Andrew, hurry back inside. Mom is searching for you all over the place," said his brother heading toward them. Andrew stood up and hurried back inside as his brother stepped to the boy.

"Peter..." he said greeting him, distending his arm.

"Neil..."

The door closed behind Andrew, and he embraced Mici who had enough of the love and care and wanted to be free, so the claws came out, and she scratched Andrew's face.

"Oh, Mici, I love you so much," said Andrew hugging her tighter and kissing her head once more, feeling blood emerge from the fresh wound.

ADOLESCENCE

Mary's Gospel

Mary hurried up the stairs with a fresh cup of lemonade to surprise her son, the menthol decorating the glass emitting an invigorating and soothing scent. She stepped to Neil's door and opened it.

Neil jolted in his bed and covered himself up with his sheet. He was nude apart from his white underwear. Mary blushed and tried to act as if nothing had happened even if this was the most awkward situation in both of their lives.

She hastily put the glass of lemonade onto the side table feeling herself blush. She didn't look up, but as she turned around, she saw something hidden under the sheets. She saw only its spine, but it was enough for her to understand.

"Please, mother, knock next time..."

"I will, Neil, believe me, I will..."

She hurried out of the room and closed the door behind her leaning against it trying to regain some strength. This was impossible, how could it have come to this. Mary knew that she was the culprit. She felt the world crumble to the ground around her. She tried to raise him to be normal but failed. The worst part was that there was nothing to do now.

She walked down the stairs in desperation. When she turned into the kitchen, Josephine stood up and stepped to Mary to hug her.

"What is the matter, Mary? Why the long face?"

Mary shook her head and felt a savage stream of tears trying to escape her eyes, banging on the dam of her restraint.

"Mary, don't you start crying, what did you see?"

“He is...he is...” she tried to say the last words, but couldn’t.

“What, Mary?”

She collected all her might to say the following words. “He is reading...the Bible...”

As she pronounced the last word, she broke out in tears and slid to the ground, grabbing hold of Josephine’s legs as if she were afraid a stream would wash her away.

Magdalene’s Gospel

Magdalene hurried down the stairs with a sly smile on her face. Her mother leaned against the kitchen’s door frame, watching her daughter descend.

“You look beautiful, sweetheart.”

“Thank you, mother,” said Magdalene as she stopped and pirouetted, ending it with a courtesy. Her mother laughed as the colors of the roses flowers decorating Magdalene’s dress came to a rest. They were both wearing the same dress, and this, Magdalene thought was repulsing.

“Where are you going?” asked her mother.

“To the library,” she said forcing the sweetness of honey into her words.

“You poor thing. When will you be back?”

“I don’t know. When the library closes. Around eight, I guess. Will you still be at home?”

“I am afraid not. The dinner is in the fridge. The opera will end at ten. I think we will be home by half past ten,” said her mother caressing Magdalene’s head.

“Have fun, mother,” said Magdalene hurrying out of her home painted the color of a pale green apple, nothing too extravagant. The house described her life so precisely, nothing too extravagant. She couldn’t understand how her parents could possibly be happy here. She knew that she wouldn’t end up like this. She would become a pop star.

She pranced down their perfectly mowed neon green lawn and skipped down the road, her pink dress with the many romantic flowers swaying in the wind, the butterflies on her hairpin accompanying her every move. She looked back over her shoulder and waved to her mother. She took a right, and her mother dropped out of sight.

She reached into her heart-formed purse for a cigarette. She placed it into her mouth and lit it, trying to inhale the smoke, but it made her cough, so she decided not to smoke it after all. She jumped on the arriving bus and sat down in the back, huddling up, careful not to be seen through the window as the bus sped by their home.

Finally, freedom.

She reached into her purse for the black eyeliner and raised it to her eyes drawing a thick line at the root of her eyelashes, placing some glitter on her eyelids smudging the black line a bit. She looked like an alcoholic and this pleased her, but this was not enough. The neon green hairspray emerged from her purse, and she blew it into her blonde hair creating a strand of green, then, with the black hairspray, a strand of black. She ended the ritual by blowing some hairspray into her hair and messing it up.

She was a rebel against everything her parents symbolized. She hated the mediocrity of the suburban life, the boring afternoons and the silent nights. She was against everything her parents loved, but most of all she was against their frail intolerance, faint but noticeable, the rudiment of the century before. She was afraid she wouldn't stay always this sharp on the edges and life would chisel her until she would become a tiny little pebble, docile and playful, like her mother, the perfect housewife. She shuddered at the thought.

The bus reached the periphery of the city and stopped. Magdalene got off at the shopping mall. The palm trees rising before the complex of glass and concrete gave the place an air of fake exoticism. The parking lot stood empty. It was deserted as the customers drove a few more miles into the heart of the city for a greater selection.

As she hurried toward the entrance, she jumped over the grass that made way through the cracks of the concrete here and there. The doors slid open and she entered. Everything was silent. The shops stood abandoned, some of the windows were shattered. It seemed to her that the rapture had come, and she was left alone, the last human on earth. She hurried to the bathroom to change.

Magdalene closed the door and adjusted the make-up in the fragmented mirror before her, the neon light above her flickering now and then. She took her dress off, carefully folding it and placing it into her bag. She reached for her dark ripped stockings and put them on. Through the holes, her marble-white skin could

be seen. She put her skull T-shirt on, far too larger for her, reaching the top third of her thighs.

She reached for the teddy bear flask and took a sip of the ardent whiskey then placed it back into the heart-shaped bag and hurried to the front of the mall to meet the others.

James and John were sitting on a bench. James was wearing a black leather jacket with cut-offs just reaching his knees, John his usual white blazer with a pink shirt tucked into his white pants. The smoke of their cigarettes rose into the air the same way. They were twins. Their curly blond hair and protruding noses made them look like two Caesars, two rulers of ancient time sitting on a bench before a decadent mall. They were the heirs of one of the two local fish stores. Their family was quite wealthy selling delicatessen, caviar, salmon, and oyster, to the aristocracy of modern times. Of course, they were not as rich to be allowed into the suburban ring her parents belonged to; members of the club, playing golf two times a week and sipping gin and tonic by the pool, but they were wealthy enough to know that the future was open before them.

“What’s up, boys?”

“Nothing,” said John without caring to face Magdalene.

“Some whiskey?” she asked raising the flask. They each took a sip then waited in silence.

“Is Neil coming?” She tried to pronounce these words as if Neil meant nothing to her, but even she heard her voice quiver.

“What do you want from him, whore?” asked James.

“Don’t call me that,” she said insulted.

“But aren’t you one?”

“Well maybe. Anyway, is he coming?”

“There he is,” said John stepping on the butt of his cigarette.

Magdalene turned to face Neil, and she felt her heart rise. She tried to repress the grin distorting her mouth, but her joy was too hard to hide. Neil too was wearing a leather jacket with tight jeans and a white T-shirt, his black boots unlaced embracing his ankle. The waves in his dark hair bounced as he moved. A frail beard was beginning to appear on his unshaved face.

“Wanna trash the mall?” asked Neil reaching them, grabbing the flask from James and taking a long sip.

“What will Fred say?” asked Magdalene a little preoccupied.

“Nothing, he’s drunk and asleep in his booth. I just checked him out,” said John winking at them.

“Cool.”

John and James hopped off the bench and ran inside to disappear behind the sliding doors of the mall, leaving the two of them alone.

“Come here, baby.”

Neil grabbed Magdalene by the waist, and they kissed for long minutes. Magdalene could feel herself turn back to the girl she truly was, afraid and lonely, scared that the world would not accept her for who and what she was. Her ankles shivered a little as Neil’s arm grabbed her stronger and stronger by the waist. The moment he let her go, she turned back into a rebel.

“Let’s go,” she said pulling Neil by his hand toward the mall.

They hurried after John and James. As the doors closed behind them, they heard the sound of glass breaking. They walked down the abandoned main hallway, up the escalator, and found the two of them standing before a shattered store window, holding an empty bottle of beer. Magdalene stepped to a trashcan and kicked it to the ground.

They began chasing each other around the building, and their laughter echoed through this infinite space built for the sole purpose of shopping. The afternoon sun was shining through the windows in the roof. They jumped into the forgotten fountain and started splashing each other as happily as one can be with the stale water, algae growing where the water reached the light blue tiles. Slowly the second flask of whiskey was emptied.

They stopped before the arcade, the only place they respected.

“Do you know where to switch it on?” asked Neil from James.

“Sure.”

John and James hurried away snickering and pushing each other playfully as Magdalene followed Neil into the dark room filled with games deriving from long time ago. They kissed once more when they heard a sound that began with a low murmur, its tone rising high the next second, turning into the chaotic noise one can only hear in a game room.

Neil stepped to a car game and smashed the part where the coins were kept, the coins rolling to the ground. He threw in a dime that rolled to the floor then threw it in again allowing Magdalene to join the game. The race began, and she looked at the cars that were formed of distinguishable pixels. The car moved like a brick on ice lacking any resemblance to the dynamic of real cars. A few years ago this game seemed cool, but now was

so primitive in comparison to the games of today where you control the motion of the characters with your own body. The feeling of retro mockery coming over her amused her and made her smile.

John and James returned, stepping to a zombie shooting game. The screams of civilians rose into the air followed by the desperate roar of the living dead, misunderstood, only wishing to die.

The sun went down and semidarkness fell onto the mall, its lights only glowing here and there. As they played through the forest of games, they heard a zombie-like scowl coming from behind them that made their blood freeze in fear.

“Whathe uck areyu doinere?”

Magdalene turned around.

“Oh, crap. It’s Frank.”

Frank sat on his little electric car facing their way, looking like a water balloon flowing down the sides of the vehicle.

“Let’s get out of here,” shouted John.

They dashed out of the arcade and ran across the fountain as the vehicle buzzed behind them. They began to slalom through the benches, changing direction abruptly to lose their tale, but he was closing in on them. He was about to grab Magdalene’s hair when the escalator appeared in the distance, filling her with a power that prohibited her to give up. James and John ran down the stairs followed by Neil sliding down the rails.

She heard the buzzing grow louder behind her and felt a tingling sensation in the stomach that made her feel alive. She jumped down the stairs, and she could hear the breaks streaking behind her.

“Combaaaaaaa,” screamed Frank, drunk as always, unable to move without the car.

Magdalene stopped a few steps down and turned around mocking him, smiling at his distorted figure. The omega-like wrinkles on his forehead made him look sad, a portrait of a man whose life was filled with rejection and hate from the ones who were not as fat as he was. Magdalene raised her hand and gave him the middle finger then dashed down the stairs to join the others. They left the mall laughing, powered by excitement as a thought was born in Frank’s head to terminate his own life.

John and James hurried home into the night as Magdalene and Neil walked to the bus. Neil sat down on the bench and pulled her

into his lap in this motionless part of the city. Magdalene kissed Neil much more passionately than ever before. She felt his cold hands slide under her shirt, grabbing her breast sensually and awakening a tingling between her legs.

She looked around and saw a few dumpsters lining the road.

“Let’s go, Neil.”

“Where to?”

You know where...” she said winking.

“Now? But I don’t have a condom...”

“I do,” she said pulling him up from the bench to the secluded little place. He resisted only for a second then gave in. Magdalene lay down onto the concrete hidden by the dumpsters and the black bags of trash. She pulled down her tights and felt him kneel down over her. She faced the stars as his face floated into her sight. Neil entered, and the sting pierced through her membrane making her hiss. It was done, she was not a virgin anymore.

As Neil’s movements were becoming faster and the sour smell of a vinegar-like fluid embracing them grew stronger, she felt a pleasure she would not feel for a long time. She felt light burst out of Neil and rush through her body, it wasn’t just pleasure, it was its essence. She couldn’t contain the feeling. She arched her back and screamed in a way that the local bums thought that someone was being murdered.

The light escaped from her body through her orifices, and the two of them fell to the ground panting. As she listened to Neil breathe, she looked up at the stars and knew that one day she would join them. Magdalene searched for her cigarettes in her purse giving one to Neil and putting one in her mouth. The reality fell down onto her shoulders once again.

“What is the matter, Magdalene?”

Magdalene inhaled the smoke and felt too weak to hide her secret.

“I am sick,” she said at last.

Neil sat up and looked at her motionless profile. “Is it serious?”

“They don’t know, we’ve been to so many doctors, but no one knows.”

Neil bent over Magdalene and kissed her on her mouth. “Everything will be alright, you’ll see.”

Magdalene nodded, smiling at the love of her life.

The sound of the bus disrupted the idyllic moment. She jumped up pulling her tights on and hurried to the bus. She sat down in

the back and waved as Neil disappeared behind the curve. She looked at her watch. Midnight.

“Oh, fuck.”

She knew what was coming, but she didn't really care because she was over the thing she feared most in her life. She rose into an otherworldly mood and just floated home only to come back to earth when she found her parents waiting for her, sitting on the stairs.

“Where were you? Why are you dressed like a filthy cunt?”

Peter's Gospel

The night was cold, too dark to see. The city was far behind them, its polluting light unable to hide the celestial bodies so far in the woods. Here the moon and stars ruled over the world, and this felt right.

Peter felt the heat of his piss warm his hands. He listened to it dribble down the rocks into the precipice beneath him. Standing at its edge, Peter felt the fragility of life, and only now did he understand that between life and death there is no barrier, no safe zone, and one can step from life into death whenever they want to.

He shook the last drips off and zipped his pants up, tucking his checked shirt into his beige shorts and adjusting his thick-framed glasses. He looked down but didn't see the bottom as if he were standing at the side of an endless pit. Somewhere he knew if he would jump down, he would fall right into the lap of Hades feeding his faithful companion Cerberus with the bones of the dead and listening to the tingling giggles of the Fates as they cut the thread of their next victim.

As he walked back to the camp, he could feel the branches of the bushes caress his face, not by accident he thought, but on purpose. Alone in the woods, he felt the presence of the earth, still caring and not renouncing her hope that humanity would notice her agony.

In the distance, past the thick curtains of trees that rose to the sky creating a roof with its branches covering the night sky, a flame was flickering, and he slowed down watching the figures who were so far away from their sober selves, so different, yet each showing their essence, not caring whether it is good or bad, shedding the skin of the many centuries of social conventions.

The light illuminated their joyful faces, shining past them and coloring the trunks and the leaves surrounding them with an always moving and changing orange. Peter took a deep breath and headed toward the clearing as their voices turned into a distinguishable murmur gradually morphing into words and sentences lacking any type of mundane logic. It was Neil's voice that he heard first.

"You know when...um...what animal is that...um...wolf...no, no, coyote...yes. So, you know when the coyote runs after that bird and runs off the cliff and...you know, he doesn't fall right away, but walks in the air for a few seconds without noticing...and what was I saying? So, he walks for a few seconds in the air and doesn't fall but like hovers in the air...But what did I want to say? Oh right, I wonder what would happen to us if we wouldn't notice that suddenly there is nothing beneath our feet. Could we walk in the air a little, I wonder?"

Everyone went silent as if instead of this non-sense, someone had told them the secret of life.

After seconds of silence, James began to speak. He was far away, talking in a tone without expression as if his were words were not destined to them, but to the stars themselves.

"Actually there is something tragic in the cartoon, and I believe that the creators knew this. They knew that everyone would cheer for the wolf and secretly hope that he catches the roadrunner eventually. Each time he failed, the more they wished for it to come true. That's why everyone watched it even though the episodes' structure was the same. Because everyone is a wolf...um not wolf...coyote, right. Everyone runs after a dream that is about to come true, but it never actually does, not because they can't grasp it but because they don't want to. Only the courageous few will seize it.

"Just think about it. What would happen to the coyote if he would catch the roadrunner? We don't know, and that is what many want to. Does life continue in a much better way? Or does it lose its meaning? We want to know whether it is a good idea to make our dreams come true or not. Does it make us truly happy or do we lose the meaning of our lives."

Peter moved the branches, and the three jolted up in fear, slowly turning toward him. As he stepped into the light, they all gave out a sigh of relief.

“I thought you were a killer, thank God, Peter, thank God it is you,” said James giving Peter a seductive smile.

Peter smiled back and hurried to take his seat on the fourth empty log by the fire. John faced him and handed him the joint.

“Here, Peter, loosen up, you are always so stiff. God won’t punish you if you take a single shot.”

“I won’t, this is sin. It’s already hard enough for me to tolerate what you do.”

“Bla, bla, bla. Always the same old shit.”

Peter looked down heavy-heartedly and wished with all his heart that he could just be like any other normal adolescent, but he wasn’t. He was indoctrinated with orthodox religious views of his parents, hating sin by principle and not because it was truly wrong. This defense is far too weak in comparison with the knowledge of why it is wrong. Peter wanted to be normal, like the rest of them, but he wasn’t. There was a part of his soul that he was taught to hate and was trying desperately to rip out not yet realizing that he couldn’t.

“Leave him alone, John,” said James and patted Peter on the back. “He’s old enough to know what he wants to do.”

Peter gave James a smile of gratitude. He looked up at James because he knew he was so much different than what he showed the world. It was just a notion that soon would grow into knowledge sturdier than rock itself.

“What are you doing next year? I mean now that high school ended?” asked Peter examining the others who slowly returned back to reality from their elevated state as the fumes evaporated through their pores. It was John who answered first.

“I don’t know. James and I are probably taking over the fish shop since it seems you don’t want to.”

Peter thought of the fish shop his parents built up with James’ and John’s parents. His parents insisted that he should leave the shop to begin his theological studies and Peter, like always, agreed.

“Neil?” asked Peter.

“Nothing, probably. And you, Peter? Are you still going to study God?”

Peter smiled and nodded, feeling his conviction toward religion had decreased through the years as he grew older and began to think for himself.

A silence fell on the group as they understood that they had grown up, and none of them knew what to do. They were adults, the whole world pushed down onto their shoulders now, and no matter how hard they shrugged, they couldn't rid themselves from the burden, not anymore. They knew that the carelessness was over, but they postponed the full realization a little further as John prepared the next joint.

"Does anybody know what happened to Magdalene? Is it true what they say?" asked Peter looking into the red eyes of Neil.

"Oh yeah. She just finished her first track. In a few months everybody will be playing her songs," answered Neil and fell silent.

"Did she really change her name?"

"L€ne," answered Neil after a few seconds.

"And why does she spell it with a euro sign? How do you pronounce it?"

Neil just shrugged. "Like a simple *e* I guess, probably pronouncing the last *e* as well."

"Do you miss her?" asked Peter knowing that he was wondering into a dangerous territory.

"Fuck off, Peter. She's a whore."

"I guess."

"The sun is about to rise any minute now," said Neil. "If we hurry, we can see it from the top of the mountain."

The four of them stood up. Each of them took their blanket and placed it around their shoulders. Peter's was red, James' was blue, John's was a pale orange, and Neil's was white. As they hurried away from the fire, they seemed apostles of ancient times.

The dark sky was turning grey, and all the colors were dull as if the entire globe had a grey undertone. They walked up the steep slope, grabbing the rocks to go higher and higher. Empty plastic bags and aluminum cans decorated their path as they tried to reach the sky.

"How far is the top?" asked Peter grabbing a vine that didn't hold his weight, causing him to slide a few feet back. "Shit," he screamed. When he thought this was the end, he felt James's strong arm touch his behind, preventing him to fall any further.

"Are you alright, Peter?" asked James concerned.

"I guess."

"Hurry up," Peter heard the others shout.

He finally arrived to the top. James patted his back and sat down on one of the rocks. Peter absorbed the panorama around him.

The border between the pinewoods and the suburbs moved higher up the mountain as humanity spread, defeating nature. The river sparkled like a single silver thread, dams inhibiting its flow toward the sea now and then. The lakes seemed like great footprints of a giant. In the distance they could see the city with two distinct areas. The periphery of the city was slowly dying as everyone either moved to the center or to the suburbs. In the center they saw the many skyscrapers stretching to the sky. One building stood out from the rest, its top was decorated with silver moons setting one on top of the other, weakly reflecting the morning light. The sea, guarded by a lighthouse and an iron woman, was filled with ships arriving and leaving the port. Peter sat down on one of the lonely rocks. The nature was so much scarcer at this height, and he could feel it was harder to breathe.

The sun rose, the horizon splitting it in two. Suddenly two hands appeared from within the sun, grabbing its sides and pulling it far apart. The hands were followed by the head of an old man with hair white like snow and his beard spiraling down toward infinity. The old man jumped out of the sun and stood up. As he towered toward space, his feet alone were as large as half the city. The four boys looked at this unlikely apparition and did not dare to move.

The man roared, and his voice awoke a wind so strong that it almost blew them away. The roar turned into a cough.

“Oh my God, I’m sorry, it’s just, I have a cold.” His voice was so loud it caused the world to shake.

“I think I must whisper,” he said. “Where are you?” he asked searching for them, squinting their way. “Oh, there you are.” The figure knelt down and reached for a pair of golden glasses residing in an invisible pocket in his toga and put them on.

The four boys were too scared to move. Neil was the first one to stand up. “Who are you?”

The figure laughed and bent closer to Neil carefully examining him as if he were a precious porcelain figure. Peter inspected the man’s face, and for an instant, he recognized the traits of Neil. After the laughter ceased, the shaking world calmed down as well.

“Don’t you recognize me? I am your father,” he said looking at Neil then turned toward the others. “This is my Son whom I love. Listen to him.” Peter nodded. James and John were shaking.

Neil’s face had an air of fury. “I am not your son. How dare you come here and state you are my father. Where were you all this time? You were nowhere when I grew up. You are nothing to me.”

“I am your father no matter what you say. You always knew you were different, Neil, and you know what must be done.”

“You may be my biological father, but I don’t feel anything for you. My real parents are at home.”

Neil turned around and started climbing down. The man gave out a sigh.

“You will understand that no one can run away from their fate.”

Neil didn’t answer. The figure turned to the three of them.

“You can speak of this only after Neil has returned from the dead. So, shhh,” said the man raising his index fingers to his lips, his spit falling on to them like rain.

“From where?” asked Peter with incomprehension.

“When it is time you’ll understand.”

Peter nodded as the figure jumped back into the sun, and everything turned back to normal. The rosé rays of the morning light caressed the face of the world.

“Holy shit. Did you see this? Sick trip. What was *in* this weed?” asked John at the verge of laughter,

“Shut up, John,” said Peter, “what we saw was reality.”

John looked at James as if Peter were crazy and began to laugh lying down onto the ground.

John’s Gospel

“What a trip we had. Camping is awesome. Right?” asked John not facing Neil as the taste of strawberry dissolved in his mouth. He was enchanted by the many people hurrying in all directions, everyone living their own life. He twirled his long blond hair around his finger then released it, examining his white blazer and dark blue shirt, searching for spots. He was relieved not to find any.

“Yeah, it was quite cool. Do you like working at the fish store?” asked Neil.

“I guess. It’s not much fun, but at least I can stand on my own two now. Have you decided what you are going to do? You could go and work for your mother at the furniture shop...”

“I won’t.”

John and Neil were sitting before the ice cream parlor on iron chairs one next to the other protected from the sun by a rainbow-colored umbrella. They were facing the road and enjoying as the coolness soothed them from within. Now and then, a car sped by, other than that only the constant murmur of humanity could be heard.

Across the street they saw the park with the fountain in the middle spouting water high into the sky before the great white building of the town hall. For the first time John enjoyed the milieu of the suburbs, and this extraneous feeling surprised him a bit.

Neil rested his head on the back of the iron seat and closed his eyes.

John faced Neil’s ice cream and could not believe what he saw, his surprise culminating in the following words: “Oh, crap.”

Neil opened his eyes and saw John’s face distorted with terror. Neil looked down and what he saw made him jolt up causing the ice cream to wobble in the cone a little. Neil saved it just in time before it fell into his lap. A face was smiling from the strawberry ball, giving a wink to Neil. *Ting.*

“Hello, Neil. I understand that you’re mad at me, but what would have happened if you knew me before? Would you have become a better man?”

“Maybe not better, but maybe happier.”

“Happier? Neil, don’t be silly. Are you truly unhappy because you grew up with two moms who loved you more than anyone? Look into your soul and answer me sincerely. Is this the true cause of your unhappiness?”

Neil turned away with apologizing eyes not directed to the face, rather his parents at home. “No, it’s not their fault.”

“Then why are you unhappy, Neil?”

“Shut up.”

Neil stepped to the garbage can and tossed the ice cream inside.

“Come, John,” said Neil waving towards him.

As they left, they heard the voice coming from the depths of the garbage can. “You know what you have to do, don’t run away from your fate, this is the only source of your unhappiness.”

John hurried after Neil who was storming across the road into the park. John tried to dodge the people that somehow parted before Neil, and like waves, collided behind him, crashing against John.

“Wait, Neil.”

Neil stopped, and when John caught up with him, they both hurried into the park.

They walked through the great oak trees lining the gravel path as the sound of the water splashing became louder and louder. They stopped at a bench and sat down. The breeze brought with itself the cooling spur of the fountain. John finished his ice cream, trying to solve the puzzle of Neil’s glance.

“What we saw in the woods was true, right?”

Neil just nodded. John was not surprised because he always knew, but it was so much simpler to live in self-denial. A pigeon landed on their bench and started cleaning its wings. As it moved, the feathers on his neck sparkled in the color of oil spills. With a pop its head exploded, and from the neck, the cells started proliferating into a tiny head of an old man, his white beard flowing down.

“You can’t run forever, Neil,” said the bird. “You know why I sent you to earth.”

“Leave me alone,” said Neil pushing the bird off the bench. It opened its wings to fly and landed upon John’s head who was too terrified to move.

“What are you scared of, my Son?”

“Nothing.”

“Neil, everyone is scared before finding their way.”

“They won’t understand me, and I’ll fail you.”

“I didn’t send you to Earth to convert the whole globe. All you must do is deliver the message, the rest is up to humanity.”

“Leave me alone, I was much better without you. Come, John.”

They stood up and left the bird behind as black clouds gathered over them. The old oaks started morphing into the face of the old man, the many flowers lining the road creating elaborate patterns morphed as well, each strand of grass and finally even the pebbles on the path resembled the same face.

“Don’t be scared,” they chanted in perfect unison. “Fulfill your fate, this is all I ask from you.”

“No, No, NO,” said Neil starting to run. They hurried past the fountain as Neil pressed his hands against his ears trying to

silence the words. With a clash, a lightning struck, and water came pouring down onto the world, each drop the face of Neil's father.

"Don't be scared. Fulfill your fate, this is all I ask from you," the world sang.

Neil fell to the floor. "Leave me alone," he screamed, and his voice exploded from his mouth and rose to the sky, piercing the clouds, causing them to part. The sun reappeared, and John saw the face of Neil's father in the sun. He winked, *ting*, then faded away. Neil's body fell to the ground.

The park gave out a sigh as the drops refreshed it after the days of dryness. The green of the grass and the leaves of the trees, the millions of colors of the flowers radiated. Through the cells creating them, the perspiration of the Gloria could be sensed.

John grabbed Neil and pulled the unconscious body to a bench nearby. Neil's face awoke something in him that was more than friendship but less than love. John knew that he would never leave him even if the whole world would turn away. Neil awoke and looked at John with his translucent eyes pleading for help to find a way not to fulfill his destiny.

Matthew's Gospel

Matthew lit the cigarette watching the bustling sea of people beneath. He played on the invisible piano before him, imagining the sounds emerging from the nonexistent keyboard. He smelled the rice powder around him. Men and women with great white wigs listened to him play, the king himself nodding in recognition. His cellphone buzzed, and he quickly picked it up.

"Sell, Matthew, sell now," he heard through the phone. Matthew faced the clock hanging over the crowd like a sword. These words were like the gun signaling the beginning of a race. He threw the cigarette bum to the floor, pushed himself away from the Doric column, and jumped into the sea of people wearing suits. It was pure chaos for the laical but not for the ones here. Matthew dodged the people hurrying in every direction. He dashed toward his laptop at the other side of the room. He jumped over someone ducking to tie his shoelaces, slid across the table, and pressed enter.

Done, he texted on his phone. Matthew heard the bell ringing. The stock was closed. Papers flew into the air and were falling like

autumn leaves, the sighs of desperation mixed with the exultations of glory. Matthew sat down to rest a little, realizing that he was tired and could not do this any longer. Slowly the room emptied, and cleaners started gathering the papers into a pile with the help of their brooms. The room looked like the inside of the Pantheon except for the many monitors fastened to the columns, and the booths growing out from the marble pavement like mushrooms here and there.

Matthew heard a whimper coming from the far end of the room. He stood up and walked across the trading area as the sound grew louder and louder. The cleaners were immersed in their work, only the monotone sound of the strands of the broom brushing on marble could be heard. He jumped up the stairs, hurried through the hiatus between two columns, and had to stop in the semi-dark corridor surrounding the arena.

A man was lying in the corner shaking. He grabbed his left pectoral muscle as if he were trying to prevent his heart from escaping the prison of the rib cage. He sighed one last time. The shaking stopped, and the body was motionless, dead. Matthew recognized himself.

He heard a deep rumble, and the building started shaking. A great crack appeared in the ceiling and then it began crumbling. The cleaners continued with their job as if nothing had happened, but Matthew was determined not to die this way. He dashed down the corridor as the columns, one after the other, fell and crashed against the wall behind him. He flung out of the two-winged door and down the marble stairs leading into the spacey atrium. He pushed the great entrance door open and hurried down the stairs leading to the road in the red rays of the afternoon sun as the building crumbled behind him with a bang.

The city was completely empty, not a single soul was to be seen. He walked in the middle of the abandoned road with the many skyscrapers tickling the sky. He dusted off his grey suit fitting him so perfectly it was hard to move in it. The neck of his white shirt was suffocating him, so he loosened his thin black tie and felt a little freer.

The world itself started shaking, and a shadow appeared, growing wider around him accompanied by a whistle. He saw a great slab of concrete falling right on top of him. He started running as the slab crashed into the asphalt road behind him. The skyscrapers before him were cracking as well, and the top parts

were sliding to collapse onto the road. He took a right not knowing where to hide when he saw two great oak trees signaling the entrance to the grand park in the center of the city.

He looked up and saw a skyscraper breaking in two, plundering right onto him, the splinters of the windows falling upon him like rain. He felt the fragments cut his face and rip his suit. He began dashing toward the park as the building was precipitating right onto him.

The entrance was only a few feet away, and Matthew jumped. The building crashed to the ground with a boom, and the sound wave thrust Matthew into the sky. He fell onto the gravel path, his body rolling a few feet.

The booms were echoing in the distance as the city was being destroyed, but he was safe here. He stood up, dusted his clothes off, but stopped because he didn't actually care about how dirty they were. He felt at home in the green forest and did not mind the concrete world becoming one with the ground around him.

He staggered to a bench and lay down as the sun waltzed out of the world, giving place to the night. Matthew fell asleep ever so swiftly and deeply as the stars over the city were visible for the first time in many hundreds of years.

A pleasant tune hit his ear. He opened his eyes and sat up. It was dusk, and everything else was silent, the world still sleeping. He searched for the source of the tune. It was coming from a drunkard heading his way. The figure was far away, approaching at the end of the corridor lined by trees like columns withholding the sky. It was a man, and his strong contours were embraced by light, a figure dancing in the fire. Matthew put his shades on, for the light was too painful to bear. The man drew closer and took a sip from the bottle of whisky in his hand now and then.

Even though his voice was husky, it felt as if he were singing to him like a mermaid, seducing him and caressing his whole body. The figure was not singing distinct words. Matthew realized that the light embracing him emanated from his body, like millions of strands withholding a puppet.

The man stopped and bent forward trying not to lose his balance. He noticed Matthew staring at him, and in the same instant, the light disintegrated into thin air. Matthew took his shades off and waited for the man to approach him.

"May...Isit...down?" asked the man, his voice tripping over his own words.

“Go ahead,” said Matthew.

The man sat down and lay back on the bench lighting a cigarette and putting his hair behind his ear exposing his wild and untamed beard. He looked like a wild man, but his translucent eyes made him transcendental. The smoke rose into the air, and Matthew recognized the scent of weed.

“May I have a shot?” asked Matthew. The man handed him a joint, and Matthew inhaled the fume. He felt all the stress that was building up in his veins through the years at the stock exchange vanish in a whim.

“Nice suit,” said the man and snickered. Matthew examined his suit that was now perfectly intact. He caressed his face but did not feel the wounds caused by the raining fragments of glass.

“What is a business man like you doing here at an hour like this?” asked the man.

Matthew felt an urge to confide in him. “I saw a man die today, not able to bear the stress anymore...”

“Rad,” said the man.

“I realized that I didn’t want to die this way...my work is not something worth dying for, at least not for me...”

“So?” asked the man facing the sky as if he were seeing someone.

“I don’t know, I guess then it is a waste of time then. I earn pretty well but still can hardly find the power to wake up and do the job...”

“Then leave...”

“...and do what?”

“Pursue your dreams...”

Matthew was amused by his words but didn’t want to offend him by laughing. “How can I call you, my dear friend?”

“Neil.”

“Neil, life is not Hollywood, dreams never come true.”

“Not if you don’t even try...maybe you’ll find out that what you are doing now is not what you are meant to do, and this is the specific cause of your unhappiness...” Neil stopped for a second, deep in thought, as if he understood something. When the silence was becoming too long, he continued, “You have some money put apart I figure.”

Matthew nodded.

“Take a break and pursue your dream, and if you fail, at least you’ll have a clear conscience knowing you’ve tried. You have the

luxury many don't, to go back to your previous life if the new one doesn't work out..."

Matthew inhaled the smoke. He felt himself rise into the air.

"Don't you have a dream?" asked Neil, his eyes bathing in red.

Matthew smiled to himself and said under his nose, "To play the piano..."

"Great. You are very lucky. I don't have any. Good luck, old friend," said Neil standing up and leaving.

Matthew stood up as well. "Wait, where can I find you?" he asked searching in his pockets. "Here take my card and ring me up if you need anything, not as if I can give you anything until you yourself don't know what you need."

Matthew marveled at the words that didn't pertain to him, words so strange and still said by him out loud. He handed him his card, and Neil slid it in his rear pocket. He walked away and left Matthew alone to ponder about the things he heard. What if life and Hollywood sometime do coincide?

Matthew left the other way to see that the world did not crumble, not yet, but it would if the economy would crash definitively. He did not despise the world of finance but couldn't do as if he enjoyed it either. He never forgot his dream, just thought about it as a child's fantasy. He could never rid himself of a picture living in his brain, him playing the piano merrily in a dim bar the day when the Reaper pays him a visit.

Peter's Gospel

"Ammon, the Pharaoh's orders are to pursue the Israelites."

Ammon watched the messenger hurry away, the dust slowly settling after him in the silent side alley. A bad feeling was overcoming him, but he didn't have time to care. His beautiful wife was standing in the entrance with her hand on their boy's shoulder. The boy was looking at his father and sucking his thumb not really understanding what was happening around him.

Ammon stepped to his wife and gave her a passionate kiss with a notion that this would be their last encounter. He shook these troubling thoughts away. They were armed and the Israelites were not. He knelt down to his son and caressed his face bearing the beauty of his mother and the strong lines of his father. He was the embodied innocence radiating all the goodness and virtue in the world.

“Whatever happens, listen to your mother.”

The child nodded and watched his father turn away. As Ammon stepped out of his home, he felt two little arms clutching his legs. He looked down and saw his child’s deep hazel eyes sparkling as a tear refracted the sunlight.

“Everything will go well. I’ll be home by nightfall.”

His wife picked the boy up, and they both watched Ammon leave through the buildings emerging from the desert sand itself. As he walked through the streets, he sunk deep in thought. He tried to find the origin of these emotions of finiteness and lassitude, trying to convince himself that nothing would happen.

He walked through the narrow streets as the sun shone down on him through the intricate cracks created by the labyrinth of houses. People hurried by him with great woven baskets to be filled up in the bazaar at the other end of the city. He walked by a snake hypnotizer and stopped for a second. The perpetually pulsating tune rose from the brass flute into the air. The lid of the basket slid to the right, and a dark green snake emerged, each scale glistening like many emeralds and his eyes sparkling ruby red. It left the golden sand behind, rising toward the lolite blue sky. The silver bracelets of the hypnotizer glowed in the sunlight.

It was getting late, so Ammon hurried away to the stables. As he approached the tiny building covered with reed, he heard the neighing of the horses that were being mounted. He stepped into the darkness of the stables and adjusted his white toga, cleaning his chocolate brown muscles of the invisible layer of sand, then stepped onto the carriage with the muscular black steed ready to receive the orders.

The doors opened, and light burst into the stable. He swung the whip, and its crack made the horse stand on its hind two feet and gallop away through the city gates.

The others were already lined in formation before the city walls. He was the last one to arrive only to hear the last few syllables of the orders. The city gates closed behind them, and he faced the never-ending ocean of sand. The horizon was lost in the mirage of water caused by the emanating heat. He heard the trumpets pierce the silence, and the hundreds of carriages left the city far behind.

They rode for many hours rising and descending the many dunes. Many miles before them, the sky was filled with menacingly dark clouds. They weren’t simply dark, but they were

black, draining all light from the world and beating down on the desert with an ever so strange storm.

As they grew closer, they saw that the infuriated tempest was composed of not water but tongues of fire. They stopped before the impenetrable burning curtain and saw the Israelites hurry away farther and farther into the desert.

Ammon heard the voice of the captain giving out the orders. "Everybody rest. The moment this rain ceases we continue our journey. They will not be able to cross the red sea. Be ready to continue any second."

Ammon walked back to his carriage and lay down into the burning sand. He closed his eyes and tried to relax. The heat was beating down on them, and he felt the liquor embracing his brain boil, cooking it like an egg. The day flew away quickly, but the curtain of fire was still blocking the way. The sun set covering the desert with the cool night. Ammon watched the army dancing as the light from the flames fell upon them. It was growing colder, and a gentle breeze caressed him and calmed him down causing him to fall asleep.

"Wake up," someone bellowed.

Ammon opened his eyes to see that the clouds had parted and the curtain had dissolved into thin-air. He jumped onto the carriage and rode away after the others as the sun reemerged over the horizon.

The sea appeared, tingling amidst the arid grounds of the desert. The wind brought a salty scent with it. The front of the never-ending line of carriages stopped for some reason, and Ammon drove closer to the shore to investigate. He had to stop because he didn't believe his own eyes. The water was parted creating a corridor leading through the perpetually fluent walls of water. The captain hesitated for a second then turned toward the army.

"We swore to follow the orders of the Pharaoh. After me!"

The captain swung his whip, and his carriage hurried through the corridor with the walls of water. The army followed, and soon Ammon was riding past the translucent sea. The fish were swimming about as if nothing had happened. The bottom of the sea, where the army was riding, was covered with suffocating clams, dying sea stars, and flapping fish begging for some water. The Israelites were already safe and sound on the other bank. Ammon hoped for a second that they would succeed, that they

would survive, when a great bang erupted echoing around the world.

Ammon stopped his horse and looked up to see the walls closing in on them. The crashing mass of water thrust him in all directions, and his body obeyed its undeniable and undefeatable power. As the water poured down into his lungs, he thought about his family, his beautiful and innocent child who was condemned to grow up alone, in constant hunger, helpless against the evil powers of the world without his father. The world turned black, and Ammon road away through the dark tunnel toward the light.

He soon reached its end and stopped his cart on top of the clouds. He jumped off the carriage and headed toward the golden gate that opened as he drew closer. Light emerged from behind the gates, and the sound of trumpets echoed, announcing the arrival of the greatest ruler of all. Tiny putti materialized from nowhere with the body of infants, but the decadent wrinkled face of ancient beings. They flew around Ammon with their tiny flutes and blew their screeching tune into his ears. He tried to chase them off, but they returned like irritating flies in the unbearable heat of summer.

Soon God appeared, sitting on his golden thrown carried by four Seraphim who, instead of having two arms and two legs, had millions of wings emerging from all over their body. Ammon could see how they suffered under the burden they were carrying, but the fear reflected in their eyes suggested that they did not dare to complain.

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. All the earth is filled with his Glory. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. All the earth is filled with his Glory. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. All the earth is filled with his Glory,” they chanted over and over again, barely being able to speak, about to crumble under the weight of the God who grew far too fat in the laziness of the heavens.

Guarding the throne were the Cherubs. Monsters. They had four faces, one of a man, an ox, a lion, and a griffon vulture. Their conjoined wings covered their faces, and they were standing on ox’s feet. The sound they gave out as they saw Ammon, made him tremble in fear, the roar of the devil.

Following God came the rest of the hierarchy. Hovering in mid-air came the Thrones, beryl-colored wheels-within-wheels with their rims covered with hundreds of eyes announcing the godly justice. Then came the Dominions who looked like divinely

beautiful humans with a pair of feathered wings wielding orbs of light fastened to the heads of their scepters and on the pommel of their swords. Then came the Virutes with their maps of space controlling the movement of all celestial bodies, and the Powers with their million-page-long encyclopedias guarding the history of the world, then the Principalites, the educators and guardians, rulers of races, nations, and people, bearing a golden crown and a scepter, then the seven Archangels, Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel, Selaphiel, Jegudiel, and Zadkiel. Finally the millions of common angels appeared and took their places, all of them gathering behind God. Ammon waited for centuries until the entourage finally settled down.

God cleared his throat. "You have sinned, Ammon, and I sentence you to burn in the flames of hell until the end of time. You may speak in your defense, but I can tell you there isn't the tiniest possibility that I grant you pardon," said God as a putto placed a golden cup of coffee in his mighty hands. "You have sinned against my chosen people," he said taking a sip.

"Who are your chosen people?" asked Ammon.

"Ah, good question. Now the Jews, but I decided to widen my base. Soon anyone will be allowed to join, they will be called the Christians. Oh," he said grabbing his protruding belly, "this coffee is a little too strong, my bowel movements... Angels, bring me the godly loo."

Four angels arrived, carrying a golden toilette booth. They placed it before God who disappeared behind the red satin curtains.

"And what happens to those who are not part of the chosen people?" asked Ammon.

"They all have sinned," he said from the booth.

"Then why did you create me when you knew that I would commit sin and pursue your chosen people? Why didn't you spare them the despotic ruling of the Egyptians?"

"I needed to make my people witness the mighty God I am. I needed people like you. I need sinners..."

"So, basically, you created me to make them suffer, and now that I do as I was ordained to do, I am declared a sinner? Why make them suffer, why create us if you could just show yourself to them and make them see your glory?"

“My throne is far too big to fit through the dark tunnel you came in from, so I had to find another way. Do you see my ingenuity and godly astuteness?”

His entourage unanimously clapped and cheered.

“I think you are crazy,” said Ammon. “I left my wife and child behind just because you play with us like a spoiled child with his dolls.”

“Silence, you impudent scum. Open the doors of hell.”

The clouds parted before Ammon’s feet, and great flames rose to the sky, scorching his hair.

“Push him inside,” he ordered.

A putto appeared behind Ammon, but he just slapped him to the floor. “Don’t bother. I am glad and willing to be consumed by the flames. I could never serve a deluded psychopath infant like your God.”

Ammon jumped, and the warm flames embraced him. As he fell, he heard the godly toilette flush, and golden turds fell from the sky like rain.

Peter woke up drenched in sweat, bathing in the rays of the afternoon sun. He rubbed his forehead as the images of his dream came pouring in. He examined the pictures one by one, scenes about a maniac residing in the deepest cell in an asylum where his insanity is given birth by the mother of ignorance who constantly copulates with the father of everything illogic.

He knew too well that what he saw was more than a dream but much less than reality. He saw the God his parents made him serve and shuddered. He saw an idol that was about to crack and crumble to the ground to be forgotten forever, never to be respected and praised again. It was a mistake that humanity must never make again. The fog blurring his future now rose, he knew what had to be done. He had to leave college and become one of Neil’s pupils.

He felt a compulsive force that made him rise from the bed and find Neil even though he was not picking up his phone, so he decided to visit the playground, the place that was so important as they grew up.

He hurried down the wooden stairs, holding the white railings. The moss green carpet felt soft under his socks. His parents were sitting on the light green sofa with great palms bending over them, offering them refuge and intimacy.

“I’ll be coming home soon,” he said as he tied his shoelaces.

He hurried down the cobblestone path lined by the rhododendron bushes to jump onto the arriving bus. The suburbs gave place to the desolating scenery of the periphery of the city. The bus stopped, and Peter jumped off.

Stray dogs chased each other, and Peter hopped out of their way before he was pushed over. In the distance sirens could be heard. It was becoming a hostile neighborhood, but to them it was more than a place of peril and danger, it was the place where they had grown up. This blinded their sight, morphing what they saw into a sweet and nostalgic place. He walked through a dark alley to step out into a playground surrounded by abandoned buildings.

He heard the screeching sound of not oiled, rusty metal grinding against each other. The red sun set behind the building. A figure was sitting on the swings, staring down deep in thought. Peter approached him.

“Hi, Neil.”

Neil only nodded.

“Where were you last night? Where were you today? I’ve been worried sick...”

Peter sat down and pushed himself away from the ground, swinging back and forth. As the breeze caressed his face, he flew back in time and felt young again. Everything he thought right and moral was about to change drastically thanks to this boy who was not yet able to accept his fate.

“I had a dream, Neil...”

Neil did not listen to him and looked up as if he hadn’t said a word. “I know what has to be done.”

“You do?” asked Peter surprised.

“Yes. But tell me how will we convince them? We must defeat an ideology of two-thousand years.”

“I know, Neil, but think of your predecessor who had to the same and still succeeded, more or less.”

Peter fell silent then asked the question that was always on the tip of his tongue, but he never dared to ask. “Did you know him, Neil? I mean Jesus.”

“Yes and no. The body I never saw, but we share the same soul. We are the same, just the vessel is different.”

“Did you always know who you were?”

Neil nodded. The moon took its place and watched as the two children slowly faded away. A rat pushed a trashcan over and fled the scene.

“How do we start, Peter?”

“It’s simple, we reach out to the people.”

Neil pushed himself away from the ground, and Peter saw a drop of tear sparkle in his eyes like one of the many stars in the sky. Neil searched in his pocket for a cigarette and placed it in his mouth.

The silver buttons on his black leather jacket sparkled like many diamonds, and the gel in his hair shone like many micron thick silver strands. Only now did Peter see how pale he was. His beauty was not of this world. Peter felt aroused a little even though he knew that Neil was attracted solely to women. His translucent eyes mesmerized Peter because it bore the plasticity of water but the sturdiness of rock. Each time he looked into them he lost himself a little as if he were being attracted toward a precipice on the bottom of which the infinite ocean was awaiting him, not the raging oceans of Earth, but a docile and lovable mass of water that gives life and takes it away in time, he only had to jump.

Peter decided to leave the conservative religious ways and step onto this virgin path, but he knew far too well that this was a risk that the disciples of the past took as well and eventually were rewarded. He saw the wonders with his own eyes and knew who Neil’s father was. They would be condemned and called insane, but he didn’t care because he knew the truth, and eventually the rest of humanity would see it too.

“Why are you sad, Neil? You have a place in the world, you should rejoice.”

“I know, I am happy...”

“But then why are you frowning?”

“It’s hard to learn that your youth ended. We have grown up.”

“But think about what you can achieve, what an adventure awaits you.”

“I know, but only now do I really understand how fragile the barrier is between life and death. We are growing old, and the end is approaching.”

“Don’t be so melodramatic, Neil. I have an idea, you won’t like it, I don’t like it either, but hear me out.”

“Not now, not yet.”

Neil pushed himself away and Peter did the same. They swung back and forth bathing in the moonlight. The world that existed behind them slowly vanished.

ADULTHOOD

Philipp's Gospel

Philipp lay back in the seat of his provisional office he occupied every Sunday where he worked as a volunteer on the usual bureaucratic assignments the church ran on. He smelled the tips of his hands and still felt the smell of fish from the never-ending hours of packing the crates from the truck into the fridge during the week. It was the smell of work, of time spent usefully, and this warmed Philipp's heart.

The pen tinted the paper blue as it moved swiftly in his agile hands. He brushed away a stray curl from his forehead and rested for a second. The nameplate on the reverend's white door on the right sparkled gold. He faced the window before his desk, looking down at the park. A breeze entered and brushed the leaves of the palm tree in the vase standing by the brown sofa beneath the window. He enjoyed the silence that one only feels when their heart is at peace.

He bent over his desk once more and began with the booking that poured the numbers like a spring turning into a great river, not permitting the slightest delay because the overflow is imminent and will flood the towns and cities in the vicinity, destroying the lives of many.

The moment he stepped over the threshold leading back to work, two knocks interrupted him.

"Come in," said Philipp facing the door that opened.

A familiar face appeared.

"Peter..." said Philipp with a tone of false welcoming and mockery. "What brings you here, old friend?"

"Hello, Philipp," said Peter coldly greeting him and grasping his hand a little harder than necessary.

"Come do sit down."

As Philipp sat back into his chair, he saw a strange young man enter after Peter. Even though the stranger was silent, he filled the room just like a gas and entered into his lungs to dissolve in his blood. The man's wild hair and untamed beard coupled with the placid eyes awoke in Philipp a sort of attraction lacking any type of sexuality.

"Let me introduce to you Neil," said Peter.

Philipp shook hands with Neil. Even though his soft hands were warm and his grasp gentle, his fingers embraced Philipp's hand with a strictness, not conveying brute force, rather a spiritual strength.

As Peter and Neil sat down on the couch before the window, Philipp asked, "How is your fish shop going, Peter?"

"Great, Philipp, simply great."

"Oh, don't lie, all your customers are coming to us, your once thriving shop is about to go bankrupt any moment."

"This is not why we came, Philipp."

"Oh, Peter. Talk to your parents, we are willing to buy your shop. Your parents can keep their jobs if they wish. I promise."

"It took their whole life to build up their shop, and they are not giving up."

"John's parents are willing to sell..."

"Don't try these dirty little tricks on me. I'm not stupid, they're not willing to sell. Anyway, we're here for much more important reasons."

Philipp sighed and lay back in his chair. "Alright, how can I help you?"

Peter squirmed in his seat and gave a squint to Neil who seemed to be here against his will. Philipp looked at them not having the slightest idea what they had come here for.

Peter's family had sturdy religious values and always despised Philip and his community a little, believing them more as a sect than the rebirth of a religion. They knew, just like Philipp, that the wonders performed by the reverend were not real, but what they couldn't accept, unlike Philipp, was that the reverend was doing this to expand the flock of God. Moreover he fed the need of people to escape from reality into a world where wonders do exist, and God is so close, not only visible, but tangible as well. The reverend was working for a good cause. These illusions weren't harmful and attracted those people who were deaf to the words of God and wanted to see actions.

“There is no easy way to put this...” said Peter stopping mid-sentence.

Philipp reached for the glass of water and before taking a sip said, “Go on, Pete, go on.”

“...I think that Neil here is the new Messiah.”

Philipp spat the water out like a fountain, so great was the shock caused by this insolence. He put the glass back on the table and wiped his mouth.

“Excuse me?” he asked whispering.

Philipp looked at Peter who didn't try to explain or correct his words making Philipp realize that he was truly convinced of his truth. Philipp scrutinized his face, searching for a grin, anything that would prove that he was joking, but Peter's face stayed as still as the sturdiest rock.

“Get out, Peter. You of all people, you, the child of the most bigot believers, how could you say something so atrocious?”

“What my parents believe in is one thing, what I believe in is another. You know how I was raised, this is the exact reason you should believe me. Hence my family's bigotry I truly believe that he is his son.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“Look at him.”

“Look? Why?” Philipp turned to face Neil, but couldn't see anything. The sun burst through the window, blinding Philipp and causing him to squint. Neil was bathing in light. Philipp stood up and let the shades down then sat back into his seat.

“Prove it, Neil. Do something,” said Philipp.

Peter turned to Neil with anticipation, and Philipp saw that he too did not know what was about to happen. They both watched him in perfect silence.

Neil sat in his chair staring at the desk. Philipp looked at his hand and only now noticed how white they were, more than pale, almost translucent. He seemed a specter not belonging here between the living but not even to the realm of the dead, just hovering between the two, seeing both at once. His inert bearing somehow hypnotized Philipp, and when Neil raised his hand, Philip jolted a little the way one does in his sleep, waking up just before hitting the ground.

Neil's hand rose through the air without any weight at all as if it were made of the lightest cumulous. His hand floated toward Philipp who lay back, scared what that hand would do, trying to

dissipate into the black leather seat behind him. The hand glided to the stack of pens in a tiny mahogany box by the photo of Philipp's mother. Philipp did not dare to move, not even breathe. Neil picked up a pen with his pale fingers, returned his hand to his lap, and started fiddling with it.

He looked up at Philipp for the first time and Philipp saw his eyes were the color of the unpolluted, turquoise sea.

"Philipp," said Neil. Philipp felt his voice embrace him, and all he wanted to do was to lose himself in it, to be caressed by that hand giving him unbearable pleasure until the end of time. "I am sorry, but I will not perform any kind of wonder."

Philipp didn't know how to evaluate what he had just heard and witnessed. He wanted to believe them, but couldn't, it was a leap of faith he couldn't perform. If Neil would have said, 'Philipp, I am the son of God,' Philipp would have believed him, but no one said a word.

"Get out of my office please," said Philipp in disgrace. "Every now and then we meet people that truly think they are the Messiah. This is not only humorous but makes you seem like a megalomaniac psycho. Get out. I don't have time for this."

"Philipp, please listen, you must help us," said Peter begging him.

"Get out, get out," said Philipp opening the door and showing them the way.

Peter stood up and stormed out of the room. Neil left without a care in the world. The moment Philipp closed the door behind him everything went a little darker. He stepped to the window to pull the shades back up. As he sat back behind his desk, Philipp could not rid himself from Neil's aura to which he stuck to as if it were flypaper.

The reverend's door opened, and Mrs. Plumberry stepped out, followed by the reverend. The reverend was wearing his usual black suit. His white hair was combed backwards giving him the air of an oil mogul grown old.

"Mrs. Plumberry, all you have to do is raise your hand when I ask for volunteers. Philipp will push you to the stage in the wheelchair, and when I demand you to walk, all you have to do is stand up and walk."

Philipp loved the reverend very much, but his voice, its venomous sweetness, made his stomach turn and awakened hate

in him for this man. This he always tried to hide, even from of himself, most of all from himself.

The door closed behind the old woman, and as the reverend returned to his office, he asked, "Is everything alright, Philipp?"

"Of course, reverend."

The door closed behind him, and Philipp was left alone. As he looked outside, he realized that the sun was nowhere to be seen because the window was facing east and during this time of the afternoon the sun was setting in the west, on the other side of the building. It was Neil who emanated the light, not the sun.

"I really must sleep more," he said returning to his desk and bending over the papers to continue with his Sisyphusian fight against the never-ending stream of numbers.

Peter's Gospel

Neil stopped his red Mustang at the abandoned motel at the edge of the desert. The wind awoke bringing sand from the womb of death. Peter looked at Neil staring at the steering wheel.

"I understand you don't want to perform wonders, but then how do you want to attract the attention of the people?"

Neil shrugged, but Peter didn't give up.

"People listen to the reverend, and they would listen to you too."

Neil shrugged once again and remained silent.

"C'mon, Neil, get out. Sulking won't do any good."

Neil nodded, stepped out of the car, and slammed the door behind him. He hurried to the trunk and grabbed his skateboard with its burning flames running across the underside. He plucked each freshly oiled red wheel that turned without making the slightest sound, then opened the back door, and reached for his black bag. He dusted his black leather boots off, and his pants swayed a little as the wind blew in through the tattered jeans. His deeply cut XXL black T-shirt exposed his pectoral muscles with tiny strands of hair. Neil brushed his long dark hazel hair back and scratched his manly beard.

Neil approached the pool and stopped at its side, stepping onto the back end of the skateboard, making the front end hover in mid-air. He put his weight onto the front and rolled down the side of the pool only leaving the grinding sound of wheels on cement behind him. As Peter approached the pool, Neil reemerged from

time to time, rising into the sky. His silhouette appeared periodically, twirling and somersaulting in the air before the summer sun that cast its rays on this desolate place.

Peter examined the L-shaped two-story abandoned motel with its many shattered windows looking down on the yard, then ducked under the fence surrounding the pool, and stepped out on the other side. He walked past the white deckchairs, some of them broken, others flipped over. The palm trees surrounding the pool were on the verge of death, life was only blinking in them, ready to go out any moment. The breeze moved the dry leaves that gave out a hissing sound, a snake ready to mar the youth and inject the venom of revelation that everything ends eventually.

Peter stopped by the iron ladder leading into the empty pool and sat down into one of the folding chairs. He reached for the whiskey in Neil's bag and took a long sip. The fluid burned his esophagus. Neil emerged from the pool, sat down by him, and grabbed the bottle to take a sip.

Peter was lost, he left his old God and now was following the new one, at least this is what Peter hoped. He started working at the local socks factory after his parents threw him out when he told them who he was and what he wanted to do. The work was nothing extraordinary, but at least he could rent his own apartment. The liquor rose into his head, and he felt light. All this life of complete abstinence was gone now, and for the first time he was really enjoying life, not knowing whether this was right or wrong.

They sat there in silence for a few minutes. As Neil rolled a joint, Peter stood up, reached for a spray can, and jumped down into the pool to start a new fresco. Peter had an artistic vein that he had only discovered after he severed ties with his previous God and stepped on the road of self-acceptance.

Neil lit the joint and jumped down beside him to quietly watch him as he worked. Occasionally Peter reached for the joint. When the smoke began to take effect, everything seemed to change. The colors became so much more vivid. The purple seemed to be more than what it was, it had a strong neon pink undertone. The black contours only made the letters glow. The neon green dripped down the letters that were emerging from a thick cloud of yellow. When Peter was finished, he stepped back and admired his masterpiece, his Sistine chapel.

Neil read the words, “The dying apostles of death. Oh, Peter, you are such a dork,” said Neil snickering, but patted Peter in admiration nonetheless.

Peter climbed up the ladder and sat down on the chairs facing the desert as day turned into night. He reached for his phone to post their location. It was getting dark, and Neil walked to the car to switch the dazzle lamps on. The strands of light illuminated Peter’s back, casting his shadow on the concrete yard that turned into sand a few feet away.

Neil sat down and gave the bottle to Peter. He took a sip then cleared his throat. He heard his own words from far away, a little bit slower than usual.

“Why didn’t you perform a wonder, just like Philipp asked? Just like your predecessor did?”

“I won’t,” said Neil facing the sky, “as you see, it didn’t work for Jesus, and it won’t work for me either.”

“But what do we do now, Neil?”

“There is always a way. Sometimes you just gotta let things happen, and they turn out for the better. Sometimes.”

“I’ll put some music on,” said Peter.

He walked to the car and switched the radio on. Rhythmical music rose into the air invoking ancient tunes of aboriginal dances conveying a prayer to the gods above for better weather, for luck in battle, for prospering peace, for pardon and absolution from their sins. The singer persistently chanted her wish to be the slave of a man, willingly, without force, annulling the peace treaty signed in Appomattox, making fun of the many victims the war demanded, causing Grant to roll over in his grave.

It was music hated so much from the previous generations, but Peter knew that the ones who judged them did not want to comprehend that everything evolves from what the previous generation started. The old is taken by the youth and morphed into something new, something that the young generation can call their own.

They talked into the night when another light approached them, coming from a different angle. Peter turned around and saw a golden Corvette dashing toward them. The car took a sharp right, drifted for a few feet, and stopped with a deafening screech. Two identical figures jumped out from the back of the vehicle and headed toward them. As they stepped into the light, Peter recognized them, John and James, but there was a third

silhouette, much more slender and feminine, someone who moved much slower than the other two, swaying from left to right like a snake.

The figure stepped into the light, and Peter's heart rejoiced. He couldn't contain his happiness and hurried to hug Magdalene. She was so different, yet she was the same rebel as all of them, channeling the words of the abandoned youth of today. Peter let go of Magdalene, and she walked, not walked but slid toward Neil. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and they kissed, bathing in the light coming from the cars, witnessed by the envious desert.

"You really made it, Magdalene, or should I just call you L€ne?" asked Neil.

"L€ne will be fine."

"You are a star..."

"I guess," said L€ne blushing.

"How did you find us?" asked Neil intrigued.

"Peter checked in, and we saw his location."

"How long are you staying?" asked Peter jumping up and down.

James unpacked his backpack filled with whiskey. L€ne broke loose from Neil's arms and reached for a bottle without answering and then started moving to the pulsating music. They danced with Neil as James and John skateboarded. Peter lay down enjoying this unexpected reunion, closing his eyes listening to the sound of their voices, their laughter, their bodies moving, the music, and the wind coming from the desert.

The bottles emptied one after the other, but Peter could see that something was disturbing L€ne. Just when he thought he would never learn its source, she pulled him away. They walked to the motel, and L€ne kicked in one of the doors and hurried to the toilette to bend over the seat. L€ne roared and threw up, filling the bowl with a red paste-like liquid filled with glitter.

"Oh shit, what is that?"

"Gliteoeoeoer." She threw up once more. When she was done, she cleaned her mouth. "It's a strange disease, autoimmune or something, my body creates a glitter-like substance to contain...who the hell knows what."

"Is it dangerous?"

"Who knows..." she said and sat down onto the moldy old bed next to Peter. It was dark apart from the light of the cars coming

through the tattered shades causing their shadows to distend onto the walls of this decaying room.

“What is the problem, L€ne?”

“I’m leaving, Peter, leaving for a very long time, and I just came to say farewell.”

“Where are you going?”

“On tour. I will be a vagabond from now on. Everyone wants a piece of me.”

“Good for you, we will miss you, but I guess you made it, and you should be happy. Does Neil know?”

“No, and please don’t tell him, just give us this last night.”

Peter nodded, then L€ne hugged him, and they hurried back to the others. The party continued until the first rays of light appeared over the horizon. L€ne and Neil headed into one of the many rooms, John staggered into a second one, and Peter and James occupied a third one. Peter sat down on the bed as James closed the door behind him. Peter looked at James’ long blond hair tumbling down onto his shoulders like the waves of the golden sea.

“Take your pants off,” he commanded Peter, and he obeyed. James pushed him onto the bed, threw his skull T-shirt to the side, exposing his rippling upper body, and bent over Peter, kissing him passionately. He grabbed Peter, and with a single motion, turned him around, making him fall face down. James spanked him, and Peter felt the propulsion sway up his body. Peter heard James unbuckle his belt and saw him put a condom on. He was like Michelangelo’s David, Peter thought, the same body except for his cock twice the size. James grabbed his waist and raised it into the air then pierced him from behind, stabbing him again and again until dusk turned into morning, and Peter fell onto the bed senseless with pleasure.

The next morning Peter opened his eyes and hurried out of the bedroom to find Neil staring into the nothingness at the edge of the desert. He walked to him and saw that his heart was broken.

Philipp’s Gospel

The wind blew through Philipp’s hair, gently caressing his face, soothing him, causing him to smile, bathing in the grace of the world. Philipp opened his eyes and could not believe what he saw. He was standing at the feet of a hill with an ancient city emerging

from the sand itself behind him. Patches of green decorated the devastating landscape.

He was wearing his usual grey suit that stood out from the surroundings that evoked ancient, long lost times.

“Hello, Philipp.”

Philipp turned around and saw Neil standing next to him. He was different than the silent young man who sat in his office. He was glowing, emanating light that burned through reality, and Philipp thought he could see God peeking through it.

“Neil?”

“You can call me that, in fact you can call me whatever you want, but Neil will be adequate. Follow me, I want to show you something.”

His voice was gentle, but transcended authority, a commandment not to be defied. Neil walked up the hill calmly, taking each step as if it were his last. Philipp hurried behind him as a voice emerged from the silence. He could swear it was the voice of Neil, but he was not talking.

As they reached the top, Philipp saw twelve men listening to a man who he recognized instantly, it was Jesus. He was much shorter than how Philipp had imagined him, so ordinary, so human. He looked much older than his true age, and his eyes were sad because of the cross he was bearing and the fate he knew would come no matter what happens, like a tidal wave that nothing could stop, not even the greatest dam ever built by man.

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. I do not call you victims because you must immolate nothing, as I will not either. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other.

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me, hates my Father as well. If I had not done among them the works no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. As it is, they have seen, and yet they have hated both me and my Father, but this is to fulfill what is written in their Law, they hated me without reason and is there anything worse than hate without reason?”

This is all Jesus said, and he headed down the hill, leaving all of them alone. Philipp watched his contour dissolve in the setting sun, his words still ringing in his ears. He turned back to Neil.

“These are not his exact words. I know the Bible by heart.”

“Shhh. Just listen,” said Neil nodding toward the apostles.

The apostles started moving, some stood up to stretch their limbs. Peter lay down on the grass and reread the words. Slowly they settled in the burning rays of the setting sun, and the meeting continued without Jesus.

Peter was the first one to speak. “We listened to him all this time, and all he gives us is a single commandment? To love each other?”

“This won’t do, people,” said James. “We need to create more practical laws. Rules that can be easily understood and followed. No one will join us with this feeble commandment of love.”

Peter nodded and said, “First point of order. Divorce”

“We could connect it with adultery. Listen,” suggested Matthew picking his writing up into his hands. “I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

“Good, Matthew, this seems something Jesus would say,” said Peter.

“Wait there is more,” said Matthew raising his hand. “I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.”

“I don’t know, this seems a little too harsh...but sounds pretty cool. Next point of order. Homosexuality...”

“Jesus never spoke about them directly, shouldn’t we leave them alone?” asked Andrew, his eyes filled with doubt.

“That doesn’t count,” answered Philipp. “He didn’t speak of many things. This is his first visit, he can’t see everything, we must help him and translate his words into our language. What if we spread the word that we were chosen by the Saint Spirit as vessels to convey the message of God. What do you say?”

Everyone nodded and sat up a little bit straighter as they tasted the manna that made them chosen.

“So listen,” said Peter opening his mouth. “God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. So?”

“Perfect, Peter,” said Philipp. “Saying to love each other is easy. What homosexuals do is unnatural. Jesus clearly didn’t want to speak against the laws of traditions of a million year old society. He cannot expect that everything changes with a snap.”

“But these people don’t harm anyone...” said Andrew a little aggravated by this meeting.

“Maybe they don’t, but if we turn against the traditions of society, no one will listen to us. We must reach out to them, make them believe that we don’t want to change the world. Once they do believe this, we can start by making small amendments, taking out passages here and there until only one law remains: Love each other as I love thee.”

Everyone nodded.

“Listen to this, people, this will blow your mind,” said Matthew smiling. “A rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

“Good, good, the rich, blame everything on the rich,” said Peter.

“And what about his words about hate without reason? Shall I take it out? It will do no harm, only a few words less,” said James.

“Yes,” said Peter, “and that part about the victims too, we cannot permit anyone to believe that we are selfish. We are prone to sacrifice, and through sacrifice, we will win the heart of the people. Everyone feels sorry for a victim.”

Everyone agreed.

“I actually like writing,” said Peter. “It’s fun. A perfect exercise for the imagination and the mind.”

Everyone agreed once again.

Philipp felt the heat becoming unbearable. The sun was beaming down on the world punishing it with its melting rays. Philipp felt the world deform around him as if he were drunk. The sky became wavy, and the three dimensional world began to compress itself into a two dimensional one as the millions of colors of the world began dripping down from the canvas. He was the only three dimensional object in the picture. Wherever he turned, the paint was dripping down, and Philipp saw a perfectly white canvas behind it that shone so brightly he had to close his eyes. When he reopened them, he was lying in bed in his room.

He stood up and knew what he had done was a mistake. The cognizance spread through his veins and turned into pleasure, a pleasure that seemed to have no specific cause, just a tint of recognition. He had to touch himself. His checked pajama pants slid to the floor, and his firm instrument rose toward the sky. The morning sun caressed his tanned muscles, shining and bulging. The wind brought the scent of lavender as his joy was

culminating. The rapture was building up, and Philipp realized that beyond the recognition, this was a celebration, a celebration of the gift of life that should be cherished over all, all times. He reached the summit, and the seed of life fell to the ground as a revitalizing drizzle.

He stepped into the shower and slowly returned into reality from the elevated state he was in. For a second he was over the clouds, so close to the sun that gave light but did not burn, gave hope and did not ask for anything else just to accept the gift itself. He obeyed it and now knew what had to be done.

He jumped into his dark blue suit and tied the red tie around his neck. He combed his blond hair backwards elevating the front part, creating a wave like the ones of a turbulent sea. He hurried down the stairs and said farewell to his parents sitting in the kitchen. Through the rectangular window over the door the rays of the sun fell onto the pine parquet, the specks of dust flying by carelessly. Philipp rushed out the door and made haste to the reverend.

He hurried down the lane lined with lavenders, leaving his home the color of a pale banana behind. He was strolling down the main road protected from the sun by the great oak trees when he saw the bus approaching the stop. He jumped onto it, knowing that any second of delay is a sin that will never be forgiven. The bus doors closed, and his home sped by.

The bus floated through the suburbs, and Philipp could not tell where he was exactly. The homes and roads were all the same, little boxes on the hillside, it seemed like a set in the world's greatest studio, and perhaps it was. Everything seemed fake. It felt to him as if in the night the roads sometimes rearranged themselves. It was just a feeling and nothing more because he could not tell whether anything changed at all. The church finally appeared, and Philipp gripped to this familiar point, pulling himself out of the transient perdition.

He jumped off the bus and hurried to the small building by the church, its white wooden board gleaming in the sun in revitalizing contrast to the neon green of the yard and the red bricks of the church itself. The roses were glittering with drops of dew, tiny diamonds on the red petals of lust. He jumped up the stone stairs leading to the entrance and burst inside his office. He did not look around and focused on the golden door handle, the mean of defeating the door, the last obstacle barring the way to

his goal, the reverend. He pushed the golden handle down, and the door opened obeying to the energy he invested into the movement.

He was conscious of his body as the two-winged door burst open. He saw his shadow distend on the Persian rug in the reverend's office, a blackness surrounded by light. The reverend looked up, and in his eyes, Philipp saw wonder and awe. He knew that something was manifesting itself through him to the reverend.

“What is it, Philipp? I wasn't expecting you on a Monday?”

“I know, I must hurry over to the fish shop, but I met someone you must meet.”

“You are radiating, Philipp, who is this man?”

“I don't know exactly, but he bears a tangible divine presence, something I never felt before. He might be suited to work by your side. With him we will be able to reach out to the younger generation.”

“Great, Philipp, bring him to me, and we'll see.”

“I promise, you will be satisfied.”

Philipp smiled at the man who was on a separate journey, proceeding on a different road from the mainstream religious values, at the man who was so close to God yet missing something, making him not much better than the church he himself despised. As Philipp hurried out of the building and headed through the park leading to the fish shop on the other side, he examined these newly born thoughts of betrayal inside him. His hero was not perfectly clean.

James' Gospel

James stopped before the red bricks of the church still smelling of liquor from the night before in a black T-shirt, cut-offs, and leather boots. He took his great shades off and examined the roses smiling at him, seducing and charming him, inebriating him. This was caused not by the scent itself but by what it awoke in him, something that was there but could not be named, something lingering in the darkness, still afraid to step into the light, fighting against the sweet voices of the roses.

The stream of clouds flowing into the building was made up of white heads of the elder creating an endless cumulous. James looked at the red brick tower of the church where the great brass

bell was reflecting the rays of the sun beaming on him and worsening his hangover. He was one of the few young ones here, and the old faces were smiling at him, happy to see life in a place where there is so few of it.

Is it the young generation's fault that so few attend church, not just this specific sect's church, but any other? He tried to examine why he did not attend and knew that it was because the things he could learn in there were old and pagan, just a mystique set of rules, hazy and not pure good. It was not his fault, but the fault of the religions written into stone, unable to change, primitive and cold. Blaming the young was the simplest thing to do as self-examination was something painful and always over-looked by the religious leaders. Finding the flaws and fixing them was something no one had the courage to do.

The cloud of elders diminished, and James hurried to take his place inside. He walked past the many cameras standing by the entrance and facing the stage, ready to channel the show to the many TV sets connected to them. The white wooden seats were filled with sick people. The blind, the deaf, the disabled all gathered here in hope of change. The narrow windows let the sunshine in, lighting a very simple and puritan room waiting to be filled by the presence of the reverend.

He found an empty seat and sat down. He nodded to the old woman next to him who just patted his back as James sank into his thoughts. 'I will not perform any wonders, I will not commit the same mistake twice,' he heard Neil's voice. As he waited for the mass to begin, he wondered whether he was truly the son of God, if he could perform any magic at all. He shook these troubling thoughts away but could not deny that they were growing in him. This was Neil's first appearance, and James hoped he could see the proof of his divinity.

A door swung open, and the reverend stepped onto the stage, his great belly protruding from under his black robe, and his face resembling that of a well-fed infant. He was wearing a golden ring with a diamond that was in contrast with his humble mannerism. He approached the front of the church bowing to the ones gathered here. 'I will perform no wonders,' he heard the voice of Neil again, and preoccupation started growing in him. He was scared that they would blow their only chance.

"Welcome, everybody. I greet you in the name of God. Today is a special day, the first day of a never-ending crusade to conquer

the heart of the youth who have turned away from God toward the foul material goods of the devil.”

The crowd murmured and nodded. The old woman looked at James and gave him a wink. James tried to smile but still felt uncomfortable and felt as if the reverend were pointing at him. This first sentence would have been enough to close the ears of many, but James was determined to listen, at least once.

“They have turned away from God because they have been lured and tricked from us. Instead of choosing the way of God, they choose the easier way. They seize what they need and fall into the arms of evil. They are lost, and they must turn back to God. This is our job, we must try to regain their trust.

“I am growing old, and I found my successor. God led to me his lamb, the lamb through which he will manifest himself after I am gone. God is between us all the time but shows himself only occasionally. I have found my successor, and you shall see his power, the power of the healing of the Holy Christ. I present you Neil, please give him a round of applause.”

Neil stopped in the door with doubt in his eyes. He smiled and stepped onto the stage, and James was enchanted by his radiance. It was as if he were emanating a gentle light that didn't lose strength as it spread like strands of hair. He felt a wire slide up his back and connect itself to an invisible socket at the back of his head. He was connected, yet through the wire nothing was coming, only a pleasant feeling of the promise of a message.

Neil stopped by the reverend who patted his back. James saw Philipp too was enchanted by Neil's presence. James looked around to see that apart from them, the others were facing the reverend who gave them what they needed. He knew that if he could somehow solve the riddle of what it was, they could finally find a way to deliver the infinitely complex message that Neil was here to deliver, whatever that was.

“Now, do we have any volunteers?”

This was the signal, the first crack in the dam. Those who could, stood up and began waving madly with their arms like algae at the bottom of the river. They whirled in the current created by the words of the reverend. James saw an insatiable craving across the hypnotized face of the old lady sitting beside him.

“Who will be the first one to be cured by this lamb of God?” asked the reverend.

The arms moved wildly, arms trying to reach the sky, arms ready to leave the ground to rise higher than the rest, wanting to be chosen. The reverend moved through the corridor, past the rows, pacing on the red carpet, his hands clutching one another behind his back, enjoying the arms reaching out to him. He smiled and stopped, grabbing an arm and pulling an old man out like a fish from the river. The arms slowly calmed down, and everybody took a seat.

The old man limped to his right leg, and slowly, led by the reverend, he approached the front. The man was moving very cautiously as the rhythm of his movements was disrupted by the way he put down his injured leg trying not to encumber it with the weight of his body for too long and quickly putting the weight back onto the healthy one. The man stopped before Neil and knelt down.

‘I will perform no wonder, I will not commit the same mistake of my predecessor.’ James hoped that he would see another proof of his ancestry as he felt the happenings of the past fade into the world of illusion, making him think that everything he saw before was the manifestation of a need. The same need he shared with these men and women facing the reverend here, the need that was slowly taking form and was waiting to be named so that it could step onto the dark stage.

“Now, I ask everybody to bow their heads and pray...” said the reverend raising both his hands into the air.

Everyone obeyed, including James, and murmur filled the room.

“Neil, now it’s your turn, prove to the world that God decided to manifest himself through you, show them God, let his power shine,” screamed the reverend, his voice growing louder and louder and turning into a shriek. James’ heart started beating faster.

Neil stepped to the old man kneeling before him. For a moment he hesitated then knelt down as well and put his hand softly onto the limp leg of the volunteer. James was afraid, afraid that nothing would happen, afraid to witness that Neil was not the son of God, that Neil was only human, and perhaps that God didn’t even exist.

The murmur in the church rose over the wooden beams. It was this monotone chanting that originated from the need that caused

the letters slowly to unite inside James' head naming the one hiding in the back of his skull.

Neil stood up and stepped back. The murmurs ceased, and all heads were facing the front now. James' heart sank, Neil did not perform the magic expected from him. The man kneeling before Neil slowly stood up. He placed his weight onto the wounded leg, giving out a hiss. They blew it.

The man did not give up. He gradually put more and more weight onto it until he was balancing all of his body on the limping extremity. The healthy foot rose into the air, and the man was standing solely on his once unusable leg. The man looked up smiling and spoke to the crowd.

"I am healed."

The crowd began to applaud and everyone stood up unanimously. Cheers rose into the air, whistles pierced through space.

"He is healed," squealed the old woman beside James, raising her hands and facing the sky. The crowd roared, screamed, applauded, and all of their faces gleamed. James felt something that was so much more than joy, so much more than the greatest orgasm ever. It was the recognition that we aren't alone, that miracles truly exist, that the world is so much more than what it is, that after death life begins, a life with God, that nothing ends when we definitively close our eyes, but everything begins from there. James could not contain his joy and cheered so loudly not caring what the others thought, not caring that maybe he was making a fool out of himself because he was celebrating, celebrating eternal life.

The reverend raised his hands into the air as if he were trying to embrace the sun itself and yelled to the sky, "We praise the power of our Lord Jesus Christ who has died for our sins yet saves us over and over again for his love is infinite, and everyone living in his name shall live in the grace of God for eternity. Thy Lord is great, thy Lord is mighty, thy Love is eternal."

The wounded man performed a cartwheel then finished it with a summersault landing right next to his seat. He sat down, and the sermon continued. James was in an elevated state throughout the ceremony.

The unknown figure embodying the need finally stepped onto the stage and raised his hand bearing a white glove into the spotlight, the rest of the body still hiding in darkness. A soft

music began playing, and the hand began snapping to the rhythm of the drums. He stopped and started shaking his hand as jazz defeated the drums. He clapped once, two hands in the light. Then, as if the figure were swimming, he spread his arms through the air, and his body became visible, the tap shoes glistening in the light. The music was growing louder and louder, and his feet started moving. He was wearing a cylinder hat, and his face was hidden by the rim's shadow.

He felt camaraderie with this group of unknown people here, they were all sharing the need. The body was dancing on the stage, ruling it with his moves as the trumpets, drums, and pianos battled.

The ceremony ended, and the people embraced Neil, caressed his face, shook his hands, their eyes fixated to a point somewhere over Neil's head. They were not seeing Neil but were seeing the figure dancing in the spotlight on the stage inside their heads. When finally the last man left the building, James rose from his feet, hurried to Neil, and hugged him.

"I knew it, I knew that you could do it. For a moment you really had me there, for a moment I really thought you were a hoax."

The man on the stage raised his left hand and grabbed his hat, tossing it into the air, and James recognized him. James rose in the deserted auditorium to clap and felt joy. The greatest need of all, the need to be stupefied. This is what everyone is after, to be stupefied, to see that life can be magical, that there is more than matter, that there is a possibility that something mystical happens.

"I didn't do anything," said Neil making the figure on the stage burst into thin air.

"Don't be so modest, Neil, you saved that man, you saved him..." said James desperately trying to bring the dancer back.

"James, wake up, listen to me, this was just a show and nothing more..."

"What do you mean, Neil?"

"That man was just an actor, a friend of the reverend..."

James felt his heart break. He felt ashamed, tricked, and ignorant. He looked at Neil and wanted to punch him right in the face, he wanted to grab his beard and pull him to the ground.

"How could you, Neil? How could you deceive these people?"

"James, you knew this would be a hoax."

The hangover was still tugging his head. Neil was right, James knew this would be an act yet, for some reason, forgot it.

“It is for a good cause, James. I must deliver the message, and at the moment there is no better way...”

“But still it doesn’t seem right...”

“You saw the cameras, thousands of people saw me through them. First I make them believe me, and when they do, I will deliver the words. Do you have a better idea?”

“I guess not...”

“Great, let’s go, I’m getting hungry.”

Matthew’s Gospel

Peter, John, James, and Philipp left, the sound of their car slowly dying and the disrupted night gradually going back to sleep. Matthew reached for a bottle of mineral water and poured it onto the flames burning in the metal can in the middle of the abandoned playground, dying out with a last sizzling scream. Neil threw the cigarette’s butt to the ground and stepped on it.

“Where is your car, Matthew?”

“A few blocks down.”

Matthew’s beige linen pants danced as his legs moved and his leather sandals appeared. He adjusted his shirt decorated with flowers and turned the peace sign around so that the shiny part faced the world. He felt the breeze caress his Rasta hair and somehow felt at peace with the silent Neil pacing by him.

“How many months have you been working with the reverend? Two?” asked Matthew kicking a stone down the alley.

“Probably,” said Neil not looking up.

“And how is it turning out for you?”

“Fine, I guess, he has the key to open the lock to the people’s heart, but I am afraid he is trying it in the wrong door.”

“What do you mean?”

“The reverend won’t let me speak. He says my charisma is far too strong, and if used in the wrong way, I could cause more trouble than good, so I must stay in the background and only perform those frauds he sets up every Sunday. This is what he says, but I know that he is only afraid I would rob the spotlight from him.”

“He always seemed an attention whore to me...”

“Yes, but this is not the main problem. Mostly the audience is made up of old people, fanatics, and ignorant. The future is not in their hands. These people are not the ones who will rebuild heaven on earth. It is the youth, they are the ones who should be taught, they hold the bricks of the future, and they are deaf to any teaching coming from any religious institution.”

They turned onto the darkened road in silence.

“And how are you doing, Matthew?”

“Not great, I am still searching for a place to play, but I am happy, and of this, I am thankful,” said Matthew patting Neil’s back.

They walked past dark four-story clinker brick buildings, only a few windows glowing here and there, the rest were barred. Most of the people living in this part of town moved into the city creating a border of death between the prospering suburbs and the bustling city. In the distance they heard the highway going around and omitting this part of the city. The streetlights blinked here and there. The carcass of a car floating on bricks surrounded by a group of bums warming themselves by a barrel of fire came into view as they moved through the abandoned roads. They walked by the mall, its glasses shattered, the dead palm trees lying across the parking lot. Neil stopped and so did Matthew.

“Do you still miss her?” asked Matthew.

Neil did not answer and hurried across the dark road into an abandoned alley. Matthew heard raging hip-hop emerging from the windows of a car painted neon lilac with neon green streaks of flame on its side. The car was jumping on its suspensions as it rolled past him. Matthew waited for it to pass then hurried across the road into the alley after Neil.

Neil was standing at the orifice of the narrow passage. Matthew heard voices coming a few feet down, voices of the youth, screaming and yelling. Matthew stopped by Neil and saw a group of boys surrounding another boy lying on the ground.

“How dare you come here, you cock-sucking faggot?”

One of the boys kicked the one on the ground in the groin. The poor boy moaned. One of the boys unzipped his fly and knelt down to their victim.

“Come here, Jamey, suck on my balls a little, isn’t this your dream?”

Neil started toward them, and the group of boys faced him. Neil moved with his usual confidence, his motions flowing one into the other like a two-legged river.

“Leave the boy alone...” he commanded.

The group of boys began to laugh. They were a few years younger than Neil and were not scared, still their laughter had a nervous fragility about it.

“Who the hell are you?” asked one of the boys. “Get the hell out of here before I stab you to death.”

Neil did not move, and the lack of fear in his presence made the others uncomfortable. They attacked, and the prey did not flee. This is not how it should go down in nature.

“Leave the boy alone, why should he be punished for being different?”

“Who...the hell...are...you?” asked another boy, spacing his words and emphasizing each one with a tone of incredulity.

“Wait a minute, I know this man, he is the one performing miracles,” said yet another one making air-bunnies with his middle and index finger.

The boys started laughing. “You are a phony, you are just a cheater. You heal the sick, right. Pathetic.”

Matthew could not stand their words. He found an iron tube lying on the ground. He picked it up and swung it in the air a few times before heading toward them. He stopped by Neil and crashed a wooden barrel standing by the wall, its splinters rising into the air. The group of boys jumped back.

“Get...the hell...out...of here,” said Matthew.

The boys looked at each other and decided it was better to flee before this pacifist shatters their skulls.

“Thank you,” said Neil ashamed.

“No problem,” said Matthew stepping to Jamey to help him stand up. When Matthew pulled him up, he realized that the boy had no weight. “Are you alright?” asked Matthew. As Jamey nodded, Matthew saw that the boy was translucent, a ghost. The boy had bruises running across his face, but he smiled and his gentle hazel eyes radiated with gratitude.

“Go home and have a rest. Believe me these brutes will be extinct in a few years when they realize that bullying is for losers.” Jamey nodded once more and left, his tears sparkling like the stars in the sky.

Matthew stepped to Neil and patted his back. As Neil spoke, Matthew was astonished by the purity of his voice. “You see, Matthew, all I did was make myself deaf in their ears. I worked for the reverend and became a laughing stock in the eyes of the youth. They’re right, I am a cheater. I must leave the reverend and find another way.”

They left the alley and stepped onto the road. Matthew’s car was parked behind a saloon.

“I just don’t get it,” continued Neil. “He tells me to deliver the message, and he doesn’t tell me how. He even watched me as I step onto the wrong road.”

“He will help when the time is right, you’ll see...”

“The thing is I don’t want his help. We must start again, we must build up our own group of followers, fish them out from the road, fish out the sane, the young, and the strong...”

“How do we do that?” asked Matthew intrigued.

“You’ll see. I’ll tell the others tomorrow. It is so hard to learn that you were heading down the wrong road. So much time and effort only to understand that you were wrong.”

“Don’t think of it like that,” said Matthew trying to console Neil. “You have changed, you are much more confident. The charisma the reverend was talking about was not always this strong. I saw you perform a few times, you have something that many don’t, and that x-factor is something you developed now, standing before a crowd...”

“I guess you’re right, I am not scared of them like in the beginning...”

“Now that’s more like it.”

Matthew opened the door of his buggy, and they sat in. The motor rumbled, and the black car left the saloon behind, rock music filling the air.

John’s Gospel

John stood in the middle of the bustling road with humanity rushing in all directions. He was like a rock in the middle of a turbulent river causing the water to part around him. The many bodies brushed against him, and he felt as if his rugged edges were slowly becoming smooth, formed by their touch. He knew that this was not the case, he was not being formed by them, but by Neil’s presence. He was the one who tamed his adolescent

fury, and now John was the one who was trying to form humanity, at least this was their goal. He took a deep breath and just didn't know how to start. He knew that there was no other way than diving in. He collected all his courage, closed his eyes, and focused on his breathing before stepping to his first victim, offering her a flyer.

She was a business woman wearing a dark suit with outlines so straight it seemed she were carved out of the coldest marble. Her black bob-styled hair was so strict that it almost caused John to jump back, fearing from the scolding that would emerge from the lips the color of blood. She was talking to someone on the phone, not talking but screaming. The woman looked at John, then to the paper, and just ignored him.

John felt blood rush to his head. He was declined, and this was so hard for him. John, the stud, turned down. He caressed his blond hair the color of the sun. His chiseled muscles were always tanned, and he always wore white. He was so different than James yet the same.

He saw a young man humming merrily to himself, coming his way. He wore a red checked shirt and was dangling a brown bowling bag in his hand. He took every step one after the other rhythmically. He smiled at John who offered him the brochure. He looked down and took it. John smiled at his first success. His eyes shone with gratitude, and the man gave him a nod. John watched the man leave, and he was only happy until he saw the man stop at a trashcan to toss the flyer inside without even reading it.

He offered the invitations one after the other, but no one seemed to care. He was turned down over and over again, and slowly he was giving up hope when in the distance he saw something shining, rushing toward him. The crowd parted, and a girl appeared, a girl so special and enchanting, not like the empty female idols of today, but bearing a beauty that was eternal and could not be assigned to any specific century.

She was smiling, and it seemed to John she was nothing but a smile on a bicycle. Her long black hair swayed in the wind. She was wearing high heel shoes, yet she turned the pedals so swiftly, dodging the men and women before her. Her teeth, her teeth were shining. The girl stopped the bike before John, and he could not speak for a second, mesmerized by her beauty when he realized she wasn't alone.

Coming swiftly behind her was a young man who was less human and more like a deer. His eyes were so placid and calm yet radiated a knowledge that happiness is for all, you just have to reach out for it. He gave her a kiss, two halves meeting. They took the paper from John and read it thoroughly.

“Will you come?” asked John, his voice filled with hope.

“Definitely,” said the girl, her voice shrill and sharp carrying the melody of the sirens.

“Really?”

“No,” said the man, not as if he wanted to hurt John’s feeling, just telling him nothing but the truth the girl was afraid to tell him.

They hurried away leaving John to sink deeper and deeper in despair. John was giving up when finally a man stopped, a man that looked like the cutest little teacup in the world residing in the castle of the beast. As the man smiled, his front teeth appeared, a chip missing from his top central incisor. He took the brochure. As he left, John saw him slide it into his pocket. John rejoiced for a second until he realized that this still didn’t mean he would come.

He needed reassurance, so he walked down the road to find Neil handing out his stack of papers. The men and women hurrying by James were constantly bombarded with so much information but have adapted to it and created a filter through which only the necessary information can pass, excluding everything else.

He found Neil by a fountain. The little angel atop of the rock emerging from the pool was standing on his toes, the other foot raised into the air, and was peeing down into the water.

Neil saw John approaching and asked, “So how did it go?”

“Not good.”

“It was a stupid idea, right? Now what do we do?” asked Neil hanging on John for an answer.

John just shrugged and sat down feeling the cool fume emerging from the water settle on his face, soothing him and cooling him underneath the raging summer sun. Neil sat down beside him as John closed his eyes facing the sky, bathing in the warm rays.

They were at the end of the road with darkness before them, not knowing how their road would continue.

“May I sit down?”

John opened his eyes and saw a lovely old woman standing before him. Her hair was white with a lilac undertone. She smiled, and the wrinkles running around her face turned into many smiles as well. She was wearing a white blouse with a medal on her breast representing the face of a man, probably lost or dead. She was wearing a purple skirt on which wrinkles appeared as she sat down. John smiled at her then turned away knowing that he was staring at her for too long.

“What are you holding in your hands?” asked the gentle old woman.

“Oh, this? Here, take it,” said John handing her a flyer.

“A meeting where the truth of God will be revealed,” she read then turned to John, “By whom?”

“Neil,” said John nodding toward Neil who smiled at the old woman and waved.

“What a lovely idea...” she said taking a long pause, “...not.”

John and Neil faced the lady who was still smiling kindly.

“What the hell were you thinking?” asked the old woman as her voice morphed into a deep baritone.

Both of them jumped up not believing their ears. The madam’s face started changing as if it were made of play dough. Her hair started growing longer, and from around her mouth, a long white beard emerged, flowing down onto the pavement.

“It’s you,” said Neil recognizing his father “Don’t you ever grow tired?”

“Me? Of course not, I love disguises. It’s really fun, you should try it.”

“Leave me alone, let me go down my own road.”

“And where is that leading?”

Neil did not answer, knowing that his father was right.

“You are not a teenager, you don’t have to defy me anymore. Just listen to my advice for once.”

“He’s right, Neil,” said John interrupting, feeling sorry for the father whose son doesn’t want his help. “Just hear him out.”

Neil looked at John for a few seconds then faced his father and said, “Alright, I am all ears.”

“You must become a rock star or a pop star or whatever you call these people you worship.”

“What?” said Neil not believing his ears.

“Don’t look at me like that. It is not as if I were trying to convince you to try green hams and eggs. I want you to become a

star. How many fathers would want the same? I am quite awesome, right?”

“How do I become a star, father?” asked Neil with a sarcastic grin across his face.

“First you should start a band.”

“With whom?”

“Are you blind? Look at your friends here, John plays the acoustic guitar, James plays the bass, Matthew plays the piano, and Peter is a DJ.”

“A DJ?” asked Neil surprised then turned to John.

“Well, something like that,” said John. “He used to play music every time the church held a ball for the youth.”

“Exactly. Philipp could be your manager,” said Neil’s father. “You just need a drummer.”

“What type of music will we play, father?”

“Electric-pop-rock-sacrilegious music will be trending soon.”

“Doesn’t sound too good?” said John.

“Believe me, it doesn’t, especially for me,” said Neil’s father. “I prefer disco music, you know, Gloria Gaynor’s *I will survive* and stuff.”

“What will we sing about?” asked Neil a little irritated.

“Anything you want to say,” said Neil’s father with a matter-of-fact tone.

“What do I want to say?”

“Neil, c’mon what is wrong with you? Deliver the message. Now I must really go.”

Neil’s father, who was still dressed as an old woman, turned into a cloud with a puff and rose into the air. Neil and John watched him leave.

“He seems a little crazy...” said Neil still facing the sky.

“Who knows, maybe, or he is just happy.”

“Maybe.”

Peter appeared in the distance. They both looked at him and did not believe what he was wearing. His white T-shirt was tucked into his beige pants just over his belly. He was wearing white socks with sandals. He waved to them and smiled, his eyes glistening behind his thick glasses.

“Why are you so happy?” asked Neil.

“I don’t know, it’s just good to see you. Did you see James? I miss him.”

“Shut up,” said John. “How long haven’t you seen each other? Half an hour?”

“You can’t understand until you find love. I don’t think handing out these papers will do any good though,” said Peter careful not to hurt Neil’s feelings.

“Daa,” said John.

“What will we do now?” asked Peter turning to John then to Neil.

“We are starting a rock band,” said Neil with his presence emanating sturdy reassurance.

“No, shit,” said Peter, doing a pirouette and landing it on his knees, giving the world a rock fork with his thin little crooked fingers.

Josephine’s Gospel

“You must be kidding me,” said Josephine looking at Neil, hoping that he was only joking. She faced Marry for help, but she just smiled.

“Who gave you this idea?”

Neil was staring at his fingers as he fiddled with the corner of the tablecloth.

“Neil?”

Neil stayed silent for a few seconds before admitting the truth. “My father.”

“Your father? How the hell did he find you?” snapped Josephine losing her temper. “How can he tell you something like that? Of course he can, he is not the one raising you and caring for you. He just wants to be your friend. And what will he do when you fail? What will he do when you realize a few years later that this will be nothing more than a dream? Do you want to be a loser? A guy who thought he could be a rock star and failed.”

Neil still played around with the tablecloth trying to tie a knot on it.

Josephine continued, “I’m sorry, Neil. If you decide to go down this road, I am afraid you must leave our home. If you are not willing to come and work at the furniture shop I am sorry, but I cannot feed you anymore. If you think you are an adult then act like one.”

Neil stood up and walked up to his room without saying a word. After the door closed behind him, Mary and Josephine sat in silence for a few seconds.

“Am I too strict?” asked Josephine hoping for some reassurance.

“I don’t know. To tell you the truth I think he has something that others don’t, but I don’t think this is enough. He is a talented young man of this I am sure, he has a nice voice and good hearing, but in this world, talent is not enough. You need something, not luck, nor godly perseverance, but something that is so hard to name, an amorphous power that lifts you up from the river’s bed toward the surface to be thrust into the air.”

“So?” asked Josephine not understanding where Mary was going.

“We cannot take the risk to raise an adult who still lives with his parents. If he wants to stand on his own two feet, we must let him, and hopefully he will succeed.”

“And if not?”

“Then we will help him our way.”

Josephine heard Neil stomping upstairs in his room, back and forth, back and forth. “He is leaving, right?”

“I am afraid so,” said Mary.

Josephine knew that both of them were terrified what the future would bring. Like all parents, they dreaded that when their child leaves the nest for the first time he falls to the ground, unable to fly, and splatters across the pavement.

Neil walked down the stairs, stopped before the entrance, and put his luggage down.

Josephine and Mary stood up from the dining-table and walked to him.

“You are right, mothers, I must grow up, and part of this is to step on the road of life, even if it leads nowhere, even if it leads toward a precipice.”

Mary hugged Neil stronger than ever, but Josephine turned around and walked back into the living room without saying farewell. She was disappointed, it was their fault, it was because they weren’t strict enough that their child wanted to be a rock star. As she closed the door, she heard them speaking.

“Where will you be staying?”

“At Peter’s apartment, I guess.”

“You know she loves you?”

“Of course.”

After Josephine heard the entrance door close, she felt Mary’s arm caress her shoulder. “It’s not your fault. We always knew that there was something in him, something that was not like us, something extraneous, something wild and raunchy, a confidence that is not human. He must have inherited it from his father.”

“Will we ever meet his father? I want to see who this man is, Mary.”

“I don’t know, perhaps.”

THE FIRST STEPS

Judas' Gospel

Judas opened his eyes feeling the sunlight caress his face through the glass walls of the apartment. He sat up and saw the city around him. The bed was standing in the corner of the room surrounded by immense glass walls making him feel on top of the world. The love of his life, the woman with yellow hair grown down, was sleeping placidly beside him. Her smudged make-up created a black aura around her eyes. As she lay there with her mouth open as if she were deep in thought, the red lipstick staining her teeth appeared. The glasses of champagne were left lying on the carpet along with hundreds of earrings, bracelets, necklaces, rubies, sapphires, diamonds, and gold sparkling among them. He saw the crooked black crown and dark eyeglasses she wore the night before, sunken into the long hairs of the white rug.

Judas looked at his watch to see he was late, so he slid out of bed exposing his nude body to the world, his snake tattoos running around his body. He flexed his muscles in the mirror, and they bulged thanks to the many hours of exercise. He combed his long black hair and found his pants lying in the corner of the room. He jumped into his light blue jeans and put his white slim-fit T-shirt on, finally sliding his feet into his boots thrown down by the entrance.

The minimalist style in the apartment was not quite his taste, but nonetheless he felt at home. As he tied his shoelaces, he thought about the home of his dreams, the smell of lavender entering through the tiny windows flowing down onto the strip floor, drifting over the flower patterns of the living room sofa and beneath the black metal chandelier hanging from the low ceiling with its wooden beams exposed.

He walked toward the entrance and stopped, fixating a point on the wall. The control panel with the many numbers stared up at him, waiting for the code to open the door that was barely visible, blending into the white surface, only a thin black slit giving out the silhouette of the orifice. She would disappear from time to time in here only to emerge renewed and shining. Judas was not granted entrance no matter how many times he begged. The only secret between them.

He reached for his leather jacket with his name written on the back, the letters running over the embroidered skull. He descended with the elevator, stepping out into the silent garage and hurrying to his motorcycle.

His steps echoed in the abandoned space, and even though he knew he was alone, he felt watched. He listened attentively, but his footsteps were the only ones that echoed. The mild lighting of the garage made everything look even more obscure than it truly was. He was relieved to find his silver motorcycle with its iron poles emerging from the front like antennae ending in leather in the far end of the parking area. He jumped on it, started the rumbling motor, and sped out of the building into the light.

As he turned onto the main road, he was relieved to be out of the darkness. He slalomed through the many yellow taxis flooding the road at this early hour. It took time for him to leave the many skyscrapers behind and reach the bridge leading to the highway. He stopped before the elevated bridge saluting a boat hurrying toward the sea. When they let it finally down, Judas rocketed away on the six-lane road.

He felt the air rush into his face as the abandoned buildings of his destination appeared on his far left. He found the exit. As he curved away from the road, he noticed how the concrete here was cracked by blades of green grass fighting to reach the sun. He drove through the empty roads until he reached his destination, a four-story building made of clinker brick. Most of the windows were barred. Judas checked his GPS. He was where he was supposed to be. He approached the building and stopped his motorcycle in an alley with drying lines filled with clothes hovering above him, connecting the two adjacent buildings. He heard two men speaking.

“Cleopas, could you please hurry up? We’ll be late...”

“Coming, Anonymous, coming.”

Stupid names, thought Judas. He jumped off his bike and hurried to the front where he found the entrance door open. He stepped into the decadent building and shuddered at the sight of the musty wallpaper peeling off here and there. He was the last one to arrive, so he sat down at the end of the row of wannabe rock stars. He took the advertising out of his pocket and reread it, not being able to believe that this was his destination. The letters told him he was in the right place.

As the line decreased, Judas' anxiety grew, and by the time it was his turn, he was crackling his knuckles and felt butterflies fluttering in the darkness of his stomach. The door opened, and a wild head of a man appeared. The man looked at Judas as if he were about to gobble him up, not to decrease his hunger but placate his sexual desire.

"Next one," he said and smiled at Judas. His smile made Judas uncomfortable, knowing that he was looked at the same way men look at women, like a piece of meat to plow. Judas forced a smile on his face and entered.

The man who called him in was distended on a sofa filled with holes. His head was in the laps of a thin boy who was typing something on his phone. A well-groomed man was leaning against the windowsill ridding his nails from dirt as another one with Rasta hair was smoking a joint.

"My name is James," said the man who called him in, "this is Peter, John is over there, Matthew is getting high, and Neil is in the bathroom."

The man typing on his phone looked up.

"Oh, my God..." said Peter staring at Judas not believing his eyes. Peter slowly stood up and stepped to him. He put his hands on his shoulders and turned him a little right then left, examining his profile.

"Oh my God, it is really you..."

"Who, Peter?" asked James with a tint of jealousy in his voice.

"It's her boyfriend..."

"Whose boyfriend?" asked James then stopped, looking closer at Judas. "Oh my God, it is him," said James recognizing him too.

"This is such an honor, I am her greatest admirer. I know every part of her life through the papers. You are hired..." said Peter jumping up and down, clapping his hands.

The door opened, and Neil emerged from the white tiles of the bathroom, and for a second Judas was shocked by how much they

resembled each other. Only their eyes were different, Neil's was a pallid blue, Judas' was a burning brown.

"No one will be hired just like that. Sit down and show us what you can do..." he said pointing toward the set of drums by the window.

Judas felt a tint of rage in his veins. "You speak as if you were someone important, but you, just like me, are a no one..."

"You can leave if you wish..."

"I don't wish to, it's just this arrogance I cannot bear. Give me two sticks..."

Peter threw him the sticks, and Judas caught them then turned them in his hand like a majorette leading a parade would. He sat down behind the drums facing the corner and felt their eyes upon his back.

The drums started rolling enunciating power. Judas felt a fire awaken in his heart. From the darkness surrounding the flames, bodies came forth, their skin red in the kindling light. They danced to the rhythm round and round, the tip of their spears glinting now and then. As the rhythm sped up, faster and faster they moved around the fire, their dance originating from deep within. The flames started vibrating and turned into a head of a wolf howling toward the red moon ruling over the world. The howling stopped, and the canine head rose into the air followed by its body, and running on all four, the flame hurried away leaving everything in darkness. Only the red moon shone down onto the darkened world.

Judas struck down the last time, and both his sticks snapped, the two pieces whirling in mid-air then falling to the ground with a high-pitched clatter. Judas stood up and turned around to see the faces of the audience staring at him with awe, not making the faintest noise.

"Why do you want to join?" asked Peter breaking the silence. "Why don't you speak with her? Why join a band like ours?"

"She won't help me. I must build up my own fame, only then will she help..."

"You're hired," said Peter clapping.

"What next?" asked Judas.

"Our songs are ready, the lyrics are done. We didn't hear Neil sing yet though..."

"You mean you didn't hear your front man sing? What the hell is wrong with you..." asked Judas not believing his ears.

“We don’t need to...”

“What do you mean?” Judas looked at the men in the room feeling as if he had just stepped into an asylum.

“You’ll see,” said Peter reaching beneath the table before the window and handing him a CD. “Could you please give it to her to sign it?”

Judas nodded and grinned, Peter leaped into the air with joy.

Peter’s Gospel

Peter rode down the hill as the buildings flew by him ever so swiftly. The only time he actually felt free was when he rode a bicycle, much freer than on a motorcycle with James, because his own muscles were propelling him, making him fly over the blistering pavement. He rode in the middle of the street knowing that cars didn’t use it anymore.

He saw the periphery of the city from up high, and he couldn’t tell whether it was dead or alive. This caused shivers to run up and down inside him in contrast with the body’s outer layer burning under the summer sun. This ambivalent feeling was emphasized by the stinging sensation of anticipation that made him choose the bicycle as means of transportation to work away his restlessness.

They entered the competition of local bands. The first round would take place in a few weeks, and they still hadn’t heard Neil sing. What if he can’t sing?

He was taking chances with Neil all the time, and only now did he realize this, riding his bike over the city, seeing it from a bird’s point of view. Even if they were taking risks, it never felt as such. It was faith that didn’t let them see it this way, it was faith that made him feel that this was the only reasonable thing to do, but Peter knew that becoming a rock star was never a reasonable thing to do. Still people went down this road from time to time and succeeded. It wasn’t the faith in Neil itself, a blind faith with no reason, it was the faith in the world that was awaiting him. Even if Neil never spoke about it, they all knew that it was the same world residing in all of their hearts. They were following him, but had faith in the future.

He finally reached the bottom of the hill and parked by the garage they were renting a few blocks away from his apartment. He jumped off the bike and raised the metal door into the sky and

his band appeared; a group of losers wanting to rule the world. Judas was already waiting behind the drums, John and James were holding an acoustic and a bass guitar, Neil was standing by the microphone, Matthew was resting his head on his keyboard, the turntable was waiting for Peter.

“Hello, everyone,” said Peter.

“Get the hell to your place,” said Neil with a nervous frailty about his rudeness.

All of them were silent, and Peter tried to go to his place without making a sound, unsuccessfully, tripping over the wires here and there, sitting down after several apologies.

Peter saw an inexistent light emanating from Neil’s pores. The light formed invisible wires and slid to the ground and like golden snakes approached the band. The strand of light slithered up his body and connected itself into an invisible socket at the back of Peter’s neck. The wires were connected waiting for the message, the light was there, waiting to be filled by essence.

Neil counted to three, and the music rose into the air. It was not bad, but it wasn’t exactly good either, music played by amateurs preparing for the championship of local bands. Peter felt the wires tighten, but still nothing was pouring through them, the music was missing the last component, the words.

Neil’s contours started burning. Light rushed through the wires into their skulls and burst out through their eyes making their surrounding burn brighter and brighter until everything was completely white. The music died and even though they played, they only heard a high-pitched whistle. Their hands and bodies moved in perfect silence as Neil’s body slowly dissolved in light. Peter felt the light enter through his mouth, slowly filling him up. The words came from all around, emanating from the light itself, so elementary but bearing a weight that no human could deliver, simple words yet so hard to understand, a group of letters conveying the essence of the universe itself.

“Love everybody as I love thee.”

The light was flowing faster and turning brighter. Their contours gradually dissolved in the white liquid of the light until all they felt was the light itself, the essence of the greatest orgasm.

When Peter felt he would explode, he returned back to reality. He looked around and saw that everyone had experienced the same. Neil was panting at the front, his energy drained, his spinal column curved, using the microphone as a walking stick to bear

the burden of his body. He slowly erected himself adjusting his hair a little then turned to them.

“This is it, not more, nor less.”

They all smiled hoping their goals would be fulfilled some way or the other.

L€ne’s Gospel

“Please, L€ne, help us...”

The joy that filled L€ne’s heart a few minutes before when she heard Neil’s voice quickly went down the drain giving place to disappointment.

“I knew it, Neil. I knew that after such a long time, you didn’t call me just to ask me how I was...”

“What do you mean, L€ne? It was you who decided to leave. I thought you were better alone...”

“Just because I left, it doesn’t mean I left forever, it definitely doesn’t mean that I don’t want to hear at least from you.”

“Then why didn’t you call?”

“Me? I am the girl, Neil, hello. It is your duty to call...”

“Women...first they battle for emancipation then to be treated as women...”

“Neil, shut up...”

Both of them waited in silence determined not to speak until the other, determined not to hang up either.

“I’m sorry,” they both said at once and chuckled a little then L€ne continued, “I guess life flew by so quickly I didn’t have time to acknowledge how far we drifted away, and when I did, it was too late. I thought it was better not to call, that you would be furious, that we wouldn’t know what to talk about, that we would be strangers to each other...”

“And I thought that you becoming a superstar meant you didn’t have time for losers like me...”

“Well, this isn’t the case, so what do you need, my dear old friend?” asked L€ne with a tone of mockery.

“Help. I started a band and signed ourselves in for a local competition...”

“A band?” L€ne rejoiced. “That’s marvelous. And how is the competition going?”

“Very well, thank you, we are in the finals...which is great, but even if we win, I am not sure we will achieve the notoriety we need. We don’t want to be local celebrities, we want the world...”

“I see. You know, Neil, I may be a star but I’m not omnipotent. I’ll try to speak with my manager, he is the one that makes all the calls and we’ll see...”

“Great. How is your life turning out to be, L€ne?”

“Great.”

“Great. Will we meet someday?”

“I think sooner than later. See you, Neil.”

“Good-bye, L€ne.”

She hung up and smiled patting her suitcase. The fleet she had planned a few days ago would have to wait at least a few more hours. The uncertainty she felt before the call left her immediately, someone was waiting for her, the man of whom she perpetually thought of, the man she saw on the streets every day, the man who visited her in her dreams. A few moments before she wasn’t sure whether leaving her present life was a good idea, but now she knew. She knew she wasn’t alone, and she would be able to endure the nothingness of this life a little longer.

L€ne coughed a little and glitter stained her hands. She cleaned them with a handkerchief, then stood up adjusting her whore make-up and ragged skull T-shirt she used as a dress, and finally jumped into her boots. ‘The show must go on,’ she said to herself stepping out of her hotel room and smiling at how dramatic she sounded. ‘The show must go on, L€ne.’

She got into one of the taxis parking before the hotel and took way to her manager’s office. The skyscrapers moved as L€ne’s attention shifted toward the inside. She was empty, just a puppet and nothing more, leading a life without meaning. Even if she was more than wealthy, it didn’t make her happy. She was just moving through the darkness, without any goal except death itself, just existing and nothing more, living for the sake of living, and this was not enough, and she couldn’t bear this anymore.

The car stopped before one of the many skyscrapers, and L€ne stepped out onto a blood-red carpet with a circus-like pavilion above her. The doorman’s Hulkian muscles bulged through his uniform as he opened the door. L€ne stepped into the atrium where a dwarf sitting behind the receptionist’s desk greeted her. The elevator doors opened, and two women sharing the same arm stepped out.

“Hello, L€ne,” they said unanimously, and L€ne tried to smile sincerely. She pressed the button and the elevator rose. *The Entrance of the Gladiator* was playing as usual, over and over again, never ceasing even for a second. The music crawled into her head and wouldn’t let her go.

The elevator door opened, and L€ne stepped into a small room, the shelves reaching the ceiling, filled with gadgets and jars of all sorts, skulls, amulets, fetuses, frogs, and snakeheads. The secretary, a fortuneteller, was sitting behind a crystal bulb and smiled as L€ne entered.

“We’ve been expecting you,” she said caressing her crystal bulb. L€ne smiled knowing that her predictive powers resided under her table, a monitor connected to the camera facing the entrance in the atrium.

“May I enter?”

“Wait a moment.” She pressed a button that gave out a buzz then a few moments later the head of the manager appeared in the bulb. “L€ne is here to see you...”

“Let her in.”

The fortuneteller pressed another button, and the heavy Baroque door gave out a buzz. L€ne stepped to the door and pushed it open. She entered into the office, the carnival themed cloth hanging from the top of the ceiling creating the interior of a circus tent. The manager was wearing his usual red coat and black cylinder hat. He was playing with his whip when he saw L€ne and stood up.

“L€ne, my dear friend, how are you darling...”

“Fine, Julius, thank you.”

“In what way can I help you...oh please, sit down.”

L€ne stepped to a Baroque sofa and sat down as the bordeaux cushion embraced her behind.

“Let’s get to the point, Julius.”

Julius nodded giving her permission to continue.

“A friend of mine started a band, and I think they are really great,” lied L€ne who had never actually heard them play, knowing that being good was not enough without the proper representation. You can be the worst untalented singer and with the proper management, still rise to the top.

“Go ahead, L€ne, go ahead...”

“They play a type of electro-rock-pop-disco-sacrilegious type of music...”

“Very eclectic, what are their genders?”

“Six boys,”

“Great, great, we don’t represent a boy band yet, they sound really interesting...”

“They are, they are,” said L€ne agreeing. “I can ask for a demo if you’d like...”

“And what do they sing about?”

L€ne tried not to show the hate bubbling inside her towards him. Julius knew this very well, and as he waited for the answer, he played with his pointy moustache that looked like two spears growing out from right beneath his nose. L€ne knew that all she could do was tell him the truth.

“Religion, self-acceptance, tolerance, about the new world, sometimes abortion and adultery...”

Julius laughed and started shaking his head. “L€ne, L€ne, L€ne. Why did you come when you knew what I would say?”

“Who knows, I had to try. I was hoping that you have become illuminated over time...”

“L€ne, you know very well that people don’t want to listen to this. They want to hear about love and heartbreaks, parties and hangovers, nothing to think about, all the banalities in the world...”

“Are you sure this is what they want to listen to? Isn’t this what you give them and all they can choose from?” asked L€ne. The frustration was growing in her, and she shifted positions in the chair now and then, trying as hard as possible to remain seated and not to tear him apart.

“People don’t have time to think, and they want to hear things that are so trivial...”

“But look at Lady Dada. She sings not only about love and parties, but many other things and still people seem to listen...”

“L€ne, Lady Dada is a one-time phenomenon, just a momentary deviance from the mainstream. Don’t you think that she is so much different than you are, she has a really great management this is the secret and, L€ne, I don’t know how to put this...you know that she is a little more interesting than you’ll ever be...”

L€ne felt her hands tighten into a grasp, but luckily she could still control herself. “Maybe, but this is not what I am talking about. She seems to have a message, no matter how primitive,

still it is more than what I sing about, why can't you let me sing about something else?"

"Because you are not like her, you are just one of my many products, L€ne. I warned you when we started working together. I raised you so much higher than your talents would ever let you on your own. You should be grateful..."

"I am not, Julius," said L€ne hitting down onto Julius' desk making him jump back in fear. "You don't really care about talent, all you care about is money. There is so much more in me, but you try to silence me. I am leaving, Julius..."

"Go ahead, I'll sue you, and you'll find out how unpleasant I can be. I created you, L€ne, and I can destroy you."

"Go ahead, Julius, but I know you won't dare..." she said standing up.

"Why not, L€ne?"

"Because then the world would find out what a slave merchant you are. I will tell the people that you owned me, you owned my body and voice, and soon you will find yourself without customers..."

"I am not the only one, L€ne, I am not the only one..."

L€ne stood up, turned around, and left slamming the huge Baroque door behind her. The crystal ball rolled to the ground and shattered, the secretary looked at her surprised, she did not seem to see this coming.

Matthew's Gospel

Matthew stepped out of the changing room into the Western saloon packed with the youth wanting to have some fun, their chattering filling this tiny space with smoke and laughter. He nodded to a man standing by the jukebox. The man nodded back then turned to the jukebox kicking its side. A tired country song emerged from it, crackling away, not intruding, just underlining the prevailing murmur. Matthew adjusted the peace sign dangling down his neck and threw his Rasta strands back, winking at two girls looking at him. The girls giggled and hurried away.

In the thick cloud of smoke, he saw Neil sitting by a table alone, surrounded by many standing around him talking to others. He smiled at how Neil was able to seem so lonely even amidst so many people. He headed toward him then, patting his back, sat down.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing much,” answered Neil staring into his beer before him.

“It’s because of your parents, right?”

Neil nodded and took a sip. “I understand that this is not the life they want for me, but at least they should show some support...”

“They love you more than anything, you know that.”

“Hey, Matthew,” said a girl passing by, and Matthew nodded at her then faced Neil once more.

“You know this, right?”

“Of course.”

“Cool.”

The murmur suddenly stopped, even the jukebox died, in an instant everything went completely silent. Everyone faced the door. Neil didn’t care to look up, but Matthew was too intrigued to leave this phenomenon unnoticed, so he stood up.

In the entrance he saw a huge black man, his muscles seemed to be carved out of the hardest ebony. His strong cheekbones and maxilla made him look as if he were the son of the mountains themselves. He was masculine in every way, yet he was quite the opposite. Over his dark stern eyes the eyelids were colored a pale pink. His full lips were shining red with the lip-gloss reflecting the mild lighting coming from above. The man adjusted his blond wig and pushed his breasts up then pulled his pink tank top a little higher and his neon pink miniskirt a little lower. He headed through the room as the crowd parted. His smooth hairless legs pierced through the air as his pink high heel shoes moved with confidence, not even quivering a little before the staring eyes. He stepped to their table.

“May I sit down?” he asked them. Neil did not react, but Matthew felt the urge to stand up and pull the chair out for this being. The man sat down and searched in his little purse. A tiny mirror emerged through which he examined his reflection, reaching for some mascara to adjust his make-up. When he was done, he placed the mirror back into his bag then looked around, frustrated by the silence.

“Would you mind?” asked the man with a voice so deep as if it were arriving to them from the bottomless deep abyss. His voice almost echoed in the silence. Matthew felt the tension in the air, felt the invisible battle going down. The man was serious, and the

crowd felt his power that made them turn away, the murmur filling the room once more. Neil just drank his beer. Matthew smiled awkwardly.

“How can I help you?” asked Matthew.

“You might be wondering who I am....” said the man.

Matthew nodded.

“He is my father,” said Neil spoiling the surprise. “Why did you come?”

“I heard you are having the showdown today. I just came to see you. I am so proud of you munchkin,” said the man reaching over the table to squeeze Neil’s cheeks. Neil grabbed his wrist and tossed it away.

“Don’t touch me. Please leave. I am tired of being your little puppet. What were you thinking? You can just throw me down to earth every two thousand years to die? We started the band, of the idea I am thankful, but everything else we did alone, without your help. Now, get out of here.”

Neil stood up and left without turning around. Matthew looked at the man and saw his lips quivering. The clearest tear rolled down his cheek and fell to the ground. The moment it touched the stained parquet, it shattered, its fragments rolling away like diamonds.

“Don’t mind him, he can be quite the punk sometimes,” said Matthew consoling the father.

Neil’s father nodded, stood up, and left. Matthew watched his hips sway. The beauty of this presence was undeniable, he was perfect in his way, every last detail. The door closed behind him. Matthew finished his beer and was about to return backstage when he saw four bald men hurrying out the door after Neil’s father. Matthew knew that they were up to no good, so he stood up and hurried outside.

He did not see them anywhere. He heard a yelp coming from the back alley. He hurried to the back but froze with fear at its orifice, not being able to enter. Neil’s father, squirming on the floor, was surrounded by the four men.

“Don’t you dare return to our bar....”

“Wait,” interrupted one of the assailants, “let’s teach him a lesson, let’s make him a woman if this is what he wants.”

“But I am not a transsexual...” said Neil’s father, but the group didn’t seem to listen.

The man found a plank of wood lying nearby. He raised it into the sky and a nail stood out of it, glistening in the sun. He adjusted his grip on the plank then stepped to Neil's father, lifting his skirt with his feet and pushing it back. The other two pulled his pink panties off.

"What do we have here, we are doing you a favor aren't we, you little faggot?"

"I am not a faggot, I am a transvestite for God's sake..." replied Neil's father begging them helpless with horror as the man raised the plank into the air ready to strike.

Neil's father started laughing and winked toward Matthew. *Tink*. The little worm between his legs morphed into a great snake rising above the four men who were shaking in fear.

"Let's get out of here," one of them shouted.

The snake struck, ripping off their heads one after the other. Their headless corpses fell to the ground. The snake gobbled them up then shrunk back to its original size. Matthew ran to Neil's father and helped him up.

"Are you alright?"

"Of course, Matthew. What God giveth, he taketh away," said Neil's father and grinned.

"Right."

"I must really go now."

And with that, he burst into millions of butterflies. Matthew looked at them amazed, each a different color, embracing him as if they were an always-moving rainbow. The butterflies flew away, leaving through the sun.

"C'mon, Matthew. It's almost time."

Matthew turned around to see Peter at the end of the alley. He nodded and hurried after him back into the bar.

Josephine's Gospel

"Why do we have to go, Mary?"

"Because he is our son?"

"We cannot encourage him. Why can't he come to work in the furniture shop?"

"Because he doesn't want to. I am fed up with you two, you must talk eventually..."

"I will when he grows up,"

“We can’t ignore the elephant in the room anymore. You know very well who he is...”

“We were young back then, young and stoned...”

“Really, Josephine, were we?”

Josephine looked down, and she knew she couldn’t deny it any longer.

I guess you’re right,” she said.

“Now that’s a good girl,” said Mary caressing her face.

They were sitting in their red convertible. Mary raised the key and inserted it into the hole. As she turned it, the diamond skull dangled a little. Josephine lay back in the beige leather seat and closed her eyes. She felt the car roll down from the garage, and Mary began revving the car. Josephine felt the tires squeal beneath her, then, like a jet, they burst down the road the next second.

“Why do you have to do this?” asked Josephine.

“I love the smell of burning rubber.”

They sped onto the highway leading into the city. The hills rolled away toward the horizon with the never-ending pinewoods covering them like a warm blanket, interrupted by the desolate periphery surrounding the city, their destination.

“We’ll be late, Mary.”

“Shut up,” she said giving Josephine her rebellious grin that turned Josephine on. She caressed Mary’s thighs a little.

“Stop it,” she said without any sign of conviction.

Josephine slid her hands higher and higher until she felt Mary’s garden of pleasure bathing in a warm liquid beneath her hands. Josephine pulled her dark blue dress up as Mary started grunting with pleasure. She pressed down on the gas pedal, and the red convertible sped up, surpassing the many Sunday drivers. The speed meter started rising higher and higher and just when Josephine thought they would take off, Mary gave out a squeal that rose into heaven and caused God himself to grin.

They reached the exit and rolled through the desolated city stopping by the saloon where Neil would be playing. They stepped into the overcrowded room and sighed with relief when they saw the other group still on stage waiting to perform.

A slightly obese middle-aged man stepped to the microphone, his stomach protruding from his heavy-metal shirt a little too short and emerging like the great white. He adjusted his leather jacket before speaking.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said with his deep silky voice. “We have come to the final duel between the last two bands that made it into the finals. First, we will hear *The Pharisees* then the *Crucifixion Reloaded*. When they’re done, you all can vote by placing the ballot into the box right after you register yourselves at the table in the back. Now let the show begin!”

Josephine examined *The Pharisees*. Their long black hair covered their pale faces, but Josephine saw their eyes that were up to no good, tingling with the darkness of evil. The lead singer stepped to the microphone and with an au fait husky voice said, “The title of our song is *What you do, I would never do, not when you see it at least*. Have fun.”

He patted three beats on his thigh then gave a nod. The music exploded, and Mary and Josephine almost collapsed by the pain caused by the noise. All they could hear was a deafening raucous of cacophonous cords poisoning the air around them. Then the lead singer began to sing. They looked at his face and saw that his eyes were sinking deeper into his eye sockets until they were nothing but two black holes. His mouth grew wider and wider. The voice that emerged from that darkness was the voice of the devil coming to end the world after he had defeated God.

Josephine hugged Mary, and they soon noticed that they were alone. Everyone around them was hypnotized by the music. They were alone, standing in the spotlight in the middle of the sea of enemies. The singer was draining the world from light, turning the world around them dark. It was like black ink dissolving in water, and soon the strands were surrounding them, closing in on them. When Josephine thought she would scream, the tune ended, the ink dematerialized, and the crowd started cheering.

The Pharisees bowed several times then left the stage blowing kisses toward the audience. As they disappeared into the changing room, the *Crucifixion Reloaded* stepped onto the stage. They just gave a nod to one another before beginning.

Peter pressed something on his turntable, and the beat started thumping, resonating with Mary’s and Josephine’s heart. Josephine examined Neil and thought he looked like a homeless. His dark shirt was ripped at the sides, and his black leather jacket was decorated with wrinkles deriving from a time long lost.

She didn’t understand the youth, not anymore, but she knew there was no sense in fighting them. It was better to step aside and let them prosper. Yet, she felt sad and in the back of her mind

a thought wriggled, maybe their time was better. This feeling was natural, and she never tried to silence it because it filled her with sweet, sweet nostalgia.

Neil faced the ground, and his strands of hair dangled in the air as he moved his head to the rhythm. The second he looked up John and James struck the chords of their guitars, Judas hit down on his drum, Matthew's arachnid hand accelerated on the keyboard, and Neil began to sing. Mary grabbed the arms of Josephine, marveling at the light bursting out of Neil's mouth. Light washed over them, embracing them, caressing them, and both of them felt safe, protected by this immense power that was so tender, like the soft wool of a sheep. They were swimming in light, and they saw Neil for who he really was for the first time.

His immaculate white cloak swayed as he moved in slow-motion. He raised his arms, his palms turned to the sky, delivering a gift from God himself. His hand stopped in mid-air, distended toward them, offering his saving hands. He opened his mouth and words emerged in the form of notes of all colors of a neon rainbow, warm and strong, gentle and confident. The notes danced around them before sinking into their ears.

"If someone tells you homosexuals should not adopt because it is against the will of God, tell them to be careful and think about the infertile. If it is allowed to cure them with the help of medicine, why couldn't the homosexual infertility be cured as well by adoption or IVF.

"If someone tells you homosexuals should not adopt because it is against the will of God, ask them how dare they claim to know what God's will is?

"If someone tells you that homosexuals should not adopt because a child needs parents of two genders, tell them to be careful and think about the widows and divorced whose child is also raised by one.

"If someone tells you homosexuals should not adopt because it is against the will of God, tell them that God has no gender and still bears millions of children, some are sane, others are mad.

"If someone tells you that homosexuals should not adopt because their child will see that the homosexual family model is the one to assimilate, ask them whether they think that homosexuals learned this behavior from their parents.

“If someone tells you homosexuals should not adopt because it is against the will of God, tell them God is pansexual and loves everything and everyone just the same.

“If someone tells you that homosexuals should not adopt because their child will experience hate, rejection, and exclusion, tell them if this is their worry, then they must look into their heart and ask themselves who is to blame.

“If someone tells you homosexuals should not adopt because it is against the will of God, tell them there is no greater evil than blind hate.”

Neil punched into the air, and the white light embracing them burst into the sky like sharp knives rushing away, making them return into the crowded room where smoke ruled over all. They both started clapping, looking into each other’s eyes and understanding that they did a good job raising him. Mary winked, and Josephine knew that she was right. He was the son of the One. As they clapped, they realized that they were the only ones applauding, the rest of the audience stood in silence.

Neil noticed them in the back and hurried to them. He first hugged Mary then faced Josephine. He gave her the apologetic smile that Josephine saw so many times when he was still a child, causing all her rage to melt. She stepped to him, and they hugged. Josephine felt tears rush to her eyes as she felt Neil tighten his grasp around her waist, but she tried to contain them.

“Son, you were marvelous, I am sure you will win,” said Josephine at the verge of tears.

“We’ll see,” said Neil.

The rest of the band stepped off the stage, hurried to the counter, and ordered a round of shots. The transparent fluid in the cups disappeared one after the other into their mouths. Mary and Josephine joined the celebration and felt young again. Rounds came and rounds went. Josephine was soon inebriated. The host stepped onto the stage and cleared his throat.

“Would the bands please come up to the stage...”

The bands obeyed. Judas cleaned his mouth into his sleeves and went after the rest of them. He stepped onto the stage intently bumping against the lead singer of the Pharisees.

“What the hell do you want?” asked their lead singer.

“Come hit me,” said Judas a little drunk.

Neil pulled him away from the others and apologized. The host continued after this brief intermezzo.

“First of all, I would like to congratulate to all of you. Unfortunately, there can only be one winner who will be able to record his album with the help of our sponsor, the Sox factory that gives you the softest polyester socks in the world.”

Josephine stepped closer to Mary, and they smiled at each other, knowing that Neil’s dream would finally come true.

“So, ladies and gentlemen,” Neil took a deep breath, “the winner of the battle of local bands,” Mary squeezed Josephine’s hand, “is no other than,” no sound could be heard, only the tension in the form of a high-pitch whistle, “the band that will take its first step toward glory,” Peter almost fainted and was caught by James before collapsing onto the stage, “issssss”, his voice was turning into a scream culminating into the last two words, “*the Pharisees*”.

Mary faced Josephine with disbelief. The Pharisees jumped up and down. Their leader stepped to Neil, and even though he was standing far away from the microphone, his words were amplified by it and could be heard coming from the speakers. “How does it feel to lose?”

Judas almost jumped on him before the many eyes and was stopped once again by Neil.

The crowd embraced the winners and left Neil and his band standing on the stage alone. They stepped down and walked to Josephine and Mary who congratulated each of them nonetheless. Neil stepped to Josephine to say, “I guess you were right. It’s better if I give up my childish dreams and go to work in the shop.”

Josephine put both her hands on his shoulders, looking deeply into his eyes. “You cannot leave the path designated to you only because it is harder, because any other road leads to delusions and disappointments. You know that if God closes a door somewhere, he opens a window somewhere else. Maybe this time he closed a window and will open a door for you, who knows.”

“Mom, are you drunk?”

“Maybe...a little.”

Mary approached Josephine from behind, putting her hands on her shoulders.

“Don’t give up, Neil, never. Now we’d better go because Josephine forgot that she is not eighteen anymore. Are you coming, Neil?”

“No, we are celebrating with the others in the playground. See you tomorrow.”

Josephine kissed Neil one more time then they left, stepping into the cool night, free and without worries, knowing that their child was learning to fly and will rise into the air.

THE RISE

Judas' Gospel

“How long will you stay there?” heard Judas from the phone as the flames warmed his back.

“I don't know, the whole night, come whenever you want...”

“I must see him...”

“Him? I thought because of me,” said Judas a little let down.

“Not this time, I must see him.”

“Why so suddenly? I thought you didn't have any time.”

“I'll explain everything later.”

Judas heard a click then the monotone ringtone returned, and he knew he was alone on the line with God. He kept the phone near his ears for a few seconds hoping he would hear her voice telling him that she wanted to see him and not Neil, but her voice did not return.

He always felt that she did not belong to him, to no one, in fact. This made him love her even more, an unreachable specter just within reach never to be grasped. Because she was made of air, he was afraid he would lose her. It was the fact that he could not possess her that made him love her. Judas saw Neil the way all the others did, and specifically because of this, he was afraid that she would choose Neil over him.

He walked past the many cars parked in a circle toward the fire burning in the center. He saw six male figures, each of them with a can of beer in their hands. James and Neil were wearing tight jeans with black boots that shone as they reflected the light of the flames. The flowers decorating Matthew's shirt were swaying in the shadows cast by the fire, Peter's thick-framed glasses reflected the light, John's white suit was tinted orange, and Philip's suit was the color of the smoke rising to the sky. The six of them were standing in a circle, but he did not feel like joining them, not until

the jealousy was still burning strong. Alcohol and jealousy is just a little better combination than alcohol and driving or alcohol and guns.

He waited in the darkness for a few seconds then approached the others, leaning against his motorcycle facing the ring of people at the other side of the fire. Peter spoke to him over the flames and under the stars decorating the night sky.

“Who was it, Judas? Do you have to go home? Were you a bad, bad boy?”

“Shut the fuck up. She’s coming here.”

“No shit,” said Peter, joy speeding across his face. “Hey, guys, she is coming here.”

The others broke the circle and now stood in a semi-circle watching Judas.

“What does she want?” asked Matthew opening another can of beer and taking a deep sip from it.

“I don’t know, she says she must see Neil.”

“Me?” asked Neil sitting down onto the hood of his red hundred-year-old Mustang. “What does she want?”

“I said, I don’t know, so just get off me.”

“What’s the matter, Judas?” asked Neil lighting a cigarette.

“Shut up,” said Judas reaching for a Lucky and putting the cigarette in his mouth.

“Who wants to smoke a joint?” asked Matthew.

Each of them put their hands up, everyone except for Judas. “Oh, Judas,” said Matthew. “Come here.”

Judas shook his head. Neil approached him, leaning against the motorcycle and staring into the destroying flames casting their light onto his placid lines.

Without looking toward Judas, Neil said, “You know we are friends, I would never touch her. I know how jealous you are, but I would never do anything to hurt you. I am sure she is in love with you. She could have had all the men she wanted, yet she holds out next to a loser like you.” Neil smiled and punched Judas’ shoulder playfully.

“I know, I know, all this seems so improbable, you know, me and her. I am happy that she decided to see you, I truly am, yet I am scared that it can end any second. Let’s be honest, Neil, you’ve got the looks, and the charisma that makes the panties just slide off the girls...”

“Don’t be silly, Judas, I am sure she is not so superficial.”

Judas knew that he was right.

“C’mon Judas, let’s go to the others.”

They stood up, and Judas put his great muscular arm around Neil and hugged him a little, kissing his forehead as they approached the others.

“Ah, how cute,” said Peter. “Don’t tell me that you’re playing for our team.”

“You’re terrible, Peter,” said James and kissed Peter firmly on his mouth.

“Get a room,” said Matthew lighting the joint. It moved from mouth to mouth as the incense embraced them, swirling in the air, swaying left to right like many snakes dancing to the monotone tune of the flutes, slowing down time itself. Soon their moods rose high along with the smoke, and they were young again, far from the worries and disappointments of adulthood, free from the shackles of duty, free to be careless for a few hours. Slowly the empty cans started filling the ground, and their manly laughter echoed in the abandoned playground.

They heard a deep rumble, and everyone turned to see the headlights of a limousine approaching. Gradually their voices subsided, all of them were waiting for the car to stop and for her to appear, but time moved slower than the slowest snail, and the limousine did not seem to end, distending for infinite miles over the horizon.

When they thought the car would never stop, the trunk finally came into view, and the vehicle stopped. The driver jumped out in a perfectly ironed suit with a black bowtie and a hat. His white moustache sparkled. He hurried to the back door, put his wrinkled hands onto the knob, and paused for a second. They all held their breath as the door opened, but all they could see was a dark cavern where one of the most peculiar creatures of their time resided ready to manifest herself in her full splendor.

The orifice of the cave flickered as the light emitted by the dancing flames illuminated its edges, not strong enough to penetrate inside the vehicle.

First the limbs emerged, landing on two great black extremities of a crab hiding somewhere in the depths of the Marianna trench, a monster so terrible humanity had never seen before. Growing out from the scissors the white legs emerged. They followed it up to the middle of the thighs until it disappeared inside the limousine.

An eel-like formation slid out and grabbed hold of the side of the door. The black snake twirled and squirmed. Echoing from the hole, they heard a barking-like sound that made shivers run up and down their backs. They saw a flicker then a tiny flame was born, lighting her lips the color of blood and a mole with great hairs growing out from it. The monster lit her cigarette, and as she inhaled the smoke, the ash turned dark red. Another eel-like formation slithered out with the cigarette, grabbing hold of the other side of the door.

The seven men were petrified by fear, hoping that if they stay this way, immobilized and silent, the predator wouldn't see them. They saw the eels tighten their grasp as if they were bearing a great weight that wants to pull them back into the pit, but they did not let go, and from the cave, the monster presented itself, mother of all monsters, a creation so great and feared by many, an elongated figure wearing a tentacle-like gown with the many protrusions all alive, swirling, covering her white body the color of the moon. The black gown continued into a dark corset ending right over her breast. Her hair, the color of piss, made of snakes, rose into the sky to flow down around her neck framing the face that wasn't like any human face but of the emperor alien descending from a spaceship to defeat humanity. From the deep sockets of her pale face two eyes shimmered, the palest green, topaz mixed with air, the same color of the eyes of death himself.

Gathering some energy, she pushed herself out of her cave and almost lost balance on her great shoes. The men feared that if she would collapse the deepest canyon would form, cutting right into the heart of the globe, but luckily their lives were spared once again.

She reached into the car for a leather jacket decorated by a great unicorn, its horn sparkling in the light. The jacket moved out of its own accord and slid up her back. Next, she reached back in the car for a translucent apple filled with a blood-like fluid. She raised it to the height of her shoulders with her elbow bent, balancing the apple on her palm. She placed her other hand on her hips, held her head high, cleared her throat, and finally took her first step to approach them.

She did not move like humans do, but more like a fluid flowing towards them. Her contours morphed as the dark waves washed through her, coming closer and closer. She wasn't simply fluid. It was as if her cells were remodeling themselves, changing

positions and forms, approaching them with almost a godly bearing. The apple in the palm of her right hand was floating toward them. She moved in slow motion, and it seemed to them that the tentacles forming her dress and the snakes growing out from her head lived a separate life, waving in the night sky, illuminated by the flames that never rested feeding on the wood like parasites.

She walked past the cars with an aristocratic elegance, and her pale green eyes were glowing in the darkness. She moved toward Neil who just looked up at her as an apparition, a dancer in the dark. Everyone stepped back a little, fearing that they would be seized by one of her tentacles, everyone except for Neil and Judas. The queen stopped before them and did not say a word.

She moved the apple from the side to the height of her belly as the red fluid swayed a little. She raised her other hand and pinched the stem with her thumb and index finger then pulled it out releasing a sweet perfume from the phial. The scent lingered about, and all of them knew that this was the essence of the Eden long lost. She tilted the phial, and the red fluid dribbled to the ground dampening Neil's dark leather boots and the ground around it. The scent exploded, and all of them felt dizzy and hypnotized.

This wife of the night knelt down before Neil, looking into his eyes all through the ritual. Neil could see her hair slide up onto his boots, and the strands began dancing. She placed her arachnid fingers onto the boots and started washing his feet with the greatest care. They saw this woman degrade herself into shame, yet it was not shame they sensed in her entity but the aura of being gifted, gifted to wash the feet of this man, gifted to know him, gifted to be with him. It was an act of humiliation tinted with a sexuality felt by all of them watching. This erotic scene was only emphasized by the syrupy scent of Eden. Everyone was mesmerized, everyone but Judas.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Judas heard a female voice but couldn't find its source. L€ne stepped out of the darkness and hurried toward the petrified men.

“L€ne?” everyone gasped in shock.

L€ne looked into Judas' eyes, their eyes said everything, the joy of finding a kindred and a touch of green jealousy.

They broke this glance, and Judas stepped to Lady Dada to pull her up and away from Neil's feet.

"I asked," said L€ne emphasizing the next few words and facing Dada, "what the hell are you doing?"

"What do you think I'm doing?" Lady Dada replied, and her soft voice of Circe disrupted the illusion, turning her back into human from the mother monster she was a few seconds before.

"I don't know, that's why I asked."

"This is how the prince of heaven should be treated," said Dada bowing her head towards Neil.

L€ne stepped to Neil hugging him stronger than ever. Agony ran across Neil's face because of her tight grasp, but he smiled a little proudly.

"Get away from my man, you bitch," L€ne said.

"Hey," said Neil pulling L€ne back, preventing her to jump onto Lady Dada so that she can rip her to bits and pieces with her teeth. Judas grabbed hold of Dada's waist firmly, knowing that he too was holding a ticking bomb.

"Don't call her that way, cunt," said Judas.

"Why shouldn't I? This is what she calls herself, a fame hooker prostitute witch. Why should I call her otherwise?"

"Listen to yourselves," said Neil interrupting the debate. "What is the matter with you, L€ne? You judge her with the slurs and prejudices of the world that is about to end. Maybe she was a prostitute before and sold herself many years ago but not anymore. She stepped onto the godly path, and from all her previous sins, I absolve her."

"Thank you," said Lady Dada bowing her head once more and placing her fist onto her bare chest.

"And as for you, Judas, you must really understand the many definitions of love and make a difference. The love she feels for me may emerge from the same source, but the result is totally different. Affection, eros, friendship, and unconditional love are the four faces of the same feeling growing from the same root. Unconditional love is the one that shows God in its full splendor, but do not forget that all of them are a gift, and thus should be treated as such. You must learn the difference between them even if sometimes they overlap. Her pussy is yours, Judas, I told you I would never touch her."

They all laughed as the flames warmed their faces and hearts.

“He is right, Judas,” said Lady Dada huddling closer to him. “I wouldn’t spread my legs for anyone else.”

“And even jealousy derives from God, and it is not evil, representing the greatest love, the fear of losing the other, but like all gifts, this too should be used with caution because too much of anything proves to be harmful eventually. Continnence is what I teach you,” said Neil looking at L€ne who quickly turned away but in a few seconds turned back, her eyes sparkling this time, and blew the most gentle kiss onto his cheeks. She broke free from Neil’s arms and stepped to Dada.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have called you that.”

“Don’t worry about it, I am used to be called that and even much worse. I am a prostitute in their eyes, but I don’t care. To be called evil by the evil I guess makes you virtuous.”

L€ne then turned to Neil. “And as for you, Neil, fuck you. You and your words. They make me wanna puke all over, yet somehow I don’t, on the contrary, I inhale them.”

She reached for her flask decorated with the finest brown leather and raised it into the air. “Let the party begin. Here,” she said giving the flask to Dada, “You drink first.”

Dada obeyed.

“That’s more like it,” said L€ne reaching for the whiskey. “So what brought you here?”

“A dream and a goal,” said Dada.

“A dream? What did you dream about?”

“It doesn’t matter, all I can say is that it was extraordinary and horrifying at the same time,” said Lady Dada secretly.

“Oh, c’mon, these dreams,” said Neil a little annoyed. “Why does he always have to help me out?”

“He is your father,” said L€ne. “He wants only what is best for you, you can’t have rancor because of this.”

“No, you shouldn’t, because if it weren’t for this dream, I wouldn’t be here,” said Dada.

“Why have you come then?” asked L€ne lighting a cigarette and putting it in her mouth.

“Neil must reach out to far greater crowds. You are all coming on tour with me. Maybe this time things will change for the better and will not end the same way like the time before.”

Neil looked away and faced the darkness surrounding them. Judas could see by his profile that his heart broke. Peter stepped to Dada, trembling like a little girl. “We accept your help with the

greatest humiliation, and I, your faithful fan and most vicious little monster, give my life to you.”

“What’s the matter with you?” asked Dada, tired to be treated as a star. “I am not your queen, but one of those, who like you, fight for a good cause, going against the world, against petrified tradition, trying to free the calcified gyres’ of the brains of humanity and make them see the new world.”

“I know, but still you will remain the Mother Monster in my eyes. Now please sign my chest,” he said ripping his shirt apart.

Peter handed her a pen, and she signed his bare chest as James shook his head in disbelief.

“I will never wash again!” exclaimed Peter.

Neil stepped to L€ne and kissed the top of her head. “You must answer the question pending in the air, L€ne, we already know why Dada came, so I must ask you what brought *you* here?”

“Long story,” she said.

“We have time,” said Neil leaning against his hundred-year-old Mustang and taking a sip from his beer.

The flask moved round and round as L€ne recounted the happenings of the past that led her to flee the music industry. The group disrupted by the apparition of two women calmed back down, not being less than before but much more.

When the morning light came, Judas stepped to Lady Dada and whispered in her ears.

“Let’s go, sweetheart.”

Lady Dada was far too drunk to answer and nodded. As they hurried to the limousine, they saw Neil leaning against the trunk of his car with a beer in his hand. The figure of L€ne appeared, kneeling before him. They both thought that she too was washing his feet, but soon they understood that she was praying, but in a different way. Dada stopped for a second watching them, her face turning sad. Judas pulled her away fearing what Dada felt.

They sat in the car, and Dada placed her head on Judas’ shoulder. He caressed her thighs as she fell asleep. Judas saw her now for who she truly was, a girl afraid and hurt, wanting a better future for those who were broken inside by the normal majority, just like her.

Peter's Gospel

The stage was dark as Peter hurried up to take his place before the hundred-thousand eyes waiting for the concert to begin. He felt a tingling sensation coming not from his chest but straight from his prick. This electric spark rushed down his shaft into his abdominal cavity and dashed into his brain. Anticipation and fear, a sense of unstoppable destiny.

The lights kindling above them and keeping them in semidarkness went out. The crowd went silent, not silent, dead, not holding their breath but ceasing to breathe completely. The darkness seemed irreversible.

He felt someone brush against his shoulder, and he knew that Neil had stepped onto the stage. The show was about to begin. Judas pressed down on the pedal connected to the drumstick beating the drum bass at his feet. Rhythmically he thumped over and over again, a heartbeat speeding around the arena synchronizing the thousands of hearts to beat unanimously. Thump, Thump, Thump, Thump, Thump.

He heard John strum down on the strings of his electric guitar. The instant the first sound rose from the chords, the hundreds of spotlights behind them were switched on at once, and just for a second, everything became visible. Neil was standing at the center of the stage not moving, facing the ground, his hair covering his face, dangling like seaweeds. Then everything turned dark again. The only difference now was that the murmur of the crowd was becoming louder and louder.

Thump, Thump, Thump, Thump, Thump. The guitar whined once more, awakening the light itself, making the motionless Neil visible again. Then everything returned to darkness. Peter's heart started beating faster knowing that the third one would be the one of revival, the moment when darkness would be defeated by light definitively.

Thump, Thump, Thump, Thump, Thump. John awoke the light with his guitar, and this time the lights stayed on, growing stronger and stronger and stronger until the band dissolved in the light. A beat that was so much different than the one of the drums, sharper and more synthetic, emerged from Peter's DJ table. The lights dimmed a little, and green lasers erupted from the back of the stage shooting into the sky, moving to the rhythm, reminding them of the nineties yet so very different. Then John

started playing accompanied by James with his faithful bass guitar always in the background and only seldom stepping out into the light. Matthew was striking the electric piano so swiftly Peter feared it would go up in flames. The music reached its peak and vibrated there for a few seconds to die the next, giving place to the voice of Neil.

It was his voice that made him stand out. It was a tenor, but it was much more than that, bearing the tone of the devil decorated by a blush of heaven, awakening a strange feeling of awkwardness in the listeners. His tight jeans emphasized his thin, lady-like legs. His deeply cut out shirt was feminine, yet it wasn't, making his rippling pectorals visible with his manly hairs curling about, covering his chest, giving him a feeling of carelessness. He was a man in every way, but his feminine placidity made everyone uncomfortable, forcing everyone out of the box, making them question the meaning of normality. As he sang, he inhaled the smoke from his cigarette and blew it out through his teeth. In the instrumental parts, he would drink his beer and clean his mouth with his sleeves just to continue his immaculate singing. His beard seemed to grow without rules and prescriptions. He seemed so natural, yet he wasn't, not completely.

He was made to be this way, giving him an aura of a rock star that would seduce his listeners. His clothes were chosen ever so carefully, designed by the greatest designers of his time. Everything on him was brand new yet seemed as if he had just thrown on something before stepping onto the stage. His beard was trimmed to seem to grow freely, and his hair was carefully done by hundreds of hairdressers, each caring for a single strand of hair.

The music died, and the last notes still hung in the air then popped the next second to disappear into nothingness.

Neil cleared his throat to speak, and the crowd was eager to listen, not only to his music, but his words as well.

“Thank you, thank you all for coming.”

The crowd roared, preventing him from continuing. Neil looked back at Peter and gave him his snicker-like smile. Peter smiled back unable to believe the reaction of the crowd. They actually mattered to the ones listening to them, Neil's words were now worth to hear and not to ignore. This was something so astounding and not normal that elevated Peter into a state that was not happiness but the recognition of one's power.

“There is one rule to obey over all,” said Neil when the roar subsided, “make the rule your own, incorporate it in your life, and too great a sin shall not be committed. Do not cause harm to the other and yourself in any way.

“No matter what bigots may tell you, do use condom every time because it gives defense against so many harmful deeds. It not only prevents the spreading of sexual diseases but prevents unwanted pregnancy as well. Sexually transmitted diseases cause harm in the other, this is plain to see, but remember that an unwanted pregnancy causes harm as well. It is as harmful as a small car accident, ruining the lives of at least three people if they are not ready to receive the gift. The world of sacrifices has ended, a life sacrificed is a life ruined, a ruined life is the gift of God thrown away, three ruined lives are worse than one life not even existing. For those who say contraception of any kind is murder I say that your sperm and egg are cells, just like the cells of your skin you shed. No one will be punished for that.

“Have a great night, and do not forget, do not cause harm to the other and yourself in any way.”

Neil raised his hand to wave, Peter and the others followed. They ran off the stage through a narrow corridor. A figure dressed in red silk was standing at its end, looking like an archbishop. The figure stood erect, and as they approached it, they recognized the face of Lady Dada partially covered by the finest red lace, her blonde hair mounted high onto her head like a bird’s nest. She smiled as they hurried past her.

“Good job, little buggers, now get the hell away from my stage.”

Judas stepped to his woman and kissed her passionately then they hugged.

As the others hurried to the changing room, Peter turned around and saw Neil coming behind him. In the distance he noticed Dada staring at Neil over Judas’ shoulder with a smile on her face, a smile representing something that is much more than affection with a tint of bitterness. Peter followed Matthew, John, and James into the dimly lit changing room with six tables, chairs, and mirrors with many light bulbs framing their reflection. Peter humped down onto a sofa in the corner.

Neil sat down before a mirror with the light bulbs illuminating his sweaty face. He cleaned the make-up off as Judas stepped into the room and jumped onto the other sofa sprawling in the chair,

closing his eyes. Neil turned around and said, "This is exhausting, right? And tomorrow we are going overseas...Jeez."

Everyone nodded, too tired to speak.

"How does she do it?" asked Peter.

Judas answered without opening his eyes. "I don't know, but we must keep on going."

"Who wants to party?" asked John reaching for a bottle of whiskey.

"No one," said James pushing himself away from the wall and walking to Peter to grab his hand and pull him up. "Let's go to sleep, Peter, I am really tired."

Peter rubbed his eyes and nodded then said, "Good night, guys. Have a good night's sleep. We are leaving early tomorrow."

Everyone nodded. As they walked down the corridor, Peter huddled closer to James and felt his arms around his shoulder tighten a little. Peter looked at the profile of his man and smiled knowing that he was his rock, his energy that would keep him up and alive along the tour.

They stepped out of the stadium and heard the voice of Dada echoing in the night. The crowd roared inside, mesmerized by her being, a phenomenon given birth by the will of change, an objection toward meaningless art, empty words, and mass production, even if it still was the latter in so many ways.

They walked to the trailer and opened the door. Peter unbuttoned his checked shirt and threw it onto the floor. He jumped onto the bed caressing his own slender waist and stopping his hand on his hairless chest. James threw his T-shirt with Lady Dada on it to the ground and pushed his pants down standing nude before Peter. He walked to the bed and crawled over him. They looked into each other's eyes with passion when James blew out some air and rolled off him.

"I am too tired, Peter."

"Me too."

"Do you think we are losing it?"

"Don't be paranoid, our relationship is only morphing," said Peter in a reassuring tone.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course, besides, there are so many more important things than sex."

"If you say so."

Peter stood up to switch the lights off, but before flicking it down, he watched James lying there nude with his eyes closed, feeling a comfort he never felt before. Their relationship was morphing into something greater, from being lovers they slowly drifted to being companions. He switched the lights off and carefully lay down beside him.

He was happy not only because he accepted himself but because he was surrounded by men and women not caring about who he loved and why. Self-acceptance is very important but surrounding yourself with the right people is as well. Peter was lucky, very lucky, and this Peter knew very well and reminded himself every day. He placed his head onto James' chest feeling the hairs tickling his face, and as he listened to his heartbeat, he slowly drifted to sleep.

NEIL'S TWITTER. The world of sacrifice has come to an end. The sacrifice of one doesn't absolve you from your sins, only repent can give you peace.

James' Gospel

James opened his eyes to three knocks sputtered hastily one after the other.

"Who the fuck is it?" he asked grumpily.

"It's me, Judas, open the door."

James staggered up, trying to rub off the haziness the dream had left behind. He opened the door, and by the shock on Judas' face, he understood he was naked. He covered himself with his hand.

"Oh, c'mon. You must be kidding me, don't tell me you overslept," said Judas annoyed.

"What time is it?"

"It's late, we are leaving this moment. Hurry up, your taxi will be waiting for you. We'll meet at the airport."

As Judas left, he turned around and said, "By the way, nice asset..."

"You want some?" shouted James after him.

Judas gave him the middle finger and shook his head laughing to himself. James jumped back to the bed waking Peter up. Peter sat up abruptly, still in the realm of dreams. "What is it? What happened?"

James started throwing the clothes into his luggage. “C’mon, hurry up, it’s late.”

“Did you forget to set the alarm?” asked Peter with a tone of frustration.

“So it seems.”

Peter jumped out of the bed. “I really can’t believe how forgetful you are sometimes,” he said huffing and puffing, not speaking to James anymore. James knew very well that he was pissed off, and the best thing to do was to wait for the storm to blow over.

“What would happen to you without me, huh?” asked Peter trying to provoke him.

James just shrugged looking at his bag that seemed to contain twice as much clothes compared to when they unpacked. He scratched his head and tried to compress the luggage but still couldn’t zip it.

“Get out of the way, James,” said Peter jumping onto James’ bag. “Zip it, zip it quickly,” he screamed.

The zipper slid to the other side sealing the luggage shut.

“Let’s go, sweetheart,” said Peter.

James picked the bags up and hurried after Peter. The morning air was fresh, and the sun was still lingering beneath the horizon, preparing for the show called day. As they approached the taxi, Peter turned around and blew a kiss over his shoulder, giving James an apologetic smile. James knew that everything was forgiven. They jumped into the taxi and sped off through the sleeping city toward the airport.

As they dashed through the many skyscrapers, here and there lights began to shine, the city slowly coming to consciousness. They were the rock stars, yet they were up long before the rest of the city. The illusion had to be maintained that the lives of the stars is so much easier than the lives of the rest, conveying a hope that kept many up and moving. The moment you take away the hope for a better life, everything ceases to work. Why would anyone wake up if amelioration could not be achieved?

The airport appeared, a great complex of glass and concrete, and the taxi drove around the back. They jumped out of the vehicle with their luggage flying in the air, hurrying toward the plane through a narrow corridor running down between two buildings at the end of which a figure was waiting for them. When

they saw it was Lady Dada, they slowed down, knowing that the plane wouldn't depart without her.

She was leaning against the wall with the wide rim of her huge black hat covering her face. She wore a black pencil skirt with a white blouse, black tights, and high heels almost a foot tall. As they approached her, she looked up showing her face, her eyes hidden by dark round shades. She was wearing a thin vertical line of red lipstick, just a finger wide, running down the middle of her mouth. She threw the cigarette to the floor, stepped on it, and started playing with her pearl necklace as the light appeared over the horizon and red flames embraced her slender figure.

"What is it lovebirds, too early to sing?" she said in her docile voice.

"We're sorry."

"No need to be, the plane only leaves when I am on it, but don't think I was waiting for you, you just got lucky."

She smiled, and they both knew she was playing with them. It was the gentle voice that gave her away, making her much more human than most of the people and less like the monster she portrayed herself to be. It was soft, almost motherly with a deep and strict tone of a father. She giggled a little and turned around to walk towards the plane.

She turned around and waved toward them. "C'mon, we must leave." Her shoes moved in a perfectly straight line, one after the other, a sensual apparition deriving from the pages of the most progressive minds of fashion, a show, theater itself, exaggeration squared, freedom of creation.

They hurried up the plane and greeted everyone already in place. The beige interior felt soft and welcoming, the carpet beneath them muffled their every step as they walked to their seat and sat down, the beige cushions embracing their behind. With a thrust, the plane sped down the airstrip. Just when everyone thought that the strip would end before take-off, the plane rose. They felt their insides being pulled down as they rose higher and higher and saw the world bathing in morning glory fade under the tiny little cumuli that turned into greater and greater huffs of white until they were over a thick layer of cotton, solely accompanied by the sun.

The plane was silent. Everyone was sleeping except for Neil sitting before him.

Neil turned around and spoke silently between the head of the two seats, careful not to wake Peter up. "How did you sleep?" he asked giving him a mocking smile.

"Great," whispered James.

"This is really crazy, a few months ago we were in the playground and now here, flying toward a destination unknown. Providence, right?"

"A fatherly one. I wonder where we would be without him..."

"Who knows." Neil turned around deep in thought, and James tried to relax as the plane dashed through the sky like a bullet shot out from the purest gun that meant no harm.

James felt his eyelids slowly turn to lead, too heavy to keep open. His eyes closed. When he was just pivoting on the threshold between dream and reality, he heard Neil whispering, "What are you doing here?"

James opened his eyes and saw the profile of Neil facing the window. He turned his head right to see what he was looking at when his blood froze, not terrified, rather surprised.

He saw a man flying by the plane, sitting in a tiny little cotton cloud as one would in a two-deck plane. His white hair flowed in the wind accompanied by the man's snow-white robe. As he flew, he left a streak of cloud behind. He was wearing goggles protecting him from the wind. The man raised a board with the following word: 'Congratulations.'

"It was you, right?"

The man nodded.

"I knew it. I can't do anything out of my own consent, you and your dreams, pulling the strings. Why do you always have to manage my life? Why don't you let me follow my own ways, find my own strengths?"

The man scribbled something onto the board. 'You have the world's best management and still you complain. Don't you understand that whatever you do, you do within me, by my consent?'

"It would just be nice to accomplish something on my own, to be able to say, 'Yes, what I did, no matter whether it is right or wrong, was my choice.'"

Neil's father wrote on the board once more. 'You know you can follow your way and renounce my providence any time, but beware, this never leads to good. Everyone acts within me from

the second they are born, but some leave it and proceed down evil roads as they grow up. You can leave me if you like...’

“Maybe I shall.”

‘As you wish, but remember, I warned you. If you choose to return, I will be there to re-embrace you...’

“Go to hell,” said Neil.

James saw that the broad welcoming smile on the man’s face disappeared as his docile expression turned furious. The cloud on which he was flying turned darker and darker. Tiny lightning bolts erupted from the bottom of his vehicle. The streak of cloud he left behind him dissolved in the clouds around them turning the white cotton black. Neil’s father steered away from the plane into the furious clouds. A bolt struck down behind them, and the plane began to shake.

They heard a bling then the voice of the captain came on. “Please fasten your seatbelts.”

Everybody woke up. The restlessness was tactile in the luxurious palace drifting through the clouds as rain started pouring down around them, a rain so thick it seemed that they were moving through the sea. The plane started rising higher and higher until they were over the storm.

“You may unfasten your seatbelts.”

James felt his pulse slow down but thought it was better not to unfasten them. He turned left and saw Peter sleeping beside him without a care in the world. James felt the feeling of joy overcome him, the joy of recognizing providence in someone.

He felt the glaring eyes of Neil upon him. This look was enough for James to understand that Neil knew that he had witnessed his dialogue with his father. James felt sorry for him, and only now did he realize that Neil was human, the relationship with his father was everything but godly, completely human, frail and fragile.

“You know he only wants what is best for you, you cannot despise him for that,” said James trying to console him.

“Maybe, but you all can’t deny that he is sending me to die, he is not perfect, believe me,” said Neil facing the front of the plane.

James closed his eyes and fell into an undisturbed sleep that could only be compared to the tranquility of death.

He opened his eyes feeling the plane lose altitude and grasped his chair in horror. He heard Peter laughing.

“Don’t worry we’re just landing.”

James closed his eyes and took a deep breath, relieved by the good news. As they sank through the clouds, the never-ending city became visible beneath them. It was one of the greatest anthills in the world, a world so far away and different from their own, so closed and hard to grab its essence, conveying a possibility of the future, with so many virtues and just as many flaws.

The sun was setting in the country of the rising sun as the plane gently touched down. James felt the wheels roll on the rugged surface of the asphalt and just when he thought they would run into the airport, the plane took a right and stopped. He reached for his luggage, and they quickly got off into the world of compulsory duties that one must survive in order to finally die.

They hurried across the airport toward the great black bus waiting for them at the back as if they were up to no good, aliens entering without permission, and in a way, they were. They were in a world so much different than their own, not permitting them to feel at home. James knew that difference was the problem. The difference originating from the variances of cultures that is so hard to break down and should never be completely destroyed in order to maintain the variability that is so inestimable on this planet. James jumped up and walked to the back of the bus to take his seat.

The huge black coffin glided through the streets lined by great skyscrapers rising into space. The roads were flooded by the most turbulent sea of people, made of many particles bubbling to reach their destination. A flood with no conscience yet made up of as many attitudes, beliefs, and moral principles as particles in it.

For a moment James felt afraid, not because the flood would wash him away, not because it was made up of many distinct particles with different goals, but because the flood itself didn't have one. Its existence did not have a cause or a meaning, it just existed because of its existence, because the particles united coincidentally, not because they wanted to, but because they were there, one next to the other in this specific moment. He knew very well that this disembodied embodiment of casualty moved the world, and only occasionally would a distinct wave emerge and steer the river toward another destination.

The bus stopped before a red light, and the crossing soon was covered by humans as if four waves collided from four different directions creating a deadly force that can make even the greatest

marble crumble if used by anyone for destruction. A child that can build a house of building blocks if in a good mood but wipe it away as well, just for the sake of destruction, for the joy of seeing it crumble to the ground if he sees fit.

The sea flowed away from where it came from, and when the light turned green, the bus slid away leaving the greatest crossing in the world behind as the sun gave place to the moon. Suddenly between two great skyscrapers of glass, James saw a magnificent ancient red gate. The roof was withheld by four red pillars, symmetrically were two statues, one immobilized the wind while the other froze the thunder, two gods guarding a red lampion decorated with a great black symbol awakening restlessness in the heart of James, an arriving storm, he thought. Past the gate was a long road piercing through a bazaar leading to a great five-story-high pagoda reaching the stars, something ancient amidst the modern, something ancient not thought as old, lesser than the new, but just as good, living in harmony with the city that, as they say, is far too great for any human to feel good in.

James looked into the narrow eyes of the pedestrians but couldn't reveal any discontent, at least nothing greater than in the eyes of any other human living anywhere else, suggesting that the fear of this society derived from the outer world and not from the ones living in it, born into this city. Behind the chaos and loneliness James saw life organized down to the tiniest detail so that it doesn't collapse over the heads of its inhabitants. A culture so different in many ways yet still human, with some citizens loving their lifestyle while others damning it for its inhumanity, again others protesting against the fate of every city with suicide. If the overpopulation of the planet is not prevented, the cities will grow beyond the extent of sustenance, initiating decay. No one can tell whether humans can live happily in cities this big. Nothing will be ever good for everyone until humanity learn that what is good for one is not necessarily the same for the other.

The bus turned right onto the road that led to the great hotel in the distance, their home. The bus hovered to the building as the sound of cheering became louder and louder. When the bus stopped, they all understood what its source was.

Lady Dada stepped out, and the screams escalated. James saw some in the crowd faint and fall to the ground. Their bodies were pulled away by invisible hands, and their places were filled up the next second. James was the last to step off the bus and did not

quite perceive what was happening, mesmerized by their love. The flashes from the cameras blinded him, and for a few seconds, he did not know where he was going. He felt the soft hands of Peter grab him and lead him through the stroboscopic world.

He heard the roar soften, and his visage slowly returned as the doors of the hotel closed behind them.

“Thanks, Peter.”

“What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing, I’m fine,” said James rubbing his forehead.

“Great, let’s check in.”

James nodded and looked around in the lavishly furnished five-star hotel with a taste so different, awkward in its way yet intriguing and mysterious. Across the beige marble-floor, a great red rug led the way toward the golden doors of the elevator. Next to the wall, there stood a Baroque table with a golden dragon spiraling in the air. Some of its scales sparkled green and in the socket of his eyes two red rubies shone. By the dragon, there was a tiny bonsai, years of work creating a tiny tree. They checked in and hurried up to their room. Neil was waiting for Peter and James before their door.

“You two will be sleeping with me and Matthew.”

Neil opened the door, and they stepped into the room. Past the narrow corridor leading to the living room, the city lay beneath them, distending itself over the horizon, the sparkling windows brighter than the stars themselves. They stopped in the middle of the room. The simple furniture gave the room elegance, not boasting, knowing that nothing could be compared to this panorama, artificial yet one of the most beautiful in the world.

“I’ll put down the luggage in our room,” James heard Peter’s voice coming from behind. He stepped closer to the window, feeling dizzy, knowing that the window was a fragile layer separating him from the realm of the dead. He shuddered as humanity manifested itself before him in the form of a great city.

He turned around and saw Neil staring at his Blackberry.

“You and your phone, are you glued together? You could really give yourself a break.”

Neil nodded and continued typing on the phone.

NEIL’S TWITTER. You live in an overpopulated world, feasting on it like parasites, don’t expect anyone to accept family planning policy if you can’t either.

Peter's Gospel

The cameras were flashing as Neil spoke to the gathered press. Peter stared at the glass of water before him knowing that he wouldn't take a sip from it, and the water would be poured down the drain. He felt his eyelids closing under their own weight because of the never-ending concerts, the check-ins, the departures, the take-offs, the flights around the world, and the landings. Over and over again like an unbreakable cycle. Neil stopped for a second, and this was so utterly strange that even Peter looked up.

"Follow me," said Neil jumping off the stage. The crowd parted before him. The bodyguards shrugged and gave out the new orders. Neil was leaving, and Peter knew he had to follow.

"Where are we going, Neil?" asked Peter.

"To your basilica."

Peter did not understand. They hurried by the river under the great green trees. They took a right to proceed down the Road of Conciliation. A great marble palace towered over the city, intimidating and scary.

"Is this necessary?" asked Peter tired of Neil's theatricality, envying his energy.

"Of course it is, that monstrous building of marble is a perfect symbol of the false and corrupt base of the church. It is marble, but in reality it is sand on which one cannot build the kingdom of God."

"Where are we going?" asked one of the reporters hurrying to the front of the line.

"To the church that was financed with indulgence."

"Shouldn't we get over the past sins of the church, isn't it time to move on?"

"We should move on, but in order not to repeat our previous sins we must remember. Isn't it strange that the center of the church was built with sin?" Neil turned around. "C'mon everyone."

"Aren't you afraid of the pope? He is there this moment," asked another reporter catching up with them.

"Why would I be afraid of someone just like you and I? How dare they say that he is the Vicar of Christ? That he bears the headship of the church in virtue of the commission of Christ and

with visceral power derived by him. He is just a man and nothing more, just as lost as anyone of you.”

“Aren’t you lost?”

“Of course not.”

As Neil walked down the avenue, motorcycles sped by slaloming between the cars. Waiters stepped out of restaurants with plates bearing pizzas and with bowls of spaghetti. Peter walked passed a bar where a group of men celebrated a goal, their voices escaping through the door. Peter left himself flow with the river of actions knowing that he was in good hands.

As they walked down the road, more and more people joined them, the people recognizing Neil. The tiny stream that emerged from the hotel was growing into a tumultuous river with the power to wash away anything that tried to block their way. The stream was composed of a few locals, the rest were tourists, short pants, shirts too big for them, their cameras dangling from their necks. They soon arrived to the square before the church, surrounded by the many columns and statues as if they were in a prison cell, hurrying by the obelisk and the fountains, getting closer to their destination.

The church rose toward space blocking the sun, casting a great shadow over the city. Peter was standing on one side and John the Baptist on the other. The great facade ruled over the city with its giant order of Corinthian columns bearing twelve figures, Jesus and the rest of the apostles. Maybe it was because of the sun, but Peter could see in their eyes the agony of being poured into stone, committed to watch how all love is drained out of the message of Jesus. What have they done to deserve this?

Neil hurried up the stairs as the multitude awaited, filling the square like water of a sunlit pool in Malibu.

Neil cleared his throat to speak. “Welcome everybody and thank you for coming.”

The people at the front repeated the words to the one standing behind them, and the words spread through the crowd.

“What has religion come to? Look at this monument and look at it well. A building built out of stone, a stone so cold and inanimate, lacking the heart and most of all, the mind. What has religion come to? A list of rules to obey blindly, carved into stone. How could God be so primitive and simple that it could be carved into stone? There is only one message that you all should obey. Love each other as God loves thee. This is the message that is

capable of melting the stone into fluent magma, capable of consolidating it in whatever form it wants.

“God gave you the power to think. If he wouldn’t have, you would still be suffering in caves. God gave you a mind that you can use to build or to destroy, this is up to you.

“All the priests do is tell you what is wrong and what is right, but how dare they? They are all men thinking that they are better than you, that they know what God’s secret is, but believe me, they don’t. They are not evil, don’t be mistaken, in fact they do everything thinking that they serve the Lord, but they are not. What their fate shall be, who knows, and I have not come here to judge anyone.

“All they teach you is that the answer to the question ‘why’ is ‘because’. Because God says so, because this is what the Bible says, because this is what the Ten Commandments say, because this is what the council of elder say.

“Now ask yourself the following questions and try to answer them actually giving an explanation. Why is it a problem if people of the same sex wish to marry and with this don’t cause harm to anyone? Why is it a sin to leave a marriage that destroys the subjects of it? Why is it a sin then to remarry with the promise of a life lived in happiness? Is adultery a sin when it is an escape from a spouse that wants nothing but to destroy the other one’s life? Why is abortion a sin when the child born into a family that is not ready for the gift, destroys not only the family, but the life of the child as well?

“I don’t say to run around copulating with everyone then kill the fetus and go on having sex. All I ask is to think, shake off the shackles made of cold marble and think. Ask yourself *why*. Ask yourself *who* is hurt. There is only one sin that has as many forms as mirrors on the greatest disco ball of the world. Sin is when you harm someone that means no harm to anyone.

“God’s kingdom will come when you learn to love each other with all your heart and learn to live in mutual respect.”

“Don’t listen to him.”

Peter heard some in the crowd moan in awe as the Pope stepped out onto the balcony hovering above the sea of people.

“Don’t turn away from God,” continued the Pope wearing civilian clothes, jeans and a T-shirt, lacking all the pompous costumes and accessories that make him look like a vain super star. “Do you want the world to end? Do you want Sodom and

Gomorrah to repeat itself? It is a sin for people of the same-sex to marry, it is written in the Bible, it is incorporated as an axiom into most of the cultures, it has been for thousands of years, and it worked. It is a sin to kill because the Ten Commandments say so, thus abortion and contraception is also a sin because life begins with a semen and an egg. Divorce is a sin because what God joined human cannot tear apart. It is a sin, don't you hear me? A sin, a sin, sin, sin, sin, sin, siiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiin..." he shrieked.

"Silence," boomed Neil, and he too was surprised by the power of his voice echoing around the square. The Pope started choking and had to grab hold of the balcony's railing preventing him to fall down. Women fainted in the crowd, and everyone was afraid to speak. He started retching and heaving. As he coughed, stale dust came out of his mouth and a musty smell of an unused attic filled the square. He was suffocating slowly, his suffering culminating only to give him release the next second as a moth flew out of his mouth. Peter saw the moth fly into the air then it began his descent, stopping right before Peter's eyes. The moth gave him a wink, *tink*, then a smile, and flew away. The Pope coughed and crumbled to the ground.

"I think we are done here," said Neil descending the stairs.

Silence.

The crowd parted as Neil walked away from the church. Peter could see fear in the eyes of the audience. They wanted to believe him, but Neil was tearing up roots too deep, roots that entwined and grew deeper and deeper during the many eons. Neil was offering them something new, something so simple and comprehensible, yet the crowd was terrified to believe him and cheer. Peter walked behind Neil hoping that he truly was the son of God.

NEIL'S TWITTER. Water is a gift and must be treated as such. Some spoil it while others die of thirst. Some never think of it, others can't stop.

James' Gospel

James looked at the four aces in his hands, peeking at Judas over his cards, knowing that probably he would beat him no

matter how lucky Judas thinks he is. The taste of victory dissolved in his mouth, sweet and sour, raspberry. James reached for a can of beer and took a sip, feeling the tiredness overcome him. There was one last stop, and the tour would finally come to an end, they would finally be able to return to their hometown and meet with their families.

Peter was sleeping in his lap, John was reading a book. They were sitting in John's trailer that was filled with the many books he usually read at once. Among the pile of papers and books, the room seemed the storage of a library and made him feel crowded, so many lives and different worlds residing on paper, imprisoned by ink. They were just books, but he felt the presence of the characters cheering for him, as cheering for the winner is always the easiest thing to do.

They were getting a positive buzz from many, but the great breakthrough hadn't come yet, they were still the protégés of Lady Dada, and still had to prove themselves worthy in the eyes of the youth. They were all waiting for the kick that would send them flying toward the stars. James felt it lingering about, felt the flow that would break through the dam. It was impossible to lose when they have climbed so high already.

The four aces in his hand were a symbol, and he knew that nothing happens out of pure coincidence. He would win, and for the moment, this made him forget all his worries. Judas changed his cards. It was time to show his hand, but James' happiness dissolved quickly when the door flung open, and Philipp stepped into the room.

"I just spoke with the chief editor of the Rolling Rocks, they want us to be on their front cover with a full length interview..."

Judas jumped up joyfully, throwing his cards into the air. James looked down at his cards and frowned, slamming them onto the table. Among the joy and excitement, he was a little disappointed, he was about to win, so close.

"And this is not all, I spoke to Lady. She told me that she would help us release our first album and even direct our debut video clip..."

Peter hugged Judas and Philipp. They opened up a bottle of champagne. The cork flew into the air as the foam dribbled to the ground. James stood up and left, searching for Neil.

James stepped out of the trailer and walked beneath the night sky feeling lost. He wasn't an astrologer, the night sky was the

same to him wherever they were. It had that luring and repulsing characteristic of infinity, a word impossible to understand. The lights of the city shone just over the horizon, coloring the bottom of the dark blue sky a warm orange, life fighting against death, a thin line against the vast blue above it. He walked through the maze of trailers to the one where Neil was sleeping in.

James' hopes were high, no matter how hard it was to believe it, they made it, they will rise, and after that? What happens when you reach the top? The greatest fear of James was that nothing would be there, only the valley beneath, the stunningly kitschy world left behind, the river sparkling and heading toward the sea that ends in the setting sun, beauty so far away, only the cold, arid scenery of the summit around him. What do you do if you reach everything you ever desired? Isn't that the end? Where do you go when there is no going higher? Is there such a place? Maybe you can reach a certain extent then you must fall.

He walked up the stairs and kicked open Neil's door, his heart exulting because of the news. James saw Neil hunched over a tiny wooden table with a rolled up one dollar bill in his hand. The hand was reflected on a mirror lying on the table with streaks of white powder divided evenly on it. James knew what it was and felt a strange attraction to it even though he knew the substance was dangerous, like the voice of the sirens calling the sailors closer and closer to the rocks.

"What are you doing, Neil?"

Neil looked at him surprised, knowing that it was too late to hide the facts.

"It's just an energy boost, nothing more..."

"I know, Neil, but isn't this a sin?"

"Remember, sin and virtue are just like fire, it can give you food, but if used unwisely, it can burn a village down. I am the one controlling the drug. Do you want to try some?"

'He is the son of God,' James told himself, 'he must know what he is doing.'

"Ok," he said reaching for the dollar in Neil's hand. "By the way have you heard the news?"

"Yes, Lady told me. We will be shooting after we rest a little at home."

"She was here? What for? She hardly ever visits Judas..."

"She just had to tell me the news in person..."

“Great, I guess,” he said and bent over to the mirror, sniffing the powder up careful not to miss a single speck, thinking that Neil was hiding something from him.

NEIL’S TWITTER. No one can stop us now, we are speeding higher and higher.

L€ne’s Gospel

The limousine stopped before Neil’s two-story house, the apricot-colored planks radiating before the green lawn with the rose bushes lining the path leading to the porch bearing the rattan garden furniture.

The front door opened, and two women appeared, hugging each other and smiling toward them.

Neil opened the door of the limousine, and light burst into the darkness. He stretched his limbs then bent down. “C’mon, L€ne, they are not going to eat you.”

L€ne nodded and took a deep breath, diving into the meeting. They walked down the gravel path dissecting the lawn hand-in-hand, and L€ne felt her heart beating in her throat as Neil’s parents were coming closer. He let go of her hand, but L€ne tried to grab hold of it fearing she would be carried away by a current. Neil’s hand just slipped away leaving her standing alone before the steps of the porch as Neil jumped up and hugged his parents.

“Oh, mothers, it is so good to see you, you both look fantastic.”

“Neil, don’t be rude, could you please introduce us to this lovely young girl,” said Mary.

L€ne examined her ragged clothes and golden boots and thought about a word that would describe her, and even if she didn’t find any at the moment, she knew lovely would definitely not be one of them.

“Mothers, I give to you L€ne,” said Neil waving toward her.

L€ne smiled, stepped up the stairs, and raised her hand. Mary took it and pulled her close to hug her, blowing a kiss on her cheek and whispering her name in L€ne’s ear. Josephine did the same.

“You both will be sleeping upstairs in Neil’s room,” said Mary.

“Ok, mother,” said Neil taking L€ne’s hand and pulling her inside the house. L€ne looked around in the foyer, the hazel parquet shining, the white railing of the stairs hurrying up to the

first floor. Neil led her into the living room and sat her down into the white sofa facing the modern fireplace with a rectangular piece of glass before it. L€ne felt the scent of the lilacs rising towards the sky from the vase on the side-table.

“Do you want a lemonade, L€ne?” asked Mary.

“Yes,” she said trying to sound as normal as possible.

“One more for me,” said Neil putting his head on L€ne’s shoulder. The many books filled the shelves on both sides of the fireplace. The sprinklers rose out from ground in the garden and started watering the perfectly kept lawn. L€ne closed her eyes feeling that she loved this place, she wanted to lose herself in this normality definitively. She heard two children playing on the lawn, their two children, and saw Neil hurrying to work as she waved him good-bye every morning until the end of her life.

L€ne heard a buzzing that awoke her from her daydream and brought her back to the present. Neil sat up and reached into his pocket.

“Oh shit, its Philip...”

“Pick it up, maybe it’s important.”

Neil nodded and answered.

“Hi...Now?...Why didn’t you tell me sooner...You forgot, I see...You really need an assistant...You already have?...Can’t it wait?...Bye.”

Neil hung up and threw the phone onto the glass table before them, pressing the base of his palms against his eyes as if he were trying to push his eyeballs back into his brain.

“We must go, the mayor’s wife wants us to meet the mayor. Philipp sent an open-car for us, the locals are already gathering...”

“Now?”

“Yes, Philipp says it will be good publicity.”

“He’s right, probably,” said L€ne as they heard a car stop before the house. “Should we change?”

Neil was wearing his usual leather jacket with jeans and she a T-shirt with a skeleton made of glitter on it.

“No, L€ne, we don’t have time.”

L€ne nodded, and they both stood up. Mary stepped out of the kitchen with two lemonades in her hands, the scent of menthol lingering about.

“Where are you going, kids?” she asked.

“To see the mayor...” answered Neil disappointedly.

“Lazarus? What for?”

“He is dying.”

L€ne looked at Mary surprised, both of them did not see this coming. Neil and L€ne stepped outside and saw the open-roofed black limousine, so nostalgic, parking right behind the car they had arrived with. They nodded to the chauffeur who just tipped his hat. They jumped into the back, sitting on the trunk.

They left the residential area and were heading toward the center of the suburbs. As the first shops appeared, they heard a murmur fill the air. They took a right to see the center with the church on the right, Philipp’s fish shop on the left, the ice cream parlor by the entrance of the park with the fountain in the middle, and the city hall, their destination, in the distance, rising over the suburbs with its great white dome and neo-Classicist facade. The road leading around the park was filled with people cheering. Confetti was falling from the sky like rain. A band led by uncle Sam, an old man, grim and rabbit-like, with a goatee fastened to his chin with tape, a shining horizontal strip running parallel to his lower-lip, was waiting for them to catch up. When they did, Uncle Sam raised his walking stick, and the band started playing, emitting their loud and raunchy music, heading toward the city hall.

Neil and L€ne waved, hiding their shock with the widest smile the world had ever seen. Occasionally mothers would step to Neil giving him their babies, and Neil would blow a gentle kiss upon their tender foreheads. Elders would raise their hands covered by skin like parchment, and Neil would squeeze them with compassion. It was a full-blown parade, and it seemed as if this were the happiest fucking country the world had ever seen.

Through the cheering, a deep booing emerged. Soon great boards came into sight over the heads of the rejoicing people. Finally the protesters came into view, their black uniforms draining the colors of the parade.

‘Lady Dada is the devil’s wife, you are its bastard.’ ‘The devil rules, this is the end.’ ‘Eradicate the root and the fruit will rot.’ ‘The child of the devil must succumb.’

L€ne huddled closer to Neil afraid of the drooling protester, their saliva, like acid, burning a hole into the concrete. Neil tried to smile, but he too was afraid.

“Be careful, Neil,” screamed someone from behind when a dark spot rose into the sky from the direction of the protesters. L€ne watched it approaching them, growing bigger and bigger. She

recognized its grey surface and rugged edges. The rock came down crashing against Neil's head. Neil fell back onto the trunk unconscious as L€ne felt the world spinning around her. The rock bounced off Neil's head, and for some reason, she jumped after it to catch it, as if catching it would somehow annul the hit. The rock was just out of grasp, and L€ne, investing all her strength into this unsuccessful movement, fell onto the trunk unconscious. The last thing she felt was the warm metal of the car soothing her from beneath.

Judas' Gospel

"I must speak to her..."

"But is he alright?" asked Judas at the verge of panic.

"He is fine, but he is frightened, he has been attacked."

Judas looked at the monitor, Peter's face and thick glasses occupied the whole screen. Judas could see his worried eyes and wide nostrils, huffing as if it were the end of the world.

"Wait a second, I'll get her..."

Judas stood up from the minimalist white sofa facing the great glass wall through which the Big Apple could be seen in its full splendor.

"Dada," he called out.

"In the bathroom, sweetheart..."

Judas walked around the glass dining table, took a right before the bed standing in the corner, and pushed the wooden sliding door to the side. Dada was kneeling before the cube toilette wearing yellow rubber gloves rising to her elbow, scrubbing the bowl clean.

"What is it?" she asked, catching breath between the words.

"Neil has been attacked and wants to step back. Peter wants you to talk to him."

Dada stood up and took her gloves off, cleaning her forehead with her wrist. She jumped to the mirror and adjusted her lobster hat, straightening one of its antennae so that it rose into the sky proudly.

She walked back to the living room and took the laptop into her lap, Judas stopping behind her.

"Hi," said Peter waving. "Please do something, he wants to back away."

“Ok,” said Dada, and Peter smiled. Peter disappeared from the monitor, and the white room of the hospital was visible now. Peter’s laptop rose into the sky, and Judas could see the rest of the band, including L€ne, sitting by the bed. The monitor stopped, facing the white wall as the sound of someone entering the room leaked from the speakers

“Is he alright?” Judas heard the voice of Philipp.

“Yes,” answered Peter.

“I know this is not the best time, but I would like to introduce to you my new assistant Bartholomew,” continued Philipp after a brief pause.

The chairs moved, the sound of greeting filled the room.

“Neil? Neil?” Judas heard Philipp.

“He is not talking to any of us,” said Peter.

Peter’s laptop hovered away from the wall, and Neil appeared, lying in the bed, tucked in till his neck, his face motionless, staring at the roof. Peter placed his computer into Neil’s lap.

“Neil,” said Dada in a soft voice.

Neil raised his head and turned their way. “Why didn’t you tell me that it would be so dangerous?” he asked emotionlessly.

“I thought you knew...”

“How could I? All I saw was notoriety and fame...”

“But you saw behind all this, the hell of a lot of work trying to maintain the illusion that our lives are so easy. You read the articles calling you the devil, the statements of the church and of the conservative politicians...”

“I did, but they seemed so far away. I thought they would never touch me...”

“You thought you were God...”

Neil nodded.

“You see, Neil, it happens to all of us who reach the top, we think that just because we are on a high mountain we are above everyone else, but you must never forget that the sky is always higher, higher than any mountain in the world. You must not forget that you are human just like the rest of us, if you forget this, you will fall.

“Come, Neil, let me show you something, you too, Judas, come,” she said and picked the laptop up, walking to the mysterious door, the whiteness of its surface shining. Dada leaned close to the control panel and inserted the code that opened the door. Dada pushed it in. She stepped into the

darkness and flicked the switch up. The neon tubes flickered a few times then stayed on, shining down onto many stacks of paper, hundreds of white columns made of sheets, some reaching the ceiling, even the shortest towering above Judas.

“What are these?” asked Neil, his muffled voice coming from the speakers.

Dada laughed to herself and adjusted her white T-shirt, “These, my friend, are all threats, most of them vowing to stone me to death.”

“All of them?” asked Judas.

Dada nodded. “The moment you emerge from the current of people and begin your rise to the top, not only you become lonely, with fewer and fewer companions, but you step into a spotlight that makes you a target to the evil. I could have stopped many times, but I didn’t. They are wrong, and I will not give them the reassurance of the immolated. If they bring me down, I’ll give them the biggest explosion the world has ever seen. I will not step back in silence but drown screaming to the world. I promise.”

Neil looked away, the light perspiring through the white curtains falling onto his face.

“I am not going back to the mayor, I need some time to work through this,” said Neil.

“You don’t have any, if you postpone your visit, they will think you are a coward, that your conviction is weak. This is what they want you to do, to step back...”

Neil still faced away and did not answer, but Dada did not give up.

“When I was young, my mother told me we are all born as stars, not meaning stars as in celebrities. The way she meant it was that everyone has the power to achieve perfection in every profession, you just need to be brave and stick to it, never give up. Go down your road even if the world tells you you’re crazy, stick to your conviction, even if you must sacrifice your life because only then won’t it be a sacrifice, for God will reward you. If you are convinced with all your heart that you are doing the ethical thing, even if you aren’t, God will forgive you, of this I am sure. Sacrificing something for the better is not sacrifice because, believe me, heaven will be something truly extraordinary.”

Neil did not move.

“Neil? Are you listening?” asked Dada aggravated.

Neil raised his hand and shut the monitor down.

Thomas' Gospel

Thomas watched Neil close the laptop.

"I am not going back," said Neil to the others then turned back to the window, the curtains drawn, hiding him from the world. Something made Thomas intervene and do something he would have never done in his life.

"You must," said Thomas as all of them faced him. "If you don't, all that you have worked for will go up in smoke. Don't play the wounded dog. The winners are the ones who write history, never the losers, so don't be a loser. Losers are not the one who fail to rise, but the ones who fail to try."

Neil turned away from the window to look at Thomas straight in the eyes. Thomas felt himself blush as he adjusted his white cape then the stethoscope around his neck. Neil was still watching him, so he caressed the Mohawk running down the center of his skull. They stared into each other's eyes for many silent seconds, a duel from the wild wild West.

Neil, with a single movement, threw the blanket to the side and jumped out of bed, wearing his leather jacket, white T-shirt, and jeans to their surprise.

"C'mon everyone, we are going back."

Neil stepped to Thomas. "You are coming with me as well."

Thomas looked at him, realizing he was not joking. He took the cape off and threw it onto the bed along with his green stethoscope. He walked by Neil down the corridor as one of the nurses jumped before him, trying to bar his way.

"Where are you going, doctor?"

"I am leaving."

"When are you coming back?"

"Never," said Thomas.

Lazarus' Gospel

"Where the hell am I?" asked Lazarus, his voice echoing in the darkness surrounding him. "How do I get out of here?"

Lazarus raised his tiny cylinder hat and scratched his head. He adjusted his great moustache that made him look like a sea lion and started walking without a direction. He felt as if he were walking on an invisible treading machine, so he stopped. He sat

down and decided to wait. He lay down onto the darkness that seemed to respect his contours, not draining the light from the surface of his body, just surrounding him, his red striped tie almost glowing.

He heard a creak coming from behind him, so he quickly sat up and turned to its source. A door opened, and a figure made of light entered, closing the invisible door behind him, sealing them into darkness once more. The glowing silhouette threw the butt of a cigarette to the floor, but picked it up the next second, putting it in his pocket. He hurried to Lazarus as if he were late and adjusted his hair, returning into character. The light emanating from him slowly subsided, revealing a man wearing a leather jacket, his beard growing wildly from his face framed by his long free hair. The man stopped before Lazarus, and he saw a trace of red lipstick on his forehead.

“Who are you?” asked Lazarus.

“Neil.”

The instant he pronounced his name Lazarus recognized the face, his wife’s idol, the man whose life she followed every day. It was his wife’s lipstick on Neil’s forehead, and he smiled knowing that one of her dreams had come true, she had met Neil.

“Where am I?” asked Lazarus.

“You know where you are, Lazarus, between life and death...”

“That means you are...”

“Dead?” Neil snickered. “No...”

“Then that means you are the son of...”

“God?” The grin vanished. “Yes...”

“What will happen to me? I never believed in you...”

The pause was slowly becoming excruciating. “I know,” said Neil.

Pause.

“Will I go to hell?”

They looked at each other. Lazarus put his weight to his left then right foot, feeling awkward about the discussion that was not moving too graciously.

“I am the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in Me shall live even if he dies. And everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die in eternity.”

“But I just told you that I never believed that you were his Son, just a phony...” said Lazarus panicking.

“Lazarus, don’t think of me as a single person, rather an idea. Did you live your life with the cognizance that you are doing good?”

Lazarus nodded.

“Then you believed in me, and I grant you resurrection.”

Lazarus was relieved but was still curious. “Where did you leave your body?”

“I didn’t, actually, I am still in the room with your corpse, consoling your wife, telling her that you will be fine and I cannot do anything about it.”

“So they are not witnessing any wonder?”

“No, they aren’t. I am only doing my job.”

Neil placed his hand between Lazarus’ shoulder blades, steering him the opposite direction from where he had entered.

“Isn’t the entrance that way?” asked Lazarus looking over his shoulder trying to identify the door.

“You are not going back, Lazarus, but leaving...”

“What is this place?”

“The place where everyone is asked the same question and one can answer nothing but the truth.”

Neil reached for an invisible doorknob and opened it. White light burst through the door.

“What will you be up to?” asked Lazarus growing fond of the kid.

“I will be shooting my first video clip.”

Lazarus smiled but realized it wasn’t funny. Jesus had to do similar things in the past to reach out to the people. Wonders is what people needed and what Neil gave them without performing actual magic.

“Good-bye, Lazarus, see you soon,” said Neil smiling.

Lazarus nodded and united with the light that was made of pure pleasure.

NEIL’S TWITTER. Collect your trash selectively if you don’t want to die in your filth. This cannot be an option for the sane and intelligent.

Josephine's Gospel

A vast chamber of green marble reflecting the lights of the red dawn. Neil is standing in the chamber with blood dripping down

from the knife he is holding in his hand. The petrified face of a man, a body lying at Neil's feet, his white cloth stained red, a stream of blood dribbling toward the marble throne.

Neil turns around and starts toward the exit, the sound of the steps echo in the vast space. The picture sinks slowly as he leaves, showing half of the head of the dead man.

Bare feet standing in the sand, the picture rising and showing the legs of a man, then his white tunic, stopping at the height of his shoulder letting a great white building appear at the top of the stairs, the many roman columns withholding the triangle of the roof.

Neil walks out of the door stopping at the edge of the stairs. He stops and looks down onto the crowd and smiles then raises the bloodstained knife over his head.

“The new world is here, the new world that permits no sacrifice. The man in there wanted to sacrifice me in order to sustain his power, he wanted to sacrifice something that wasn't his. A person who wants to sacrifice his own life for the other is not better than the man in there. Your life doesn't belong to you, it is a gift from God and must be treated as such. The sacrifice of the innocent won't release you from the burden of your sins. Only you can repent your sins, and only this way will your sins ever be forgiven. All life has the same value, there is no better life, nor lesser death. If you understand this, you understand the simple message, no one shall cause harm to another or himself. This is all. Marble crumble to the ground, let the God free from this prison, let him fill the world and revive it. The procurator is dead, you are free to celebrate.”

A microphone grows out of the ground and Peter, James, John, Matthew, and Judas step out of the darkness and stop between two columns. Music rises into the air, and the crowd begins to move, their white tunics swaying as the dust of the square rises into the air before the cube-like homes made of sand itself, surrounding the marble palace.

The crowd begins to bathe in the red light of the dawn as Neil begins his descent into the crowd. He is holding his microphone and singing, bending to the ground at the higher notes. When the sun sinks beneath the horizon, everything goes dark. Light bursts out from Neil's microphone, and he uses it as a torchlight to illuminate the dark bodies. Judas' drum set starts burning neon lilac, John's guitar glows neon yellow, James' guitar shines neon

green, Matthew's piano twinkles neon pink, and Peter's DJ table starts to sparkle neon red.

The colors spread to the columns and start rising higher toward the roof. Neil walks back up the stairs, each step turning white as his foot touches it. Higher and higher the colors rise until the palace is glowing. When Neil reaches the top of the stairs, the melody rises to the high C causing the palace to shake, slanting to the left, emitting a deafening rumble.

The music ends, and the picture shows the dark city just over the horizon with the palace glowing, the many neon tubes ruling over the dark world uninhibited.

Josephine reached for the remote control and looked at Mary before switching it off.

"How did you like it?" asked Mary breaking the silence.

"I don't know, Mary, it seemed a little too...theatrical..."

"I know, but remember the world changes, and we can't keep up with it forever. Neil is in good hands, he is already the head of the band that sold the most albums in a week. And what did the Rolling Rock say?"

"That they are the most influential band of the year," said Josephine reciting the words by heart. "I know, this is great, but still, Neil seems so loud and uproarious..."

"Maybe this is what the young generation needs."

"I know, I know. I am only saying that Neil seems different, I am not talking about the generation in general but specifically about Neil."

As she said these words, she felt her heart worry. Something has changed in him.

NEIL'S TWITTER. Don't forget to switch the lights off when you are not in the room. Turn your television and laptop off too whenever you leave the house.

THE SUMMIT

Judas' Gospel

Judas heard the doorbell ring and switched the gas burning under the boiling marmalade off, throwing his apron onto the white bar chair before the iron counter. He walked to the door to look through the peek hole.

"Who is it?" asked Dada sitting on the white sofa reading a book with the magnificent city bathing in sunlight before her.

"Neil, and he is not alone," answered Judas.

"What are you waiting for, open the door."

Judas took a deep breath, enjoying the silence and peace of their home just a little longer.

He turned the doorknob, and the door burst open. Neil entered, followed by three men jumping around him like flies around manure. The sky turned a little darker, a cloud passing by.

"Just this last pimple," said one of the three men, trying to put some make-up onto Neil.

"Hello, Judas," said Neil hugging him.

"We must leave the dye on a few more minutes," said another man adjusting the aluminum foils covering Neil's head.

"Hello, Dada," said Neil walking to her to kiss her on both her cheeks.

"Let me finish your pinky," said the third man with a grater in his hand.

"Guys, let me introduce to you my make-up artist, Jude," said Neil pointing to the slender black man wearing a lilac shirt tied into a knot right over his belly and cut-offs barely reaching the top third of his thighs. "James, my hairdresser," he continued, pointing to the man with pink hair tiptoeing and adjusting the foils that rustled as Neil moved. "And finally, Simon, my manicurist," he said pointing to the third man with hundreds of

piercings in his ears, nose, and lips. He grabbed Neil's pinky distended in the air and started grating its nail.

Neil was annoyed and shook them a way.

"But the foil."

"Your pinky."

"Your pimple."

All they could hear was foil, pinky, pimple, foil, pinky, pimple, foil, pinky, pimple, non-stop. Neil looked down for a second as the commotion and ruckus was getting unbearable then erupted. "I DON'T CARE ABOUT YOUR FUCKING FOIL, MY PIMPLE, OR MY PINKY. GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!"

The three assistants jumped up but were not surprised, and by this, Judas knew that Neil probably lost his temper far too frequently. They hurried out of the door bowing toward them over and over again until the door closed, leaving the three of them in silence.

"Is this really necessary?" asked Dada looking over the book she was reading.

"What?" asked Neil not understanding the question.

"The assistants..."

"Of course it is. I need to be perfect all the time, what is a celebrity without beauty?"

"Many things, Neil. Beauty is one thing, vanity is another..."

"Well I deserve it," said Neil jumping onto the sofa, causing Dada to rise a little in the sky and fall back. "I don't know whether I told you yet, but I bought a lavish mansion in the woods, you know, you really must come and see it. It is royal in every sense."

Judas saw for the first time that the light emanating from Neil was missing. It was then that Judas realized that it wasn't the sky that went dark a few seconds before, but it was because of the darkness perspiring through Neil's pores. This frightened him, and he felt the urge to flee.

"I must go, guys..."

"Where are you going, Judas?" asked Dada suspiciously.

"I must go."

Judas reached for his leather coat and hurried outside, the door silently closing behind him. As he walked down the corridor with its white empty walls and cement pavement, he remembered he had forgotten his motorcycle keys. With a movement, he turned around and hurried back into the apartment.

The door opened, and he saw Dada in the hands of Neil, their faces almost touching. Judas reached for the key on the commode right by the door, the noise of the keys sliding on wood disrupting their embrace.

“Judas...” they both said at once.

Judas raised his fist and thrust the mirror breaking its smooth surface, lines running from the place of impact toward the edges. He slammed the door behind him and hurried down the flight of stairs, deeper and deeper, many stories flying away without him even noticing.

Judas was not angry but let down, his life was an illusion, their love was an illusion. His life, just like second-class afternoon family series, was filled with clichés. Clichés, seen so many times, clichés because they happen in everyone’s life and not because they repeat themselves in the arts.

He arrived to the garage and kicked the heavy metal door open, stepping into the semidarkness. He walked through the abandoned parking lot, his steps echoing in the vast space, feeling watched as always. As he headed toward his motorcycle under the low roof filled with dirty black tubes running in all directions, neon lights interrupting the darkness here and there, he noticed something that made him stop. *Klop*, an extra step. Judas turned around and saw someone standing in the darkness of a corner.

“Hello, Judas,” said the figure with a deep baritone.

“Who are you?”

“This is not the question. The question now is who you want to be?”

Judas tried to move, to drag the figure out into the light, but his muscles just didn’t obey him.

“Ah, ah, aaaah,” said the man, the pitch of his voice rising. “Stay where you are, it will be better for both of us.” His voice was deep but melodic at the same time, the voice of an anchorman, a voice asking million dollar questions to those aspiring to be a millionaire.

“Who are you?”

“I said this is not the question,” repeated the figure.

“What do you want?” asked Judas terrified.

“The question is what you want?”

“What do you want from me for God’s sake?”

The dark figure lit a lighter and moved the flame close to his mouth. A cigar sizzled as the tobacco and paper caught fire. He inhaled the smoke before continuing. "Make him fall."

"Who?" asked Judas.

The figure blew the smoke out. "Neil."

The voice of the man sounded evil, but it wasn't, it had a tone of preoccupation, as if he wanted Neil to fall because he cared.

"I'll give you the power to turn stone into bread...show the world you can perform wonders..."

"Stone into bread?" asked Judas. "Don't be silly, I wouldn't pass the eliminations of *World's got talent* with this. People can make the Statue of Liberty disappear...turning stone into bread is not that an awe."

"Then throw yourself off a cliff and the angels will save you..."

"Why? When people saw a man dodge bullets, throw himself off a skyscraper, and bounce back from the concrete itself, all in the same movie."

"People saw all this?" asked the man as if he were not an inhabitant of this planet.

"This and many others. The world is filled with wonders, you can give me any power you want, but it will be something either feeble or already seen."

The force keeping Judas still, let go.

"You cannot give me anything I need," said Judas turning around and heading toward his motorcycle. He heard the steps following him. In the corner of his eyes he could see the dark figure move through the shadows, afraid to step into the light. Judas sat onto his motorcycle. The figure stopped behind him, but Judas did not care to learn who he was anymore.

"Judas, I can give you the world if you would like, just make him fall."

Judas put the key into the slot and turned it, the motor started rumbling.

"I don't need a world full of crap. Be calm, he will fall. He already thinks he deserves servants..."

Judas pressed the gas pedal down, revving his motorcycle and twisting the throttle. A black cloud burst out of his exhaust pipe then Judas sped out of the garage, hearing the figure behind him coughing.

The summer sun was shining down on him as he drove around the labyrinth of skyscrapers, dodging the taxis, hurrying past the

many theaters and the great park that wasn't in the center of the city anymore, trying to flee from his shattering world. He felt his mobile phone buzz in his pocket. The street lamp turned red, and he quickly answered his cell.

"Come home, Judas..." pleaded Dada.

"Home? That is not a home to me anymore, how could you do this to me? Why did you lie to me that you loved me and Neil doesn't mean anything to you?"

"He doesn't, Judas, this is a misunderstanding, please come home. Neil is losing it, we must do something, he is in love with me..."

"And you?"

"Oh, Judas, how many times must I prove to you that my heart is yours?"

Judas did not answer. The light turned green, and the cars started honking and surpassing him, but Judas did not care.

"Come home, Judas..." he heard.

Judas waited a few more seconds in silence, just to make Dada pay some penitence then answered cheerfully, "I'll be home in a jiffy."

NEIL'S TWITTER. It is not a sin to get what you deserve.

Matthew's Gospel

Matthew stretched his arms sitting in his green bean bag. The smoke from his joint rose into the air becoming milky white as it passed before the rays of the sun bursting through the cracks in the window shades. Hindustani music was playing, the percussion instruments, the flute, the conch, the horns, and the trumpets cumbersomely paced in the lazy air. Matthew yawned and slowly sunk back into his body. He reached for the joint, took a deep sip, making his soul rise once more like a feather blown up over and over again.

He was a star, but he couldn't care less. He still lived in his old apartment with the many beanbags lying about, the television with the many consoles before him, the posters of women repairing cars nude on the wall, a bong in the corner, and the kitchen lying untouched apart from the many pizza boxes towering toward the ceiling. The sound of the tired morning

traffic drifted into the room through one of the open windows. The apartment shed the many traits of his yuppie life he led long ago, a part of his life that now seemed nothing but a bad dream. He knew that if he would have stayed that way, constantly visiting restaurants, his nights spent at the most trendy night clubs, ending the party at the side of an unknown girl, over and over again, he would have turned into a psycho in an Armani suit.

The doorbell rang, and Matthew rolled down from the beanbag, falling onto the Persian rug. He slowly stood up, feeling as if he were a giant, his head higher than the tallest mountain in the world. The doorbell rang once more, and its hastiness felt unpleasant, like the sound of nail on chalkboard. The bell rang a third time sending shivers up and down his spine. He staggered to the door, tripping over the antennae of a toy jeep, catching balance just in time, and falling against the entrance door. He heard three knocks that were so loud it caused Matthew to jump up in surprise. He quickly adjusted his white curta and opened the door with a broad smile on his face.

“Good-morning, dear visitor,” he exclaimed.

“Hello...Matthew...what’s wrong...with you?” said Neil fidgeting with his hands. For the first time Matthew felt Neil’s presence a burden, an electric spark fidgeting, playing around with his fingers, putting his weight quickly from one leg to the other, jolting around. He tried to hide this feeling, but there was no need, for Neil didn’t really care.

“I welcome you in my home,” said Matthew bowing and showing him his way.

“Thank you, Matthew.”

“No problem.”

Matthew looked up and saw that Neil was already in his room playing around with the television.

“Come here...Matthew...I really must...show you...something...come quick,” he stuttered the words quickly one after the other, rubbing his nose with his fingers, sniffing now and then.

“Coming Neil, coming Neil...” he said sipping into a stale can of beer sitting on the counter for who knows how many days. “What do you want to show me?” he asked, his words coming lazily one after the other.

“It’s the trailer...of my movie...a movie about me...the main character played by me...can you believe this?”

“Cool,” said Matthew jumping into a red beanbag this time, feeling as if he jumped into magma, thinking about how colors can channel certain feelings. He handed Neil a joint. “Take a shot and slow down a little...”

“I don’t want to slow down...Who wants to slow down when they are flying faster than the speed of love...of light, I mean...of light?”

“As you wish, but don’t you crash into a concrete wall...”

Neil did not acknowledge him with an answer and just pressed play. The screen turned black.

A cross appears in the distance over the immense dusty plains, the camera flies closer and closer as a trumpet is playing a melancholic tune. A body is on the cross, his groin covered by a ragged black cloth. The picture shows a crown of thorns cutting into the skin of the man, making streams of blood flow down from the top of his head. The camera flies closer, focusing onto the top of his head as he is facing the ground.

A dark screen appears as a deep baritone says, ‘Jesus is back...’

The head looks up to show Neil, his face aggravated with the unbearable pain, his mouth dry, his eyes sparkling with tears.

‘...and he wants your soul.’

Neil starts laughing, and in the next picture he is standing at the top of a mountain of corpses with a machine gun in his hand, two flags, one bearing the swastika, the other the sickle and axle, burning behind him. He screams as he shoots down from the heap, soldiers trying to climb the mountain unsuccessfully. A flag, its white stars standing out of the blue with the red and white stripes framing them, rises behind him, and the camera focuses on Neil’s face. Then an explosion blinds the screen.

‘He is stronger...’

A picture of Neil elevating a car over his head.

‘He is meaner...’

“Lick my boots you scum,” says Neil kicking the head of a soldier lying on the ground.

‘He is sexier...’

A picture of Neil shirtless, his muscles sparkling in the setting sun and holding a woman in his arms. Their faces meet in the center and kiss.

‘...and he is here to save the world.’

Stalin and Hitler are holding hands and smiling with a map behind them, a great skull covering the North American continent.

‘Crucifixion Reloaded, the movie, coming to theaters near you.’

The screen goes black.

“What...do you...say...Matthew? Pretty cool, huh?” asked Neil, his eyes ready to pop out any moment.

“I don’t know, Neil...”

“This is the problem with you all,” said Neil losing his temper, “you are so fucking jealous. I made all of you famous...and only this once I want something for myself...and you cannot accept this...”

“It’s not that, Neil. What do you want to say with this movie?”

“Nothing...for Christ’s...sake, I just want to entertain. But even this movie says something...freedom wins over dictatorship...isn’t that enough?”

“If you think this is really necessary then I am really happy for you...”

Neil reached into his pocket and took a sniff out of a silver phial with a tiny snake twirling around it. “I am the son of God...I can do whatever I want,” he said. Neil put the phial back and stormed out of Matthew’s apartment, slamming the door behind him. Matthew felt relieved that he left, and this feeling scared him. He was relieved that the son of God was no longer there.

NEIL’S TWITTER. I am the king of the world.

John’s Gospel

John adjusted his fluent blond hair a little and checked his white pants for spots. He was relieved not to find any. He tucked his dark blue shirt in so that no overflow of material could be seen around his waist, the clothes poured onto him to fit perfectly like boiling fluent metal consolidating around a body. He reached into his man purse for a little make-up to cover up the tiny little pimple on the tip of his nose. Only when he was perfectly satisfied with his looks did he step out of the bathroom and hurry down the narrow corridor into the studio.

Reggie, the studio’s owner, was sitting before the control panel with its many switches, levers, and buttons waiting for Neil to arrive and record the last single from their upcoming second

album. Reggie was a placid black man, a little overweight, always wearing shades, even at night, and never for a second separating himself from his diamond teeth and the golden dollar sign dangling before his grey hoodie. He always smiled, but John knew that he was a cold-blooded gangster who would shoot anyone down who dared to cross his way. Other than that, he was a good man.

“Yo, yo, yo, Johnny J, wazzup?” he asked in his cheerful baritone and smiled, his teeth sparkling.

“Nothing much,” answered John really pissed off, knowing his time was being poured down the drain.

“What is wrong with this man, don’t you ever talk to him? Why don’t you know where he is?”

“We barely see him, he is knocked out most of the time, and when he isn’t, he is working on another megalomaniac plan...”

Reggie chuckled and turned to the clock hanging over the window framing the frustrated faces of the band.

“He will be here soon, you’ll see, Johnny...” he said calmly, in a tone of someone who works with egocentric divas far too frequently.

“I hope so, Reggie, I hope so.”

John opened the door leading into the recording part of the studio and smiled at the others. Peter was sitting in a corner trying to clean his nails from dirt. James was reading a magazine in the corner, the photo of the band on the front page celebrating the fifth number one hit in a row from their first album, still in leading position after several months after their debut. Matthew was sleeping on the keyboard while Judas was smoking his cigarettes one after the other even though the ‘no smoking’ sign was hovering behind him. They could get away with so much now that they were rocking the world.

The room was covered with acoustic perforated tiles, not quite brown, rather yellow. He took his light blue guitar in his hands, kicked the black wire out of his way, and started plucking chords randomly. The chords were accompanied by the monotone ticking of the clock hanging right over the window through which Reggie was gazing at the ceiling, two clocks on both side of the wall waiting for Neil to arrive.

Reggie jumped up from the chair and smiled. The sound didn’t penetrate the box, and all John saw was a muted movie. Neil entered, jumpy and nervous as always, his gesture’s amplitude

much larger than the usual this time. He was shining, but not in a good way, a meteor entering the atmosphere and burning into smithereens. He had a huge paper in his hand, and as they spoke, Neil waved it like a flag. He entered the room, his shrill voice filling it.

“I’m sorry, guys, I’m really sorry to be late.”

“Again,” said Judas throwing the cigarette’s bum to the ground and stepping on it. John turned back to the window and saw Reggie step to the wall and punch a hole into it before storming away.

“I have the greatest idea in the world.”

John looked at the others who were shaking their heads knowing that they had come in needlessly as the completion of the album was postponed yet again.

“This will change everything, you’ll see...”

He put the papers onto the ground, and they gathered around it, all of them except for Judas who was lighting his tenth cigarette and Matthew who was sleeping on the keyboard. Neil spoke, facing the papers, talking into the air, his words not actually destined to them.

“Look at my masterpiece...” he said.

“What is it?” asked Peter scratching his head not really understanding which way to look at it. “Is it an iceberg?”

“No, no, no, no. Don’t be silly,” said Neil and cleared his throat. “I present to you the Electronic Chapel...”

“The what?” asked James with a shade of frustration in his voice.

“A chapel where those who follow me can gather and pray...”

“What makes this electric?” asked John.

“It will be made of neon tubes of all colors, look at the inside, this will be the pavement, this the ceiling, and this the altar...”

“But Neil, all of them represent you...”

“Of course they represent me, I am God. I am not a separate entity really, I am him, all this time I was him, but I was ashamed of it. Now I am ready to embrace my true self. Self-acceptance, isn’t this what Dada taught us?”

“It is,” said Peter.

Judas threw the cigarette to the ground and slowly walked to James’ bass guitar, raised it into the air, and smashed his drums, the tiny parts flying into the air in all directions. “I know you are doing this for her...” bellowed Judas panting in fury.

Matthew snorted a little and turned his head, sleeping without a care in the world.

“There you go again, over and over again,” said Neil. “I don’t feel a shit for her...”

“No, of course not, then why are you building the Electronic Chapel? The Electronic Chapel *she* sang about...”

“For my followers, of course...”

“But wasn’t it you who taught us that God cannot be contained in any matter?” argued Judas.

“That is why I built it out of light...”

“This is just a matter of semantics, you are doing the same thing, building churches that will always remain empty. Dada thought of the Electronic Chapel as a virtual place, the walls made of her music. Self-acceptance is important, but the confidence she conveys is so much more, the confidence that the new world will come eventually. What she gives is so much more than hope. She gives a knowledge to be patient because the kingdom of heaven will come to earth sooner or later. Not come in the actual sense of the words, but built from the same ground we are standing on, from the rocks, from the sweat, from the love of humanity. This message doesn’t need an edifice...”

“Judas, my people need a place to gather where they can see that they are not alone, they need a place where they can learn that they are strong. I am gathering an army that will bring the new world...”

“You want to gather an army of wolves, not of sheep, and I am not willing to join...”

“Then leave, you are free to go...” said Neil showing Judas the way.

“I will...”

“Go ahead...”

Judas smiled at Neil then turned to the others, “I hope you will understand me, and soon you will follow me. He may be the son of God, but a part of him will always be human. Please, open your eyes.”

Judas left the room, slamming the door behind him. John saw Neil’s face redden with anger. “Let him go, let him go, ungrateful fool, we’ll find a much better drummer, you’ll see...”

John looked at the others and knew that like him, they felt that something broke within the group, and this stunned them a little. Everything ends eventually. If it does then what will happen to

them? It took a few minutes before Peter broke the silence and mended the crack created by the departure of Judas, provisionally at least.

“Of course we will, Neil, of course.”

NEIL’S TWITTER. If you leave me, you turn away from the world. The brave fight until the end, the cowards give up. Choose sides.

James’ Gospel

“James, James, over here...”

James turned to where approximately the voice came from and smiled.

“Is it true that Judas left the band because of the rumors of Neil and Dada?”

“No, this is absolutely false, he left us because of artistic differences,” he said with a forced confidence and reassurance.

“What will you do now that you won all of the possible gramophones that a band could ever win, let me add, all this with your first album? Where do you go now?”

“Now comes the hard part, we must stay on top. We are done with our second studio album that will probably be even more controversial than the first one.”

“And how do you like your new drummer Matthias? Is it different working with him?”

“No, absolutely not, to tell you the truth sometimes it seems to me that we have been working together forever.”

Peter tugged his arm, and James moved forward.

“Peter, Peter, is it true you would like to adopt a child?” asked another journalist.

“Yes.”

“Are you sure you are ready for this?”

“The question is whether society is. Will our child be secluded just because he has two dads? We must really go now.”

Peter pulled James away from the flashing mob and hurried down the red carpet toward the VIP party. They stood at the end of the line and waited for their turn to be consented entrance. As they spoke, they nodded and grinned to fellow celebrities knowing that in this world you never know from whom you need help the next minute.

“Did you see Neil during the ceremony?” asked James.

“Yes, I am afraid he is losing it, he seems a whole different person. He shook as he received the award, he was far too agitated...”

“Is it because of the drugs?”

“I think not solely,” said Peter taking a step forward. “He just can handle the temptations that surround him now that he is a star, it is only L€ne who keeps him together, I think. I don’t know what the hell is going on with him and Dada...” said Peter slowing down.

“I don’t know either, but why didn’t we lose it?”

Peter huddled closer to James. James smiled but felt a tear quiver at the edge of his eyes wishing to be somewhere in the future where they could love each other like two normal human beings and not two deviants. They finally arrived to the entrance. The bodyguard nodded at them, and they made way to the after-party.

The club was filled to the brim. A collage of the people who are demi-gods, and somewhere between them, there was a real one. The dance floor was a few steps lower than the place where the tables stood. They made way through the crowd searching for the others. James led the way as he held Peter’s hand firmly not to lose him in the stream of stars.

Angels were sitting on swings with ivy running up the wires withholding them over the tumultuous sea of dancers. Their chests were glistening with glitter, men and females so similar. It was hard to distinguish which was which. Occasionally they reached into their baskets and scattered white petals over the crowd. Here and there, they saw devils carrying silver platters bearing tiny cups filled with a neon green liquid. Peter and James each took one, and as they examined it closer, they noticed a tiny fairy inside it, drowned to death. They sent the shot down and felt flames rush through their veins into their heads.

Faces surfaced from the oblivion and sank back. They felt the bodies brush against them as the thumping electro music deafened everyone. What they saw was incredible, perfect people in every way, almost unreal, as if this club were the waiting room of heaven, or hell.

“Peter...James...” they heard over the crowd and saw L€ne waving. They made way, carefully pushing the bodies apart until they reached the place where L€ne was sitting.

“Where is Neil?” screamed Peter over the noise.

“He went to the bathroom.”

“What for?”

L€ne did not answer and James knew why.

“Congratulations,” she said as if everything were perfectly fine, trying to conceal the trivial. “You really nailed it.”

“Thanks. I guess we really did. You look absolutely stunning, so mature...” said James.

L€ne blushed and adjusted her wild hair, checking to see whether the strands were rising toward the sky. She shed her ragged clothes and wore the simplest slender white dress with a golden medallion dangling before the crease between her two breasts. She seemed more like a woman and less like a raunchy teenage slut. She was smiling, but James saw through her eyes a desperation that she was unable to masquerade no matter how hard she tried.

“When did he leave?” asked James, still bending over the table, not sitting down.

“Who?” asked L€ne.

“Neil.”

“I don’t know, a while ago.”

“I’ll go and check on him...”

James turned around and felt L€ne’s hands grab his wrist. Her eyes were begging him not to go, but she looked at her watch and let go, knowing that too many minutes had gone by. James made way to the back of the club. He shook hands and kissed sweaty cheeks occasionally until he finally arrived to the bathroom’s door, a tiny golden symbol of a boy pissing into a bowl standing nailed to the wood.

He entered and was stunned by the whiteness inside. The neon lights were flickering every now and then, and the glistening tiles went black for a fragment of a second. The music was muffled but still strong behind him. The bathroom was empty.

He stepped to one of the white doors and pushed it open, fearing what he would see on the other side. Empty. He stepped to the next one and pushed it open, his heart now beating in his chest, dreading what the silence meant. Empty. There were two more doors. He pushed the third one open. Empty. James felt as if he were in a cheap thriller when he stepped to the last door and pushed it in to see it was closed. He knelt down and recognized Neil’s boots. He kicked the door in and felt the door crash into

something soft. He pushed it open so that he could see inside, but the crack was too narrow. He pushed it harder until it was big enough to look inside.

He saw Neil sitting in the corner, leaning against the toilette. He was staring at the ceiling, his face was pale, and life was drained from his eyes, his pupils like points of a nail, motionless as if they were carved into stone. He was emanating something, dark rays that were not made of darkness, but the opposite of light, a force draining light from the surroundings. A syringe was standing out from the arm's vein.

James reached for his phone and dialed L€ne's number. L€ne picked up the same instant.

"He ODED..." said James.

"What did he take?"

"Heroin. Send Peter over here. Is John there?"

"Yes."

"Send him over too. You go get the car, your car, it is faster, and you know who to call."

"Yes," answered L€ne hastily.

"We'll meet at the back. Hurry up..." L€ne hung up, and her voice was replaced by a monotone whistle. James pushed the door further inside and Neil's body moved a little, allowing James to reach under his armpit and pull him out. The entrance of the bathroom burst open, and John and Peter came in, their faces aggravated.

"Help me pick him up, John," ordered James. "You, Peter, go and make the bodyguards open the backdoor."

John helped him pick Neil up. James got out of his leather jacket and threw it onto Neil's head, knowing that this was better than letting the world see his lifeless face. He picked the syringe up and threw it out of the window along with the spoon and the phial.

They stepped out into the club and moved down the wall toward the exit. Everyone was too busy to care what had happened, having a good time even though everybody wanted to be elsewhere, but they stayed, knowing that these appearances were part of the job. New couples would form tonight, best friends would turn into foes, panties would be exposed, and someone had already overdosed, what a party. All of these intermezzi were part of the game that everyone here was playing not consciously and still very well, moving around on the checked

dance floor just like figures on a chess board trying to do a check mate to God knows who.

They arrived to the backdoor and stepped out into the cold, cold night. The golden Corvette with two black lines appeared, its tires streaking and taking the turn a little too sharply, colliding into the trashcans that flew into the air, too weak to stop the motion of the vehicle. The car stopped, and they threw Neil inside. James jumped in from the other side then looked out through the window toward Peter and John, both of them shaking, their faces pale white.

“Peter, John, you stay here and do as if nothing happened, have a few shots, get drunk, get into a fight, just the usual.”

The two nodded, and James could see their worried faces reflected in the rearview mirror as the car left the club behind, hurrying out from the city toward the highway.

“Will he be alright, James, will he?” asked LÉne grabbing the steering wheel as if she were afraid she would fly away.

“Did you call him?”

“Yes, he’ll meet us at the stop at mile thirty-three.”

“Great.”

“I’m afraid what is waiting for us if we let him die? We cannot let him die, can we? What will God do to us, James?”

“We can’t, just keep your eyes on the road and drive as quickly as possible.”

Neil’s body tilted and fell onto the seats as the highway took a right and entered into the pinewoods. The stars were shining here uninhibited, the lights of the city too weak to penetrate this far into the untouched nature, defied only by the highway. The stars were so much brighter, and it felt the greatest insolence to call the celebrities stars. They were comets rather than stars, shining for a brief period of time only to fade away.

Still they got so much more than the average person who never got any time to shine at all. The ones residing in the shadows lived and existed and produced so much more than transient light. The world turned thanks to them, and in a sense the stars were working for them. The stars are the bodies who paint the sky with ungraspable beauty, a light so intense yet short, a light to admire and elevate the souls of those who are tired, keep them going on, helping them survive the mediocrity of life which so few cherish ungratefully and so many would want to have.

The white poles lining the road flew by them, shining as they were illuminated by the car's spotlight. James, all of a sudden, felt tiredness overcome him, the tiredness one feels when guarding a child. Neil was becoming a burden, always late, never with them, hyped on drugs, not thinking about anything else except how to expand his fame, a fame that conveys no purpose thus must cease to exist. He was a comet, not of light but of dark matter, bound also to live a short life, differing only from the previous one in its nature. James knew that the light can be reignited somehow, the way still obscure before him. He almost fell asleep when the car pulled over at a rest.

They got out of the Corvette, and both of them leaned onto the hood of the vehicle, enjoying the cool night breeze, the concrete emanating heat no more. Only now did James realize that in this part of the country it was always summer, the seasons didn't seem to exist, and the concrete of the city absorbed all sunlight, releasing the heat all around the year slowly turning their skin crispy and their meat well-done, just the way James liked his steak.

In the distance, just around a curve disappearing behind a hill, something twinkled. It glided over the road steadily, heading toward them. As it drew closer, James saw that it was a limousine with lights of every color flashing rhythmically, covering its surface, forming geometrical figures turning into something else every time they went out. It was like a tiny Las Vegas on four wheels.

The car stopped beside them. L€ne and James pulled Neil out of the car and headed toward the vehicle, dragging the unconscious body through the parking lot. The doors of the arriving limousine opened silently, and instead of black leather seats, everything was white, not simply white, but sterile and hygienic white. There was a low bed in the center, and around it, different tubes hung from the ceiling.

L€ne got in, and James somehow pushed Neil onto the bed.

"You can't come, James, I'm sorry, here are the keys, take my car home," said L€ne.

"Where are you going, L€ne?"

"I can't tell you, no one can find out."

James nodded. He heard a voice coming from somewhere inside the vehicle, the source hidden from his eyes. "What did he take?"

“Heroin...” she answered the man quickly.

The doors closed automatically, and this hospital on four wheels floated away, heading toward the horizon. The same moment they vanished, the sky turned a gentle orange-pink. The greatest star of all was awakening while one was dying. Slowly the minuscule spots in the sky disappeared as morning came. James jumped inside L’Cne’s car not really believing what he was getting into, feeling as if all this were not happening to him. Unfortunately it was.

THE MISSTEP

Mary's Gospel

Josephine put the telephone down a little too slowly as if the ice flowing in her vein were slowly turning her into a living statue for all to see. She placed the telephone onto the commode by the entrance. Josephine's words still rang in Mary's ears as she felt herself slowly turning into stone.

"Let's go," said Josephine, her voice bringing Mary back to life.

Mary nodded, and the lack of panic surprised her. She knew this was because of the weight of the problem that fell onto her, not allowing her to run around but pushing down on her, trying to drown her into the sticky mud beneath her. Mary stood up and started moving toward the entrance, feeling that if she would stop she would sink, never to emerge. Josephine opened the door still wearing her bathrobe and slippers decorated with the head of a bunny and stepped outside, not caring to change. Mary followed but, just like Josephine, stopped, feeling the burden on her shoulders rise into the sky, freeing her.

An old man was approaching bare foot. His white tunic swayed as he moved down the lawn toward them. His long beard spiraled to the ground, his white hair framed a face with as many wrinkles as mountains on the earth encircling two translucent ponds serving as eyes. He smiled at them as he jumped up the stairs as if he were made of clouds.

"Go back inside," said the man with a docile baritone voice.

Mary and Josephine looked at him and did not dare question him even if his voice lacked the harshness of any kind of order. The man entered without asking for permission. "Please, sit down," he said.

Mary and Josephine obeyed once more, finding themselves back on the white sofa, just like a few minutes ago when LÉne's call disrupted the pleasant afternoon.

"I'm Neil's father, and I would like to thank you for raising Neil faultlessly, in fact I couldn't have chosen better parents, proving that things do work out one way or the other. I would like to calm you down, Neil will be alright. He is at a crossroad, one road leads him back to me, the other lures him toward perdition. It is up to him which road he chooses, but this doesn't mean we cannot help him. I ask you to turn away from him, not to visit. He must understand that he is on the wrong road. The more of his supporters turn away from him the more likely will he realize that he is proceeding down the wrong road. There is still hope, but if you stand by him, there won't be any. This is all."

The man raised his right hand and snapped, disappearing into thin air, *tink*.

Mary and Josephine sat in silence, determined not to leave the house.

LÉne's Gospel

"I'm sorry, Dada, I cannot tell you where he is. He's in a good place and that's that."

LÉne hung up and leaned against the kitchen counter, looking at Peter sitting with a cup of coffee before him.

"He lost it, LÉne. Everything he does is to praise himself. I spoke with the others, and we are thinking about breaking up..."

"Peter please don't, deep down he is a good man, if you leave him, something horrible will happen to him..."

"I'm sorry, LÉne, but we can't put up with him any longer. Maybe he is the son of God, but he is definitely on the wrong path, serving the selfish evil. He has become a narcissistic ruler whose every action is adorning himself..."

"Please, Peter, talk to the others, give him another chance...out of love, please. If you love him you will stay with him, don't abandon the captain of the ship, the man you loved so much."

"I don't know...I must really go now..." Peter stood up and hurried out of the kitchen. LÉne adjusted her ponytail tinted with wild colors and smoothened the wrinkles of her white blouse and satin onion-skirt. She forced a smile on her face and accompanied Peter to the door. He jumped into his green cabriolet.

She raised her hand and waved graciously like the queen of England as Peter sped away, still waving for several minutes after the car was silenced by the woods. She stood between the pillars withholding the roof above, two lions taking a repose on the two sides of the stairs. She felt she was different, she felt inanimate, not like those statues but something mechanic.

Lady Dada's Gospel

Dada watched L€ne speed away in her golden Corvette disappearing behind a curve. She pushed herself away from the palm tree behind which she was hiding and started pedaling with her fixed gear bike toward the one-story building that stood out from the rest, not radiating luxury, but false serenity. She stopped her bike before the entrance and jumped onto the red carpet. She fastened her bike with a large chain to a pole erected for the sole purpose of inhibiting the parking here.

She was wearing a hood and felt the sun boil her head like an egg. She looked at the world through her immense shades, and only her red lips were exposed. The grey training suit she was wearing made her feel hideous as she entered into the building and walked to the receptionist.

"I'm sorry, miss, I must ask you to leave..." said the woman behind the counter, her red suit perfectly matching her lines, her circular golden glasses reflecting the monitor before her.

"I'm here to see Neil..."

"Please, I must ask you to leave."

Dada bent over the counter and started searching through the papers to find out where Neil was.

"Guards..." screamed the receptionist. A hidden door opened, and two heaps of muscles appeared, grabbing her under her armpit and raising Dada up into the air.

"Let me go, you brutes," screamed Dada. As she squirmed, her shades fell to the ground and her hood slid backwards exposing her turquoise hair and her fake mole on her cheeks.

"Wait," screamed the receptionist as if she feared she would be executed for this insolence. "Put her down."

The brutes obeyed and returned to hide behind the walls, ready to protect the rehabilitation of the famous patients.

"How can I help you, Miss Lady Dada?"

"I am here to see Neil, I know he is here."

“I’m sorry, but only L€ne can visit him...”

“Is this Neil’s wish?”

“L€ne’s.”

“Then go and ask Neil if he wants to see me. If he doesn’t, then I’ll leave without a word.”

The receptionist nodded. A bossa nova was emanating from the turquoise walls of the building. Before the entrance, there was a massive Baroque golden throne, the intricate decorations sparkling in the semidarkness caused by the tinted windows of the sliding doors. A ship was struggling on the stormy sea as the dawn was coloring the world pink in a painting. The air blowing from the air-conditioner moved the leaves of the palm tree growing out of a pot in the corner and caused its whispers to fill the room. Dada shook in disgust and had to turn away.

The receptionist returned.

“He’s waiting for you. Room 7, end of corridor.”

Dada faced her feet determined not to look up whatever happens, hurrying down the corridor afraid from the tastelessness she would witness. She stopped before the last door and entered. What she saw in the room almost caused her to faint, the golden garlands of the bed’s headboard ruled over all, the satin bordeaux sheets tumbled to the ground as a thin line of light fell onto them coming from the small hiatus between the closed curtains. Here too the walls were painted turquoise.

Neil stepped out of the bathroom with a towel around his waist, and Dada was shocked by his ribs protruding from under his skin. His beard was untidy, and his hair stuck together.

“Hi, Dada,” he said reaching for a walking stick and slowly approaching the bed.

“How are you, Neil?”

“Horrible. These people are killing me...”

Neil lay down onto his back, and as he did, his stomach sunk, emphasizing his ribs even more.

“They will not do that, quite the contrary...”

“But why? When all I wanted was to have some fun?”

“It was much more than that, Neil.”

Neil turned toward the window facing the pool surrounded by the rehabilitation center disguised as a cheap motel. Dada sat down on the bed and almost slid to the ground because of the satin sheets. She caught balance just in time, reminding herself of

the many times when she didn't and fell onto the stage before the million eyes. Stars do fall one time or the other.

"All I wanted was something for me, a reward for all the hard work..." said Neil.

"That was the moment you left the godly path and swore allegiance to the devil..."

"At least the devil did not tell me what to do..."

"Oh, Neil, he did. The devil has no body and is not the opposite of God. He is the senseless evil residing in the heart of people, he is the pointless selfishness ruling the actions of those who are too weak to go on and fight. It is the pointlessness of one's actions that is evil, the state when one is a living dead."

"At least he doesn't want to kill me like my own father..."

"Neil, Neil, Neil. You were on this planet for far too long, and like all of us, you forgot your origin. Your father doesn't want to destroy you, he wants to reunite with you. It is the devil who wants you to fall out of grace, to turn away from God. We exist within God until we decide to step out of it, and that is the exact moment we are doomed. If you don't live within him then you will be destroyed by your own will."

Dada caressed Neil's bony shoulders, feeling his body shake. Neil turned around to face her.

"Neil, your ship is sinking and soon, if the others are sane, they will leave you. Just because you go down it doesn't mean that they have to as well. Remember that treating your life as a gift is one thing and putting your need before the others is another. Your life is just as valuable as the life of the other, not more but not even less..."

Neil nodded and reached for Dada's hand. "What should I do?"

"They will stick to you until the very end, so nothing is lost, not yet anyway. They love you more than anything and believe in you, even Judas, but now they feel tricked and lost. Give something to them, a sign that you love them just as much as you love yourself, that you are grateful and not selfish."

"Why don't you love me?" asked Neil out of nowhere.

"I do, Neil, I do. Can a heart love two people at once?" asked Dada raising her hand into the air.

"Cut the melodramatic bullshit, you're not in a movie..."

"I need time, let's talk about this after you are out of here," begged Dada.

"Maybe next time we'll only meet each other at my funeral..."

Dada looked at Neil in horror and shook her head. “Don’t be a coward, Neil...”

“I won’t,” said Neil but didn’t seem sincere. Dada bent over and caressed his face then blew a gentle kiss onto his forehead.

“Nothing is lost until it is,” said Dada standing up and leaving.

L€ne’s Gospel

L€ne sped down the boulevard as the palm trees dashed away one after the other. In the distance she could see white sailboats floating on the peaceful sea, the beach was filled with colorful bathing suits, the contours blurred by the heat emanating from the asphalt road. An impressionist picture immobilizing sizzling contours.

She drove across the city until she finally arrived to a tiny building, one-story, secluded and simple. She pulled over with her Corvette and stepped out into the world, the sun high in the sky. Noon, the warmest period in the day, the only hour when even the paparazzi are at rest. She looked around to see she was alone, even the road was deserted. She saw the bathing people in the distance but could not hear their voices. She was surrounded by an impenetrable silence, only a high-pitch whistle could be heard, the sound of the sun.

She headed down the red carpet and stepped through the sliding door that shut tightly behind her. The cool air and soothing bossa nova embraced her as she walked past the golden throne to the receptionist. She felt pampered even though she just entered the building.

“Good morning, we’ve been expecting you.”

L€ne smiled at the receptionist with a bearing far too cordial, deserved only by the rich and the famous.

“Go ahead,” said the receptionist smiling.

L€ne nodded and hurried down the corridor wearing her pink heart-shaped glasses. She walked past a golden baroque table with a painting of the dying Dido hanging on the turquoise wall. She touched the leaves of the palms guarding each door, reflections of the ones lining the highway outside. There were no windows, and the only light came from the crystal chandeliers above. She arrived to the end of the corridor and stopped before the last door with the number seven on it, golden and shiny.

She took a deep breath and knew that she could not postpone the moment of reconciliation with the always brooding Neil any longer. She turned the golden doorknob and entered the room. There was a figure sitting on a wheel chair looking out through the crack between the bordeaux curtains. A gentle breeze blew through the open window, and the white transparent curtain swayed between the darkeners. L€ne saw a strip of blue water. The figure was motionless.

“Neil?”

The figure didn't move. L€ne felt the world shrink around her.

“Neil, I'm here, we may leave.”

Silence.

“Marvelous,” rejoiced Neil jumping out from his chair and turning to L€ne with a broad smile across his face. “Oh, L€ne, it is so good to see you.” He stepped to her and kissed her like many years ago.

“Hello, Neil, it is so good to see that you are better,” said L€ne relieved.

“Better? I feel splendid. Let's go, L€ne, let's leave this place.”

Neil left his room walking down the corridor with the juvenile agility that was his characteristic of long ago. L€ne walked after him, and what she felt was so much more than joy, it was euphoria.

“Good-bye, miss, never to see you again...” said Neil then stopped deep in thought. He turned back to the receptionist. “I am buying this throne whatever it costs. Send it over ASAP.”

The receptionist nodded, smiling as they left. They stepped out from the coolness into the boiling heat. Neil jumped into the car and L€ne started it. As they sped away, the many colors decorating the beach were blurred into a continuous rainbow by the speed with which they were leaving the city and heading home.

“The others are distancing themselves, Neil...” said L€ne, careful not to hurt his feelings.

“I know, L€ne, they hardly ever visited, but you know, I don't blame them, I was celebrating myself and forgot about them.”

“You can reunite them, maybe even Judas...”

“Never. He betrayed me once, and I won't let him do it again. The others will not leave me. The one thing I cannot understand is how could my parents just forget about me and ignore the situation. If the world is crazy that doesn't mean I must be as

well, I am the only one sane, L€ne, of this I am sure. I have a plan that just might work.”

“I really missed you, Neil,” said L€ne enjoying the presence of someone who actually is sure of his righteousness. He is the son of God, he cannot be wrong.

L€ne felt her heart fill up to the brim with love. “Don’t you ever do anything that horrible ever again, Neil, because I don’t know what will happen to me.”

Neil didn’t even listen to her, he was already far away, and L€ne hoped that Neil had only tripped and nothing more.

“I will bake you some apple pie at home...” she said.

“My favorite,” said Neil deep in thought, not looking at L€ne.

Peter’s Gospel

Peter pressed down on the gas pedal, and the car sped down the boulevard adjacent to the beach, leading out of the city toward the pine forest where Neil’s mansion was hidden ever so furtively. The weather was warm, and the wind was building up making the palms bend a little, their trunks and leaves like lifeless hands waving in the sky as if they were saying farewell.

The call came from nowhere, calling the twelve of them to meet him in his mansion. It was unexpected, and all of them hoped to see the old Neil back. Eleven cars were approaching the mansion, John, Matthew, the new drummer Mathias, Philipp, Philipp’s assistant Bartholomew, the doctor Thomas, the make-up artist Jude, the hairdresser James, the manicurist Simon, and for some reason even Peter’s little brother, Andrew. All the men who meant something to Neil at one point or the other in his life.

Peter thought about the betrayal of Judas. Judas could not see the world Neil was fighting for, he was a coward. But Peter could not forget his eyes, the way he looked at Neil as if he were seeing a monster, the devil.

“What are you thinking about, sweetheart?” he heard James ask.

Peter smiled at James, sunken so deep in thought he almost forgot about him. They had been together for so long that sometimes he had to remind himself that they were two different entities and do not share the same mind.

“I was thinking about Judas, about how he left.”

“Oh, don’t even bother with him. You know how jealous he was of Neil.”

“Do you think she loves him?”

“Neil? No, I don’t think so. I think she rather venerates him for who he is, as the son of God.”

Peter nodded as they sped across the bridge crossing the river that was finally able to unite with the sea. The highway turned right, away from the immense mass of water, and they headed through the pine forest, getting closer to their destination.

“Judas was never one of us,” continued James. “He had a fierceness that we don’t have, the fierceness of the wolf and was never able to be a lamb, it was derogating for him, and besides, Matthias seems a nice boy, his slender white body and gentle hazel hair, like a Greek pupil...”

James watched Peter from the corner of his eyes and smiled as he saw Peter becoming all red, he was taunting him, this Peter knew, still couldn’t do anything about it. “Shut up, James...”

“I am just joking, you know you are the only one I love in the world...”

Peter smiled and pressed the peddle to the ground, and the green cabriolet sped down the empty highway. They left through the next exit, the road spiraling under the highway and leading into the woods. Trees flew past them until a hiatus appeared. They took a left and drove up the dirt road that turned into concrete after a curve, the change not seen from the main road.

The serpentine road led them higher and higher until they reached the golden gates with two golden *N*’s in D’Nealian writing. They drove up the driveway and stopped before the two-story house built out of limestone with the entrance decorated by two marble lions and four columns of the Temple of Winds.

Peter and James got out of the car with this humongous building radiating wealth mixed with distasteful grandeur towering above them. The front door was open, and they hurried into the entrance hall with its great columns rising high and leaning toward the center creating an arch. Their steps echoed on the white marble floor in the atrium where everything was white and gold.

Two great golden vases were at the two sides of the room, one by the kitchen door and one by the door leading into the living room. Peter looked at their reflection in the golden Baroque mirror hanging on the left. In the center, on a golden table,

thriving white roses ruled over the hall with their suffocating scent, standing erect in a white vase decorated by golden garlands. A magnificent golden chandelier hung from the ceiling. The stairs rose up toward the upper floor at the other end of the room and disappeared after a curve. At the top of the stairs there was a painting of Neil standing on hundreds of skulls with a humongous cross in his hand. Peter and James shuddered in unison.

“Hi there,” they heard from their left. They turned their heads and saw a lovely young woman. It took time for them to recognize that this housewife standing before them was L€ne. Of course, she was familiar, her hair was the same, colored with wild colors, but it was tied into a strict ponytail. The most peculiar item was the light blue apron she was wearing. Her whole entity glowed with handiness, grace, and elegance. She stood erect with dignity, the dignity of a wife whose man loves someone else, the dignity of a wife whose man comes from a world with different rules, the dignity of a woman who stood by a man who did not leave him. Her eyes were trembling.

“He’s waiting for you in the back garden...”

“Do you know what he wants?” asked James.

The trembling of her eyes was taking form in a single drop. L€ne took a deep breath before speaking. “I don’t know, I don’t see, I am here to serve him,” she said. Her voice had a metallic shade. As she pronounced the letter s, they heard electricity sizzling through circuits.

“What’s the matter?” asked Peter.

L€ne shook her head, “Nothing.” She showed them the way then hurried back into the kitchen where Peter saw hundreds of burnt pies lying on the kitchen table, the scent of caramel embracing them, mixing with the stingy smell of sweat.

They hurried by the stairs, through a narrow corridor, the walls made of limber, and arrived to a tiny glass door leading to the swimming pool outside. Peter opened the door and stepped into the light.

There were twelve plastic white chairs, ten bearing the body of a friend, two empty, and a throne bearing the body of the king. They greeted everyone trying to accustom to the solemn air.

“Please, sit down,” said Neil showing them a seat, and they obeyed. Peter and James smiled, both of them not really understanding what they were here for. Neil cleared his throat

and started pacing before them with his hands clutching one another behind his back, a leader talking to his army. He spoke, and his voice lost the placid confidence and had a cacophonous tone of arrogance.

“Friends, dear friends, thank you for coming and, most of all, thank you for all your hard work without which we would still be playing in a garage.”

Peter bent forward and looked at the others feeling more than amiable love.

“I have been voted the most influential star ever to have existed, and all this, I owe to you, so let me give you a round of applause.”

Neil began to clap, his colliding palms booming and echoing in the back garden. Peter saw the many trees filled with shiny red apples around them, so perfect that he thought they were false. He focused on the words of Neil.

“We pushed the first domino over, and now the rest will follow. In a few decades, maybe in the next century, the kingdom of God will come to earth. We are warriors of a crusade trying to redeem the world from the sinful occupants and give it back to whom it belongs, to God. Many crusades will follow us, and eventually, heaven will come to earth.

“We will work for it just as hard as we did until now. We are the thirteen chosen people that were selected to change the world. We know what world we are fighting for. A world where tolerance and love for the other rule over all, a world where sacrifice is a sin if the sum of the action is zero, a world where the sacrifice of the innocent doesn’t absolve the evil from their sins, a place where one’s own value is just as precious as the life of the other, a world where one’s own happiness is not selfishness but a virtue, knowing that only in this state can one use God’s talents to the fullest. Only when all humans function at one-hundred percent will the world of God come to earth.

“I want to create a world where the mind, the heart, and the body live in perfect harmony. A world that accepts the body and treats it not as a sin but as a gift, raising it from the mud where so many people want to see it in the present. The body is a gift, you receive a gift and throw it into the mud, this is not right.”

Peter felt mesmerized. Something was sliding up his body, not light, a caressing pleasure entering into his ears. His eardrums resonated, transmitting the vibration to the hammer, then the

anvil, and finally the stirrup that vibrated the smaller membrane attached to it at the other side of the inner ear. Waves rushed up toward the top of the cochlea, causing its floor to sway like a cloth in the wind. This cloth distanced itself from the acoustical hairs, causing change in their potential, sound turning into electricity, rushing through the nerves into the brain.

He saw Neil sway back and forth, hypnotizing them. Peter was distancing himself from reality and actually felt chosen, better than the others and because of this he was grateful. He was not hypnotized by Neil's force, but by fully acknowledging the fact that he too was chosen.

"We all know what world we want to create, and I have recreated Eden for you here, in the back yard. Humanity has a long way to go, this doesn't mean we have to suffer. We are riding snow-white stallions, and just because humanity is on foot, it doesn't mean that we have to walk at their tempo. We are free to ride into the future, and this shall not be considered sin.

"You deserve a party, to celebrate your work, and with this present, I ask for your apology. I made many wrong decisions, and I am grateful that you stood beside me. This will be just a onetime occasion, the only time when we celebrate ourselves for the sole purpose of celebrating ourselves.

"So Eden, come to earth," he screamed. A thunder bolt burst out of the sky striking down in the distance, its boom resonating in the valley.

Hisses emerged from the trees around them, hisses so sweet Peter felt rapture rush across his body. They all turned around, and from behind the trunks, angels appeared. Men and women completely nude, perfectly chiseled bodies, perfectly formed faces and full red lips born to seduce. A few of them were holding platters with liquor, others bearing white strips of powder, syringes, lighters, spoons, joints, and pills.

Peter felt bodies touch him, Greek gods, and he felt his hands let go of James' hand. He felt his clothes peel off, he felt himself drift off into a dark heaven. He heard the rattling of chains around him, he was a prisoner of his body, and he was loving every minute of it. Ultimate orgasm, this is what he felt and couldn't be disturbed even by the figure of L€ne looking out from the kitchen window working on the creation of the perfect pie. Poor soul, thought Peter, poor all humanity who is not chosen like them.

L€ne's Gospel

L€ne washed the last dishes humming a merry tune, trying to suppress the moans and groans disrupting the scalding afternoon. She started the dishwasher and looked around in the perfectly tidy kitchen. She was proud of herself, but no matter how loud she hummed, she couldn't silence the orgy outside. He was the son of God, and the puny human laws he did not have to abide, this is what Neil told her in the past few months, over and over again, and she began to believe him.

She started crying in the middle of the kitchen, a stream of glitter flowing down her cheeks unstopably. She loved this man, this man that was amidst the tangling heap of bodies now.

'My heart is yours,' he heard Neil say a few hours ago, but she knew that this was untrue. She always knew how he felt for Lady Dada, the way he looked at her, the way he said her name as if he were biting into a red apple, the sweet juice irrupting into his mouth. This man had not belonged to her for years, but she did not know exactly when they had drifted so far apart. Maybe they were never close, and Neil clung to the illusion of it, the illusion of high school love, understanding that Lady Dada would never be his and there is nothing worse than being alone. He gave L€ne his mind, but this was not enough.

She always knew this, but this was the first time she actually put it down in words, the knife of realization dangled above her hidden in darkness until now, and this was the first time it fell and chopped her head off. Neil gave her his mind, but his heart was never hers to own, now his body was also drifting away in the hands of others.

She stepped to the window and watched a girl giving Neil a blowjob as a man licked his balls. The worst part was that this did not bother L€ne, not as much as the look in Neil's eyes, that far away longing, thinking of her. Neil's body was being satisfied, but his heart was cold. He just stared before him without emotions.

She had to stop this orgy, she needed help, she had to call someone, the only one that was spared by Neil's soothing words, the only one who was not under the spell of being chosen.

She raised the phone and waited for someone to answer, Judas picked up.

"Hey, Judas, it's L€ne."

"What do you want?"

“I need your help.”

Silence apart from the sound of their breathing.

“Please stop them, Judas. Something got over Neil, he is not himself anymore,” she continued.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Talk to him, slap him, wake him up, anything. This is an orgy, a hedonistic nightmare.”

“Nothing would change if I would talk to him...”

“Don’t be a coward, Judas, running away will not solve anything,” pleaded him L€ne.

“Me? A coward? I am the one who turned away from the supposed son of God. Am I really a coward? There are times when you must fight and there are times when you must turn away. Leave him, L€ne, leave him.”

L€ne slammed the phone down as if this act could silence Judas’ words and walked upstairs to the master bedroom with the French bed flawlessly made, the beige linen covering it, perfectly harmonizing with the dark brown bed frame. The great Persian rug muffled her steps as she stepped into the snow-white bathroom, the tiles lined by a thick golden line. She stepped to the sink, the form of a white shell, opened the cupboard, and reached for a hair dye. She said farewell to the wild neon colors decorating her hair.

After the chemical did what it was supposed to do, L€ne stepped out with her evenly blonde hair and dried it thoroughly. She combed before the boudoir and tied her hair into a ponytail then put on a white shirt, a black onion skirt, brand new black tights, and finally black heels enclosing her ankles. Perfect.

She hummed a merry tune to herself and smiled as she walked down the stairs back into the kitchen. The light blue apron slid to the ground and slithered up her legs to wrap itself around L€ne’s body tightly, determined never to let her go, burning into her skin. She walked to the window and saw Neil lying on the sun bed reading a newspaper. When he saw her, he waved, and L€ne could read his lips. I love you, L€ne, I love you with all my heart, mind, and body.

L€ne blew a kiss to Neil. Her children emerged from the pool, a beautiful boy and lovely girl playing with a huge colorful beach ball. When they saw her watching, they waved as well. L€ne was happy, all her dreams had come true. Neil reached into his pocket for his phone and looked at its screen, his face lighting up in joy.

He answered it as she reached for the flour and poured it into the bowl. As she hustled in the kitchen, she heard the back door opening.

She hurried into the atrium to find Neil in a perfect grey suit reaching for his black coat and dark grey hat, the red of the tie standing out from the surroundings, a husband from the sixties.

“Hello, sweetheart, I’m leaving,” said Neil.

“Where are you going?”

“I have duties to attend to, I’ll be home soon.”

“I love you,” said L€ne as the door closed, and she knew that he felt the same even if he did not say it. L€ne stepped outside and waved as Neil left, her smile stuck to her face, never to be erased.

Judas’s Gospel

“I am leaving, Judas, I’ll be back soon.”

“Where are you going, Dada?” asked Judas marveling at her slender figure being embraced by the cold neon lights of the corridor. She adjusted her black dress decorated with laces then reached for her turquoise silk coat. She looked up, her turquoise hair covering her left eye. Judas saw chaos and perdition through the right one.

“Don’t ask,” she said. “I’ll be back soon.”

The door closed leaving Judas alone with his throbbing heart. He stood up from the sofa and walked to the glass wall facing one of the greatest cities ever built with the many skyscrapers rising toward the sky. In the distance he saw his favorite one, its top made of silver with semicircles decorating it like many moons setting one on top of the other. The true moon shone down on the restless city and was reflected by the silver, deepening the discomfort in his heart. He looked down onto the street and saw Dada jump onto her bicycle. As she left, the silk of her coat waved in the sky and reflected the many lights of the streets and the signs, mixing with that of the pale moon and the piercing stars. Storm clouds were approaching, still far away from the city, lightning bolts striking to the ground now and then.

Judas stepped away from the window, walked to the stainless steel kitchen, and opened the fridge, reaching for a beer, its opaque glass feeling cool in the warm summer night. He sat down to the glass dining table standing in the corner of the room surrounded by the windows isolating him from the outside world.

His curiosity was building up into a great green flame he could not contain. He reached for his phone and opened the map application. He found Lady Dada's icon hurrying down the labyrinth of the city. She was going somewhere, not just anywhere without destination, this Judas knew from her eyes as she looked at him from the door a few minutes ago. The icon stopped then it disappeared. She switched her phone off, but the place where Judas saw her last was burnt into his retinas.

Judas reached for his leather jacket and hurried out. As he stepped into the cool night, he stopped for a second. This wasn't him, he was jealous, yes, but following a woman was nothing like him.

He stopped at the side of the curb and raised his hand. A taxi stopped, its tires screeching on the pavement. The whistle pierced through the silence of the city that was never silent actually, always emitting a monotone murmur, the placidity of the city. Judas sat inside and gave the Indian chauffeur the address.

Music rose from the radio, a music ever so strange and alien to his ears. It was something like disco but much more than that. The voice of women hit his ears, high-pitched, singing a hypnotizing tune. It seemed ancient, and only the monotone disco drums gave it away.

"What is this?" asked Judas from the driver.

"*Love me one million times,*" said the chauffeur looking at him through the mirror. "Bollywood," he added.

Judas nodded and closed his eyes, listening to the music, floating through the city, the car sometimes turning left, then stopping, then right, gliding deeper and deeper toward the core of decadence. The car braked abruptly, and Judas bumped into the head of the front seat.

"I'm sorry," said the chauffeur.

"No problem."

Judas looked out of the front window not really knowing where they were going when in the distance he saw pink neon light escaping from one of the side alleys. The car drew closer, and Judas understood where they were. He understood who she was meeting with, but this did not surprise him because he knew that if he would ever lose her, it would be because of him.

"Stop the car."

The driver obeyed. Judas handed the man the money and jumped out. He took a deep breath and hurried toward the pink

neon carpet distending across the concrete. He heard of this place so many times, but never visited it, knowing that this was the sign of the downfall of the child of the One. The pink neon light drew closer and closer as the agony in his heart grew stronger and stronger. He stopped right at the corner, his destination still concealed by the red brick wall of the adjacent building. The last barrier separating him from the moment he feared and dreaded all his life.

He would let her go if this would be her wish, but he would love her until the end of time, this he knew very well. He stepped onto the neon pink carpet and had to stop at the sight of the scene. What he saw was beautiful in a way yet horrid in every other.

The walls of the building were made of neon tubes, each surface a different color. The sidewall was glowing pink. It was like slabs of ice piercing the surface of the earth, rising toward the sky but reaching too high, causing this protrusion to slant to the side, the many spikes enclosing a sixty degree angle with the pavement. Each surface was made of neon tubes shining with many iridescent colors, like the colors of the skin of poisonous frogs hiding in the dark forests accompanying the Amazonas on its eternal fleet toward the open sea. The Electronic Chapel stood out from the dark background and shone like a crown of God, but Judas knew that this was not his crown. It was the crown of a stray lamb.

He walked closer to the building and had to put his glasses on, the light so strong it burnt his bare eyes. He walked to the stairs of light and saw the bicycle of Dada fallen to the side, thrown down in haste. The parking lot stood empty. He hurried up the stairs to the entrance, hiding, careful not to be seen.

He looked inside and couldn't believe his eyes. The room was made of pure gold. The pavement was decorated by a mosaic portraying Neil's face, the ruby of his eyes reflecting the neon lights above. On the ceiling he saw a great fresco of Neil lying atop of a cloud with a patch of cirrus covering his private parts. His body was perfectly chiseled, a younger image of himself, so much different than the slob he was now.

From the ceiling, a great disco ball hung refracting the green lasers emerging from the corners of the room, their source hidden by impenetrable smoke flowing across the ground, smelling like strawberry. The lasers bounced off the many mirrors and hurried

to the four walls creating the impression of beams of a virtual roof.

Past the golden seats, at the front of the building where Neil's wax figure was standing, he saw the turquoise silk distended across the golden pavement. It was Dada kneeling before the wax figure. The front wall was covered with white neon tubes burning stronger than the rest, like the white light many saw close to death, but at the end of this tunnel, it wasn't God who was awaiting. It was this statue that seemed alive but was more dead than the dead resting in the cemetery.

Judas stepped inside and heard Dada's whisper echo in the chamber. He saw a confessional booth by the door and jumped inside, hiding behind its red curtain. He took his glasses off and peeked out careful to stay in the shadows. He watched the turquoise figure of Dada at the front of the church praying. He waited in perfect silence, hardly breathing at all. Many minutes passed and not once did she stop. Her hasty whispers suggested preoccupation and pleaded for help.

Judas heard two footsteps echo in the chamber and nothing more. Someone arrived and stopped in the entrance with the confidence of the proprietor. Dada slowly raised her head and turned around. Judas jumped back in the darkness afraid that she would see him, but her eyes slid just past him. Never had she seemed more beautiful, her turquoise hair framing her angular face with her mouth the color of blood and the mole barely visible under her great shades. She took them off slowly. "So the only way you would meet me in the Electronic Chapel is if I'd give you my heart?" said Dada standing up.

Judas heard his own heart shatter and felt the fragments pierce through his meat from the inside.

Dada continued, "I cannot give you that, only my mind."

"I want more, I want your body and heart as well."

Neil appeared, his greasy hair stuck together in strands. Judas could feel the sour smell of smoke, liquor, drugs, and sex. Neil was not himself anymore, just an empty shell that was dying every second. He stepped to Dada, hugged her waist a little too harshly, and dragged her closer to kiss her lustfully, but Dada broke free and started backing toward the front of the chapel terrified. She was surrounded by four Neils, one before her, one behind her, one beneath her, and one above her. She was

surrounded, and there was no way she could escape. "I can't give you those because they are not mine. I already gave it to..."

"Judas." Neil spat. "What does he have that I don't? He is a loser. Look at me. The world is mine, I can do no wrong, I can say whatever I want, and my fans will follow me, I can go to rehab and return even more loved than before. I am the king of millions, chapels are built worshipping me. I am God, don't you understand? And here I am begging you to love me."

"Oh, Neil, look what you have become. What are you doing in the mansion? You must stop, you think you have everything, but you are poorer than the last beggar. Everything you have is transient, other than that, you are a loser."

Neil snickered, and his voice echoed in the golden chamber. "Me? A loser? Look around...does a loser stare down at the world as wax figures, frescos, and mosaics?"

"The problem is, Neil, that this is all you are and nothing more. A peacock wanting to be loved, wanting to seduce. This is the problem, all you are is wax figures, frescos, and mosaics."

"Dada, is this so much different than the cult you built around yourself? I just did what you did. It was you who created me, everything I am is because of you, Dada."

"Maybe it is my fault partially, but I don't feel the slightest repent. I raised you up, a boy carrying a message of love, a message of hope, but you lost the message. You have nothing to say anymore, you will be wiped away by the next wave of stars, by the new generation, and your notoriety will fade away eternally. Only few can survive several generations."

"I cannot be wiped out, whatever I say the people listen. I rule over their brains. I am their leader, Dada."

"What have I created?" asked Dada watching Neil with horror in her eyes. She started shaking and fell to the ground. Neil walked past her to the front of the chapel and stared up at his figure so much taller than him.

"What have you created? What? Look at me. I am the greatest star ever to walk the face of the Earth."

She started laughing. A flash illuminated her deranged expression, followed by a boom. The lights flickered and went out leaving them in complete darkness. Judas could hear the thunders outside beating down on the city.

"I have created a monster of pop, nothing more," said Dada horrified, her giggles breaking through her words echoing in the

darkness. Lightning bolts struck and cast their light onto her face. “I have created the faaaaaame monsteeeeer”, she screamed shaking her knuckle in the air and facing the ceiling. Flash. Boom.

Silence.

Neil snickered. “You are judging me? You? The prostitute of fame? Why are you better than me?”

“Because fame did not use me, I used it, I used it to do good, but look what it did to you. It created this degenerate. Fame uses you, Neil, wake up before it is too late. Return to your road, and all will be forgiven. Empty words are the greatest evil, and you are made of empty phrases and nothing more. You will succumb, you must succumb in order to be reborn”

“Get the hell out of here...” boomed the voice of Neil.

“I am leaving, going back to the man who is still faithful to our original goal, to the man who loves me, to the man I love more than anybody in the world.”

Dada ran out of the chapel. Neil did not bother to turn around. Judas pulled the curtain to the side and stepped out of the confessional booth. Judas saw Neil shake at the front of the stage and felt sorry for him.

“It is never too late, Neil.”

Neil turned around, and Judas understood he was not crying. He was grinning as insanity sparkled in his eyes, with the expression of someone who climbed too high where the air was too thin, and the hypoxia was destroying his cells one after the other.

“I will never succumb, I am God.”

A great lightning struck down causing the ceiling to crack. Great slabs of stone fell to the ground crushing the rows of golden seats, but Neil was still laughing.

Judas hurried out of the chapel to see Dada ride away around the corner. Lightning bolts were striking to the ground over the skyscrapers as if it were the end of the world. A warm wind started blowing stronger and stronger, stirring up the dust settling on the city, causing napkins, trash bags, and salad leaves to whirl before the chapel. Judas started running, but the wind was blowing so harshly it was hard for him to move. He was not giving up, he had to catch up with the one who loved him truly and unconditionally. He turned around the corner and in the distance saw Dada. She passed a dark alley, and Judas had to stop, not really understanding what he saw. Hands grabbed her

and pulled her off the bike. The bike rolled a few feet then fell to the ground.

Strength awoke in Judas he never knew was residing in him. He hurried toward the dark alley, knowing that something had gone utterly wrong. The world was yellow, a light reflected by the bottom of the clouds the color of piss. A great tempest was awakening, and this strange prelude was the introduction.

The wind was whistling past his ears. A nylon bag flew towards him and stuck to his legs, hissing like a rattling snake. As he moved slowly, it felt as if he were moving underwater. The dark alley was still so far away. The trees lining the road bent backwards, and Judas was afraid they would be torn out along with their roots. In the distance he heard a bang then the siren of a car began squealing in agony.

He was getting closer and closer, but his destination was still so far away. The lights went out around him, and now only the strange yellow light made everything glow. He heard hoofs behind him thump rhythmically accompanied intermittently by neighing and snorting. The end of the world was here. The thumps were getting louder behind him, and he was terrified. He turned his head to look at the Horsemen of the Apocalypse straight in the eyes, but his heart grew light. He saw a policeman riding behind him. He screamed for help, but the wind was too loud, and the policeman galloped away into another side alley. He was alone. Judas grabbed the corner of the building leading to the place where Dada had disappeared and pulled himself inside.

The wind was roaring in the alley as well, and Judas could barely keep his eyes open. He saw the turquoise hump lying on the ground. The hump was surrounded by five men wearing black capes swaying in the wind, five dark figures each holding something in one of their hands. Dada did not seem to notice Judas. She was looking up at the sky, and her eyes were sparkling. There was a faint spotlight on her face, barely noticeable, maybe it wasn't even there. The five men raised their arms. As Judas approached them, he saw that they were holding rocks.

Judas started running, but the wind was too strong, and he was barely proceeding. Dada stood up still facing the sky, and her hips started shaking left to right. The men swung their arms, and the rocks started rising in the air. Dada raised her arms as well and swayed them with the rhythm of her hips. She then hunched her

back a little and started snapping her fingers to a silent rhythm. She was dancing.

The stones rose higher as Judas was approaching them. Dada faced the night sky, and a stream of blood started flowing from her eyes before the rocks even touched her. The five men saw Judas coming. The rocks began their descent, four of them missing her, only one reaching its destination. The rock flew against her forehead and caused her skull to be propelled backwards. As she fell, her turquoise coat, now stained with blood, swayed in the wind in the yellow world.

The five men scurried away as Judas jumped to her.

“Help him, Judas. You are the only one who can,” she said weakly.

“I will.”

“He is lost, he doesn’t know what he is doing.”

“I know.”

“Leaving him was the easy part, you must do what the others will never do.”

“Which is?”

Dada looked him straight in the eyes. “Bring him down.”

Dada faced the sky. A tiny light was glistening behind the transparency of her eyes. It was the reflection of an invisible star. She spoke, but her words were coming from far away, not actually destined to him. “That is the brightest star, the brightest of them all. This no one should forget, but he did. I feel my body is light, I am leaving. Put the mole on the right when you put me in the grave. I always liked it that way better.”

Dada closed her eyes, and her body lost its tone becoming nothing but a heap of meat. She was beautiful, even in death she was conscious about her posture, about her expression, about the way her clothes fell to the ground, about how her turquoise hair covered half of her face, the blue so much in contrast with the red lips. She was conscious about the way she lived and conscious about the way she died. Maybe future generations would forget her, but this generation won’t. In the end it really doesn’t matter because eventually everyone is forgotten.

The rain started pouring down, giving the world relief, giving relief to everyone except for one person. Judas saw the tears of blood on Dada’s face being washed away by the water. The lightning bolts enlightened the sky. If someone would look closer,

they would see diamond drops in the eyes of Judas, rolling down his face and falling onto a body embraced in turquoise silk.

THE FALL

Pilate's Gospel

"Stoned to death. It's a shame, I kind of liked her," said Pilate reading the newspaper.

"You never liked anyone but yourself," said Pilate's bitchy assistant. "Everything must be about you."

"Shut up," said Pilate tossing the newspaper to the side and looking out of the tinted window of his white limousine gliding through the city. "She was kind of part of my life, my generation. I feel as if I am next."

"Oh, Pilate, you are only thirty-three."

"Twenty-nine," he said infuriated.

"Right," said his bitchy assistant apologetically.

Pilate felt his stomach rumble. "I would like to eat something. Aristide, I am hungry."

"Would you like to stop?" asked Aristide, his chauffeur, looking at Pilate through the rearview mirror, his white moustache moving with the rhythm of his lips.

"No, I just crave for something delicious."

"Of course. Wait a moment."

Aristide bent forward and pressed something on the control panel. The elbow padding by Pilate slid apart, and he could hear a calming violin play as a golden pyramid of bon-bons emerged on a platter, a gentle light coming from beneath it. The pyramid turned round and round then stopped. Pilate reached for a golden ball and unwrapped it, tossing it in his mouth. He cracked it and felt the molten chocolate inside mix with the nut of the casing. His bitchy assistant reached for one, but Pilate slapped his hand away.

"Aa-aa. This is not for you."

His assistant understood by his stern expression he wasn't joking, so he turned away offended. The car stopped at a red light.

The door flung open, and Pilate's bitchy assistant jolted in his seat in surprise. A man wearing a leather jacket with a skull on his back sat in. Pilate could see the great muscles bulging from under his tight white T-shirt. His face was covered by his long hair, but as it fell back, Pilate recognized the fierce look, the manly beard, and furious lips of Judas.

"So, so, so. Look what the cat brought in," said Pilate rubbing his hands.

Pilate's bitchy assistant slid back in his seat afraid of the visitor.

"I need to talk to you," said Judas, his deep voice resonating in the darkness of the limousine. Pilate saw through the mirror above him his self-absorbed expression. He knew that he could fall in love with his untamed hair, his light hazel eyes, his white marble skin, and juvenile expression anytime.

"You are one of the fallen angels as I recall, aren't you? Once a great star, the pet dog of Lady Dada, now a nobody with her out of the way."

Judas' eyes were burning with rage, and by the look, Pilate knew he was going too far. "Go ahead, Judas, go ahead, why are you here?" asked Pilate giving him an apologetic smile.

"Just the two of us."

Pilate's bitchy assistant turned toward Judas in dismay and spoke in his screechy voice, "Who the hell do you think you are? I am not going anywhere."

The light turned green, and the car accelerated, continuing its journey through the city.

"We can do something about that," said Pilate leaning to the door and pushing it open. The wind boomed and roared into the vehicle. Cars honked as they tried to dodge the open door stretching into their lane. "Get the fuck out of here," said Pilate and kicked his assistant in the side, causing him to fall out through the door.

"Much better," he said closing the door and dusting his hands off. "So, what is it you want, my beauty?"

"I can help you bring him down," answered Judas turning to face the city outside.

"Who?"

Judas turned back to look Pilate straight in the eyes. "Neil."

Pilate started laughing, thinking that he was only joking, but when he saw that his mouth did not curve into a smile, he stopped. “You are serious.”

Judas nodded.

“But how? He just came out from rehab, and he is more loved than ever.”

“I can help you show the world what a Pharisee he truly is.”

“Revenge is so sweet. You are hurt, poor little boy.” He stretched his arm to caress Judas’ face, but Judas grabbed his wrist and pushed it away.

“Don’t touch me.”

“And what do you want in exchange. What can I offer you?” asked Pilate putting his index finger onto his lower lip, rolling his eyes around. “My body perhaps?” he said smiling and batting his eyelashes.

Judas raised his left eyebrow. “Nothing, Pilate, I don’t need anything.”

“Don’t be modest, I’ll write you a check.”

Pilate reached into his pocket for his checkbook and wrote him an empty check with a silver pen leaving a trace of silver ink as it sped across the paper.

“I don’t need it.”

“Take it, and if you really don’t need it, give it to somebody else. I am an honest man, I always pay for what I get.”

“Give me your men, this is all I need.”

“Done,” said Pilate. “Anything else?”

“Don’t you dare speak of Dada in that tone ever again or I’ll make you pay.”

The car stopped at a red light, and Judas, just like he came, disappeared in-between the stream of cars. Pilate lay back feeling an arousal ignited by this man who looked like a stud from a Cola advertisement. He saw Judas step onto the sidewalk and stop by a bum, handing him the check. He knew it was much more than the presence of Judas that made his cock rise, it was the thought of bringing down an icon. He touched himself then unbuttoned his pants and began masturbating, gliding through the city with cars rushing by in all directions.

Judas’ Gospel

Judas sat on his motorcycle followed by eight more. Even though he was wearing his black leather jacket and black helmet, he felt the wind beat against his chest, caressing him and embracing him as they spiraled up the serpentine road in the thick pinewoods. Judas raised his hand and slowed down, the others followed. He faced the eight black riders, Pilate's dogs, the most feared paparazzi, and pointed left then right. The riders jumped off their bikes, took their helmets off, and put their masks on. The masks were made of leather, in the place of the eyes there was an objective emerging with a red light flashing periodically above it. They formed two groups and sneaked inside the dark woods ever so silently, careful not to snap a branch or cause a pine to fall to the ground. Judas waited for them to disappear then started his bike and sped off.

The road turned right, and a golden gate appeared with two *N*'s on it in perfect D'Nealian writing barring his way. Judas pressed the bell and waited. The speaker gave out a screeching sound then a woman who he seemed to recognize but couldn't name cleared her throat.

"Yes?"

"Judas."

"Wait a second."

Judas listened to the distancing footsteps and waited, his heart rushing in his chest. Was he doing the right thing? Is betraying Neil the right thing to do? He is lost.

"You may come in," said the voice. The orange light on top of the column withholding the gates began flashing, and Judas heard a rhythmical peeping as the golden gates opened. Judas started the motor and rolled up the gravel road as a great mansion towered above him with white columns withholding the roof above the entrance. He stopped the bike and got off. He pulled his helmet off and adjusted his hair then put his police eyeglasses on. He saw someone waiting for him.

It was a woman. She was completely nude, her long red hair flowed down onto her shoulders in placid waves tumbling down and covering her right breast. Judas followed her lines past her belly, lower and lower, to where her thighs met. She was shaved completely, and her skin was a gentle pink. Judas slowly approached the woman standing beneath one of the many apple trees, the red fruits shining in the sun. It took time for Judas to see that they were made of plastic.

“Good afternoon,” she said in her deep voice, raising a platter bearing a white stripe of cocaine with a one-dollar bill beside it.

“No, thank you.”

The woman nodded and said, “Please, follow me.”

She turned around, and Judas followed her looking at the place where her spine ended giving place to two perfectly round and soft buttocks kissing each other. They went around the house, and Judas heard a monotone electro emerging from an origin unknown. The garden was full of trees bearing the false red apples. This seemed like Eden, but Judas knew very well that it was not, just a mirage, a planned mirage, lacking all perfection, just the need to be it.

They walked around the house surrounded by perfectly trimmed green bushes and, past the vast windows, Judas could see money turned into distasteful, hideous furniture, feeling lucky that he was not allowed to enter. They walked past the kitchen, and Judas saw L€ne washing the dishes looking at him, not actually seeing him. The music was turning louder and louder, and Judas could sense the sound of humans, a plus beat and nothing more, moans of pleasure.

They took a right, and for a second, he thought he had arrived to a nest of poisonous and sly snakes, bodies squirming and sliding. It was the absence of scales that gave them away, but other than that, they were humping serpents. In the pool and around it the bodies lay one on top of the other, matted bodies, arms, legs, breasts, vaginas, and cocks, impossible to decipher to whom they belonged.

“Come, Judas,” he heard from the other side of the pool. It was Neil.

Judas moved past the bodies, and he saw his old friends who were too absorbed to even notice him. Men were lying with men, women were pleasing women, men were doing women from behind, women were penetrating men with the help of strap-ons, and transvestites were mounting transgender. Here and there he saw huge glass bowls filled with red apples. The syringes, lines of cocaine, joints, and other pills and powders lay in-between the long strands of green grass. Judas stepped over glasses filled with fluids of all color, red, yellow, amber, and green. ‘He is lost,’ he heard. ‘He is lost, he doesn’t know what he is doing.’

Neil was sitting on a golden Baroque throne with a nude woman and man sitting on both his sides, each of them kissing

and caressing him. Behind him two men were holding great palm leaves and fanning him while a nude woman was caressing and massaging his feet. All Neil was wearing was a linen cloth tied around his waist.

He clapped, and from nowhere, another woman appeared, bringing Judas a stool to sit on.

“Long time no see, my old friend. With what wind did you come?” asked Neil far too sweetly to be sincere.

“Just thought I’d jump in, to see how you are doing, you know, with Dada and all.”

“Horrible, I know, I know. Everybody told her not to go biking alone, but she just wouldn’t listen. How unfortunate. How are you doing?”

“Better, I guess.”

Neil stood up and walked to a platter placed on a table matching his throne and bent down to sniff up some white powder. “How long haven’t we met? What were you up to?” asked Neil wiping his nose.

“Nothing special.”

“It is really unfortunate you left because of that misunderstanding, look what you could have had.”

“I think I am better off without it,” replied Judas.

“Really, Judas?” asked Neil cackling. “Look what I have, heaven came to earth in my back garden.”

“Heaven?”

“Well, of course, everybody can love freely, isn’t this heaven? A never-ending orgasm?”

All Judas saw was a heap of bodies lacking the soul and the mind. Animals and nothing more.

Neil continued, “No one is judged here, especially not for who they are, everybody is free.”

Judas looked at Neil deep in the eyes to see he wasn’t joking. Neil turned away and faced the fence surrounding the mansion, and Judas followed. Past the fence, in the thick pinewoods, something was flashing, and Judas knew far too well what it was, so he answered hastily trying to regain Neil’s attention. “All your life you spoke about how sex is empty without love, how liquor and drugs are wrong especially when used in excess, about how the religions are wrong. You really think that this is so much better than what they built?”

“I was young back then, foolish and naïve, thinking that good resides in everyone, that God’s kingdom might come to earth one day, but it won’t. The cultural roots are too deep. Whatever I do they think that I just want to shock them, that I am a phony, that my world will bring putrefaction. I will recreate heaven on my own, a place where everybody loves God and will never leave him.”

Judas had to stand up. “But you are not God and this is not Eden, what you built here is not his kingdom but yours, everyone here is adorning you and not him. You have become the greatest star in the world, giving you the false impression that you are capable of everything, that you are God, but you are not, not completely. The mass raised you, and they can destroy you.”

“Oh, Judas. I break the bread and give it to them, and they will eat it even if it is covered in mold. I raise the glass of wine and offer it to them, and they will drink it even if it is full of poison. They will take whatever I give them.”

“Stop this abomination, you will not get away with it.”

“Don’t be silly, Judas,” said Neil standing up. He caressed Judas’ hair and leaned closer to kiss him on the lips, grabbing his crotch. Judas stepped back a little not because of the touch down there but because of his dead cold lips.

“I really can see what Dada liked about you,” said Neil, “and to tell you the truth, now that I acquired total liberty and freed myself from every human chain, I am aroused by you as well.”

“But you aren’t gay...”

“Gay, straight, who cares. Wouldn’t it be nice to live in a world without these words?”

“What a wonderful world that would be,” said Judas closing his eyes imagining that world. He heard soothing trumpets and a husky male voice, but something made him open his eyes and look around. Judas knew that that world would come eventually, but not now, not in this form.

“Neil, wake up and look around, look at this pit of snakes and stop it.”

“Who are you to tell me what to do? You are nothing but a pathetic forgotten rock star. If my deeds are not pleasing to God, he will let me know, believe me, but he hasn’t, not yet.”

“It is not because he approves that he did not stop you. He let your hands go. You are nothing more than a spoiled child thinking that your father will scoop in to help you, but he will not.

The problem with the world is that they don't realize that God will not intervene. He gave us everything, what else could he give us? If we want to destroy ourselves, go ahead. The silence of God is not a punishment, not the proof against his existence. It is his greatest gift."

"Oh, shut up. I tried to save the world, and it wasn't ready, just like the last time. I am back on Earth and have a body, for a short time I actually exist as a single entity and not just a part of a greater spirit. I will live my life to the fullest. Carpe Diem," said Neil slapping Judas' butt, sitting back onto the golden throne.

"Just because the ones with a louder voice disapprove, it doesn't mean that you don't affect the silent majority in a better way. You have changed me, I found my way through your teachings and understood Dada. She asked me a long time ago, when she was starting out, if I would love her when she'd rule the world. At that time I said yes, but I did not know how hard it would be to stand beside her without envy and jealousy when she reaches the top. I was always there listening to your words, and I found a goal, to love Dada and serve her, doing this with pride, with pure unconditional love. Maybe she loved you once, but not anymore, and I learned to forgive her."

"Great, one person heard my message, but you will die in a few decades, and then what?"

"I am not the only one, Neil. Some will pass it on to their children and their children..."

"Great, I have done my job, now Judas get out of my house before I throw you out. You are a no one, a puppy and nothing more, you have done nothing. The world is mine and no one else's, no one will bring me down."

"We'll see about that. Farewell, my friend. I wish that you find your way, and don't forget, just because you are his son, he will still send you to hell if he sees fit."

"I wish the same for you, find your way leading just around the house, past the golden gate, through the pinewoods, back to the city. Au revoir."

Judas stood up and left, seeing the apostles lying one on top of the other not knowing whom they were copulating with, what body part they were penetrating. It could have been an ear, a nose, or an eye socket for all they cared. Shivers ran up and down his back.

As he walked around the building by the neatly trimmed bushes embracing the wall, he heard a crackle that made him stop to find out its origin. The sound repeated itself, it was coming from beneath the bushes. He knelt down and pulled the branches apart and found a little window. Instead of an abandoned dark basement, he saw a room covered with white tiles. In the middle there stood a torture chair with a girl sitting atop of it, her legs spread into the air withheld by cushioned extensions emerging from the base of the chair, her vagina saluting the world. She was eating chips, and each time she reached for some more, she made the bag crackle. She was watching the muted television hanging from the ceiling in the corner without a care in the world.

A video was streaming on the screen showing an interior tinted by neon colors with dancers dancing as if they were having some kind of a seizure. Colorful bubble letters appeared now and then, asking the viewer who the girl was, over and over again, not begging but demanding to know who the singer was. The screen was muted, but the girl sitting in the chair was watching it nonetheless, probably trying to answer the question she was asked by the silent screen. Who's that chick?

The door opened, and a man wearing a white coat stepped in. He was talking on his cellphone and just nodded to the girl. "What movie are we going to see?" he asked the one on the other side of the phone. "The one where the girl cheats on his man in hope of a better life or the one with the explosions?"

He walked to the corner and pulled a strange machine on wheels next to the girl and sat down before her.

"I don't know, the one with the explosion seems more interesting."

He reached for a tube emerging from the side of the equipment.

"Is that actor still alive? I thought he overdosed or was murdered or something..."

He raised the tube and started pushing it higher and higher into the girl's vagina. The girl squinted, still watching the television, trying to answer the question pending in the air.

"Oh right, it wasn't him. There are far too many celebrities to keep track of..."

The machine started humming, and the translucent tube became red. Judas took pictures with his phone one after the other when he heard the shriek of an infant. He fell back to the

ground but stood up the same instant, scurrying away from this nightmare.

Bubbly words appeared in the sky. Who's that chick? Who's that chick? How could this girl have an abortion just like that, without thought or remorse of any kind?

Everything seemed so unreal and improbable, so fake and shiny, but empty, just like the plastic apples lying in the green, green grass. As he walked past the apple trees, he heard a hissing. He saw two glistening ruby-red eyes staring at him from the branches, a tongue appearing now and then, its end divided. Judas hurried to the bike and jumped on it, speeding away and pressing the stop button on his recorder hidden under his shirt.

He could feel the wind giving him an extra boost as if it approved of his deeds. God speed, said the wind. Eight other bikers joined him, and they drove down the serpentine leading to the highway and back to the city.

Peter's Gospel

Peter hurried to his seat in the front row anxious for all this to end and return to celebrate with the others at the mansion. He sat down facing the stage with a great mahogany desk in the center and a throne carved out of the finest rose wood behind it. Before the desk there stood a beige sofa. The background was that of a city, creating the false illusions of windows facing the vast urban panorama. Peter saw the wallpaper peeling off here and there, not understanding why this impression had to be maintained.

The cameras were pointing to the stage enlightened by blinding spotlights scorching the ones that will have to sit beneath them. Lights in an interrogation room. The lines and questions were well written, supervised and accepted by a sea of lawyers. Boredom, Peter thought, hoping to witness true surprise, just once. The band was tuning on the other side of the stage, and the cameras were taking their final places. The well-trained audience was sitting in perfect silence following the strict instructions of the coordinator preparing the signs bearing the commands that the audience, just like perfectly trained Pavlovian dogs, must obey.

The coordinator asked for the crowd's attention. He raised his hand and pointed toward the band that started playing. The drums, the trumpets, the piano, and the guitars poured out a

merry tune. The coordinator raised a sign bearing the word 'applaud', and the audience obeyed the same moment.

Pilate appeared at the top of the stairs. The lights on the cameras were flashing red, all pointed at him, channeling his image around the continent. It was his orange skin that made him look like a man made of clay. As he smiled, his white teeth glowed. His smile was so wide it seemed that he was about to gobble up the whole audience. He was wearing a slim dark blue jacket with a yellow bowtie. His black hair was combed backwards as if it were dried by the great motors of a jet, a grey strand dividing his skull into two even parts. He walked down the stairs waving to the audience, blowing kisses, owning the stage with the confidence of the host, knowing that everything here belonged to him. He stopped at the front of the stage and bowed, still waving here and there, nodding with humbleness *au fait*. He walked to his desk and sat down taking a sip from the mug bearing his name, Pilate.

"Welcome everybody, and thank you for being here on the last show of the season. Today's guest is one of the greatest stars who ever shone down from the night sky. A star with a message, something so unique and singular, not only singing about love, sex, and parties, but much more. He sings about abortion, sexual orientation, divorce, and acceptance, most of all self-acceptance. This is a long and dangerous road that caused the death of many, including Lady Dada a few months ago. To her I would like to dedicate a minute of silence and ask everybody watching us to do the same."

The studio was perfectly silent, no one moved, and Peter tried to remember the face of Dada but just couldn't. She was lost among the many stars emerging and falling in the past month. Peter felt his memories blur. In the last few weeks he was not living in reality but in-between squirming bodies and never-ending orgasms. He felt empty and for the first time understood, *he* was the one fading and not Dada.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, a little about today's guest. Neil emerged from under the wings of Lady Dada. She was the one who taught him to fly and stood by him even when he flew much higher than she ever did. The pupil surpassed the mother and of this Lady Dada was proud. An attitude so unlikely in this world of jealousy. Neil was attacked by many, by the religions and by the state, but no matter how hard they tried to pull him back to

the ground by portraying him as a deluded psychopath, they just couldn't grab hold of him, not inhibiting his rise in the slightest way. He has become a leader to many. Even I believed that maybe he truly was the son of God.

"A few months before, Neil accepted my invitation for the first time. So, please, give him a round of applause."

The music started playing, and Neil appeared at the top of the stairs. The sign went up once more, and the audience applauded. He was wearing a white toga and sandals, his fluent hair was freshly washed and swayed as he took each step descending into the arena. He smiled from under his beard and waved to the audience. He walked to Pilate, and they shook hands. As he sat down, the applause ceased, and he too took a sip from the mug with his name, Neil. He then placed it back next to the basket bearing plastic fruits at the side of Pilate's desk.

"Thank you once more, Neil, for accepting my invitation. Tell me, how are you?"

"Very well, Pilate. I would have come sooner if I had the time. Traveling around the globe seems to have taken up all of my time."

"Of course. So, your second studio album will be out in a few weeks, tell me about that."

"I can't tell you too much, but I can tell you that it will be much more mature than the previous one, a little more edgy..."

"More edgy than the previous one? How could that hardly be possible? You have been already called the devil by many..."

The audience laughed.

"...but the Messiah as well."

"Yes, and about that, are you really the child of God?" asked Pilate bending over his desk, wrinkling his forehead, squinting toward Neil.

"I can tell you 'yes, I am', but would you believe me?"

"Probably not," said Pilate.

The audience laughed once again.

"Pilate, we are all sons and daughters of God. I am blessed, this anyone can witness. Look where I am now. What a long road I have come, from an untidy garage to you. God is blessing my every step, and I know much too well that I wouldn't be here without him...I am more blessed than others, and this I tell you as a fact not as boasting."

“Sometimes you seem such a horrible and arrogant person, but I cannot tell you that I hate you, you have something that hypnotizes me.”

“Thank you, Pilate, you are so kind.”

The sign rises bearing the next command. The audience starts awing and to Peter it seems so false, like the fruits on the desk, the tan on Pilate’s face, and the mannerisms of Neil. Peter shuddered and felt himself emerge from the darkness he was sinking into the last few weeks and started rising toward the light.

“I am not arrogant,” continued Neil. “I just know what I have and what I have achieved.”

“Do you think you can change the world?”

“I don’t know whether I can, I can only hope.”

“Tell me about this world you would like to bring to earth.”

“It is a world where the saint trinity rules over all,” said Neil reciting something that was boring him to death, “the perfect harmony of the body, mind, and heart, a world where life is acknowledged as a gift and is treated as such, where life is lived to its fullest and is not sacrificed to inhibitions or overuse.”

The screens over Peter’s head flickered, screens that were dark and hiding in obscurity until now, sizzling as a picture came on. It took time for Peter to recognize what those pictures were. At first it seemed a perverted painting of body parts mounted one on top of the other, but it wasn’t. It was their orgy, and for the first time he saw himself from outside as he was having an orgasm, and he seemed hideous to himself. Just sitting there as a spectator it seemed disgusting, it was lacking something, it was an act for the sake of an act, it was murder for the sake of murder. It was sin, and this recognition pierced through his heart like a spear.

Neil continued, “It is the land of ultimate acceptance and tolerance, a world where no sacrifices are made, no one has to suffer for the good of the other, knowing that your personal happiness is just as important as the happiness of the other because only in this state does your body, mind, and heart function at its greatest potential.”

The screen flickered, now showing Neil as he snorts up a line of cocaine. The next picture immortalized his face as the first dash of pleasure ran across him making him shiver, sharpening all his senses. Next Peter saw a woman with her legs spread into the air and a man wearing a white cape sitting before her on a stool with a strange machine on his side.

The audience started whispering, and the murmur was building up. The ones sitting before the TV set, millions of people around the continent were witnessing the horror, men reduced to the state of animals. For weeks he was an animal, a being that forgot to ask questions and search for the answers. Neil tripped, but had not changed and tripped once again, this time rolling down the stairs.

“Many say that I am selfish, but I am not because you were born to be happy. This is your ultimate goal and nothing more, not because it is selfish but because this is the only sacrifice that should be made. But you know that sacrifice is not sacrifice when you give up the worse for the better, just like Jesus who did not sacrifice himself either and left the limited world for the limitless heaven. He had the luxury of the certainty that heaven exists, unlike us humans who’ll never know for sure.”

The next picture showed the man sucking the fetus out of the woman’s womb. The world hissed, and Peter soon understood who betrayed them, but he had to ask himself whether this act was truly an act of betrayal. A whistle emerged from the crowd, a single whistle as sharp as a knife.

The speakers started playing something over and over again, and Peter recognized Neil’s voice, ‘I break the bread and give it to them, and they will eat it even if it is covered in mold. I raise the glass of wine and offer it to them, and they will drink it even if it is full of poison. They will take whatever I give them.’

Neil turned to the crowd and stopped talking for a second. “What is happening?” he asked turning back to Pilate.

“The truth has come out, Neil. This is your world, your dystopia.”

“What do you mean?”

Pilate nodded toward the screens. Neil stood up, walked toward the audience, and stopped, turned to stone by the snakes of Medusa. Peter couldn’t move either, shocked by what he was seeing. Then the first paper cup flew into the air, floating over the audience, and Peter could swear he heard the music of the Danube as the cup rotated and spun barely missing Neil. Then the rest of the cups and handkerchiefs followed. It was a piece of pretzel that hit Neil in his head and disrupted his shock. He staggered to Pilate.

“What have you done?” asked Neil.

“What do you mean? You are a two-faced liar and this, the world had to know.”

“You will pay for this, Pilate, I’ll have all my lawyers bring you down...”

“And I’ll pay the consequences, but believe me I have money. I am the one who dragged you to the floor, made you human again, this is enough for me. My audience will be satisfied.”

“This is a lie, a horrible lie,” said Neil directing his words to the crowd, and then he turned back to Pilate saying, “They know that I am docile as a lamb, that I am good. The mass will not turn away even if they see that I am not perfect. I am their leader, and they will follow me...”

“Oh, Neil, Neil, Neil, this is where you are so terribly wrong. It is not you that control the mass, but the other way around. You can get away with many things until the mass is living in the false impression that you are impeccable, you can lead them until you don’t actually name the fact that you are leading them. This saddle is ever so thin and is created with mutual consent, you give them the fake illusion that perfect freedom can be achieved while they give you a pass that lets you get away with almost everything except this, acknowledged leadership.”

“They will not turn away...”

“You have broken the pact, not because you lied to them but because you openly acknowledged to be leading them. Humans are proud, and you put a spotlight onto your arrogance and their ignorance. Your mask has fallen, and the world now sees you for who you are and not how you would want them to see you.”

Pilate stood up.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I give to you Neil.” The crowd started booing. “Thank you for coming, Neil, it was a pleasure.”

Neil stood up and hurried outside as Pilate turned to the audience. “And now, ladies and gentlemen, let me present to you my newest young talent who will soon be rocking the world. I give to you Barabbas with his first single *I murdered your heart.*”

Barabbas started playing, and the booing turned into an unstoppable cheering. As the music filled the studio, Peter felt a hand caress his face, a comforting touch that made him smile and close his eyes enjoying the movement. He raised his arm to grab hold of this heavenly limb, but as he squeezed it a little, he felt that it was ice cold.

He opened his eyes and felt he was losing grip of reality. He wanted to look the being caressing him straight in the eyes, but one of its eye sockets was empty. Meat was dangling from its face, and a maggot appeared from its nostril and disappeared into its mouth. Peter jumped up in fear, but no one seemed to notice the floating corpse with its meat dress swaying ever so calmly. He gave out a shriek that was not strong enough to defeat the music and started running with all his might away from this nightmare.

He left the studio and found himself in the backstage with the crew hurrying in all directions, a tidy chaos moving the show without ever being seen or acknowledged. He turned around and was glad to see that no one was following him. He turned around the corner and found himself face to face with the rotting corpse.

“He will fall...” hissed the monster.

Peter screamed once more and started running the opposite direction. The music was slowly fading away. He ran through the labyrinth of corridors too narrow, fearing he was going insane. He just ran, scared to stop even for a second. He took a right and found himself in-between the iron beams withholding the fake background of the stage and the lights over it. The music was growing louder. The iron beams shot from all directions, like a cage. He moved in the darkness colliding with the iron now and then, climbing over it, ducking beneath it. The fear kept him moving.

He was right behind the stage as the music was deafening now. The forest of beams became thinner, and soon he found himself before the stairs leading over the stage.

“He will fall,” said the voice, and Peter turned around to see the being floating towards him through the beams, uninhibited by matter, just like a deadly smoke trying to catch him.

Peter hurried up the stairs, his steps turning into metallic clatter, barely audible, melting into the tune played by Barabbas. Higher and higher he went, still followed by this disembodied apparition trying to seize him. He took the last step and found himself on an iron bridge leading nowhere, a dead end, probably used for the maintenance of spotlights fastened to the railing.

He started backing, his heart thumping in his throat, about to faint anytime. He imagined his body falling on top of Barabbas before the eyes of the crowd. What a show, what a show that would be.

The corpse landed on the top of the stairs. Its shoes touched the floor, platforms so high it made it three heads taller than Peter. It began to walk, the maggot hurried out of the eye socket and disappeared into its nose. The healthy eye was so familiar, but the missing skin and the tattered muscles made it impossible for Peter to recognize it.

The music playing beneath them was reaching the end of the obligatory variation and was now culminating, giving place to the refrain that would wash through the crowd already familiar with the tune, heard many times during the song.

The skin of the being was growing from the neck faster and faster, covering its face until Peter recognized her, it was Lady Dada.

“Mother monster,” he said kneeling down and bowing his head. Her white skin was glowing and made her seem a mirror of heaven itself. She stopped before him and caressed his head.

“Stand up, Peter.”

Peter obeyed looking up into her eyes shimmering like the surface of the sea as the sun sets beneath the horizon.

“What happened to us?” he asked her.

Lady Dada smiled and caressed his face before speaking in her sweet motherly voice. “You were led by him, you were blinded by your own consent, you followed a leader that was lost himself, a captain that orders the ship forward not acknowledging the great hole at the bottom.”

“How could he lose himself, isn’t he the son of God?”

“He is, in the form of a human, he may be divine, but in this state he is human, blinded by notoriety.”

“Can’t we do anything? Will the son of God go to hell?”

“He will *if* he doesn’t change.”

“What do we have to do, Lady?”

“You have to make him fall. If he flies closer to the sun, he will burn, you must rip his wings off his back and make him fall. Only when he loses everything will he find that long forgotten spark he had, the element that made me raise him from the multitude. He is a lighthouse, reignite the flame, and he will lead the lost ships past the rocks, into the silent port. These stupid allegories, I really don’t know what is wrong with me.” She started laughing, and life returned into her.

“What must I do?” asked Peter.

“Deny him.”

The skin started peeling off as meat fell to the ground.

“Three times?”

“Yes, Peter.” She started rising into the sky and broke out into pure laughter.

“But don’t I have to deny him after he is resurrected?”

She started turning round and round and defeating the giggles she chanted, “No two stories are the same, believe the prostitute of fame.” Faster and faster she spun like a tornado shrinking as she was getting closer to its center.

“Why are you speaking in rhyme?” screamed Peter over the music.

“I saw heaven, and I have become insaaaaaaane,” she sang.

She was spinning faster and becoming nothing but a blurred cyclone of meat.

“Da-da-oooh-la-la-ma-ma-oooh-la-la. I want you to deny him. Da-da-oooh-la-la-ma-ma-oooh-la-la.”

She disappeared with a ting, turning into a star that sparkled in mid-air for a second then went out definitely. Peter grabbed the railing, trying to clutch something solid, something that would prove to him he was back in reality, that he was not dreaming. He slowly caught his breath and looked down from the bridge.

He saw the crowd cheering and realized that the ones sitting in the audience were not Pavlovian dogs. He saw joy in their faces, true happiness, something that he saw only now. Humanity needs entertainment. It always needed it from the beginning of time, and this modern notoriety is not worse than the gladiators, the plays, and the movies of the past.

It is so hard to find art among the sea of celebrities, but then he remembered Mozart who, while he was alive, was never as popular as Salieri. The present is always so complicated and chaotic, it is so hard to see through the mess. It is for the future to separate the grain from chaff, all the present can do is try, and sometimes, even among this apocalyptic dance, they may find God sparkling through the thin cloth of reality. There is nothing to fear, for each passing generation hates the previous one. This is what they do, this is how dying becomes a little bearable, it is so much easier to leave a world that is rotting, than a world that is thriving.

He then looked down at Barabbas thinking about the words he heard. No two stories are the same. The crowd raises Barabbas now but will forget him eventually. Why? Who decides? Who is

the one behind all this? Is it an evil mastermind? There was another alternative of which Peter dared not to think and only hoped that it was controlled by an evil villain hiding somewhere in the world.

“Peter, Peter, is it true that the *Crucifixion Reloaded* is breaking up?”

Peter opened his eyes realizing that he had almost lost himself in the memories, as if what he remembered was the present, and the press conference taking place now, hadn't yet happened.

He searched for the questioner among the sea of journalists. He didn't find him, so like always, spoke to the crowd in general, which was a little awkward, being asked a question and not being able to answer directly only to the mob, as if it was the mob that asked the question, a creature with hundreds of mouths speaking and twice as many eyes watching, ears listening, and hands writing, waiting for the first mistake to come to light.

“It is true. We are not going to give concerts anymore.”

“And what about the second album?”

“It is not coming out...”

Peter heard the pens grind against the papers as the words materialized from thin air into unchangeable writing.

“Why?”

The question he dreaded all this time, the question to which even he did not know the answer. He only knew that an apparition, maybe a ghost, maybe a hallucination, told him so.

“Because the band and I think that Neil has distanced himself from the original goal we swore to achieve.”

“Which was?”

“To create a better world.”

“But according to the pictures you all were in it, you all lived in his way?”

“This was not the world we wanted to achieve. It was the opposite. We failed and we decided to step back from the music industry. This incongruence is unforgiveable, and we can only plead the audience that if they have love in their hearts for us, to please forgive us. I urge them to turn away from Neil who himself is lost and is another person, a person that we don't know anymore.”

“Isn't it funny that you, Peter, are now denying Neil, isn't this only an act of mocking the Bible?”

“All I can say is something Lady Dada told me long ago, no two stories are the same.”

“Now that you are breaking up, do you have anything to say to all of the fans you let down?”

“The world we created in the mansion is a fake, it is everything that we fought against, but our original message is just and of that work we are not ashamed. I ask everybody to turn back to our original message and unanimously turn away from Neil until he is ready to repent. This man living in his palace is not him, that man we do not know.”

“Oh, you denied him the second time. No two stories are the same you say, does this mean that Neil is not the son of God?”

“This is a hard question, and I cannot answer you because I don’t know the answer either, all I know is that this man is not God’s son, this man in the present state is a slob, and I don’t know who he is.”

A great crash interrupted the press conference followed by the sound of hundreds of roosters crowing. The mob, like a poisonous fluid, flowed out of the entrance followed by Peter. Peter was the last one to hurry through the great glass lobby of the hotel, running as the red carpet muffled his every step. The reality around him was blurred. All he could perceive was the great glass wall serving as the front facade, the red carpet, and the hundreds of roosters running around the road, clucking, pecking, and squawking. He stepped out of the hotel and smelled smoke. A black fume was emerging from over the cloud of journalists, the black smoke seemed to have a conscience, and Peter thought it gave out a sound, the sound of an old fax machine.

Peter made way through the crowd. He pushed away the last two bodies and stepped out from the dark forest of men and women into the light. It was a truck that crashed against the pole, a truck that was carrying roosters that were now plucking around the road in the shadow of the palm trees with the great sea caressing the shore in the background.

He saw a microphone float before his mouth then heard a question that was almost yelled into his ears.

“Now tell us, Peter, are the two stories the same or not?”

Peter stared at the roosters, their crowing coming at unpredictable intervals. He heard the murmur of the mob of journalists and saw the flashes of the cameras lighting the

afternoon sky. He felt reality compress around him, being at the center of it all yet not knowing anything.

“I don’t know,” murmured Peter staring at the scene of the crash.

L€ne’s Gospel

L€ne read the headline on the newspaper out loud, “No two stories are the same, or are they?”

She opened the cupboard beneath the sink, threw the newspaper into the trashcan, and reached for the pie resting on the windowsill, waiting to cool down a little. Her best pie ever, perfect in every way, her sole achievement in years, an achievement that seemed minuscule to others, but not to her, a proof of a job well done, reaching perfection, proving to her that she had not lived in vain. Maybe she doesn’t change the world with her deeds, yet she is still happy, knowing that as long as she does the assigned work with love and preciseness, trying to reach impeccability, she will find happiness even while cleaning the crap from the toilette.

She raised the pie to her nose, and the cinnamon burst into her nostrils. She put it onto the red checked kitchen cloth lying on the table and raised it back into the sky. As she walked out of the kitchen, the pie emanated a sweet scent underlined by the sourness of the apple. She walked in her high heels with confidence.

L€ne stopped by the mirror in the atrium and put down the pie to adjust her light blue apron, her onion skirt, and white blouse emphasizing the frailty of her neck. She flattened the loose strands of blonde hair and tightened her ponytail originating from the top of her head then picked the pie back up and hurried into the living room.

“The pie is ready, Neil.”

Neil just stared at the football match and sipped his beer without caring to acknowledge her entrance. L€ne forced a smile onto her face, too wide to be sincere, giving her an air of insanity. She looked at this man, at how deep he sank. His greasy hair stuck to his face, the beard prospering wildly and untamed. He was sitting in his boxers and drinking beer, the cans and empty bags of chips lying around him, the sole proofs that this body existed, consumed food and liquid to survive, to keep it in motion

for no apparent reason, a body amorphous and repulsing. L€ne saw him this way, but the past, the memories, the feelings distorted the brain's process of deciphering the picture making her see him the way he was many years ago, a god.

L€ne loved that man even if that man was lost and must be found again. 'Leave him,' she remembered the words of Judas. Even if she knew this was the right thing to do, she couldn't, not until her sight was blurred by her subjectivity. The deeper Neil sank the more she changed as if his responsibility was channeled into her body. It started many months ago, and it reached its full height this minute when she was the perfect housewife, the true Stepford wife. She reached the top, there was no going higher, only the bottomless pit was awaiting her.

"Do you want some?" she asked.

Neil drank the last sip in the can, threw it to the floor, and reached for another one without answering. The smile on her face was becoming wider, and she could feel the pain culminate in the muscles trying to pull the angles of her lips apart. She smelled smoke as she put the pie onto the table, reached for a plate she had prepared a few minutes before, and placed it by the steaming pie. She took the golden knife into her hand and immersed it into the pie's crust. After the minuscule resistance, the knife cut through the soft pulp as steam emerged from the crack. She then slid the wide part of the knife under the slice and lifted it, placing it onto the plate. She put a tiny golden fork next to it and handed it to Neil who just took it without even caring to look away from the screen. L€ne stood up resting her hands in her lap and waiting for his reaction.

Neil cut off a small piece and raised it to his mouth, then it disappeared, and he began to chew, the crumbs falling down onto his protruding belly. L€ne could sense the smell of sour sweat and alcohol around the room, the scent of the pie too weak to suppress the foul stench. Neil chewed and chewed as L€ne waited for a word of acknowledgement, something so rare these days.

Neil's face slowly turned into an awful grimace. "It's dry," he said tossing the plate onto the glass coffee table.

"Is it?"

Neil nodded.

"Is it?" she asked once more, a cog jumping back in her brain.

"Is it?" she asked the third time, her voice underlined by a metallic tone.

Neil looked up at her annoyed. "Yes, L€ne, it's dry."

A short circuit causing a fuse to blow.

"The pie is dry," she said.

The muscles of her mouth letting go.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" asked Neil.

A body falling into the sweet abyss of reconciliation.

"The pie is dry," repeated L€ne, the cog jumping back once again.

Someone meeting with the old self and finding the fork in the road where the wrong path was chosen.

"Get the hell out of here," said Neil reaching for the remote and pumping the volume higher.

Something shattered, the distorting glass fell to the ground, and Neil manifested himself before L€ne for who he truly was. Another mirror shattered, L€ne manifesting herself before Neil for who she really was. An illusion going up in smokes, a pink cloud rising to the sky and letting the two of them see each other for who they truly were.

L€ne felt a tear emerge from the corner of her eyes, and she knew by the stinging sensation it was a stream of glitter. Her disease had gotten better in the past few months, but now it returned stronger than ever. She reached for the plate and picked it up. With a smooth motion originating from the past, rushing through the present, and moving into the future, the plate rose into the sky. Valkyries were approaching over the horizon, menacingly and unstoppable, washing through the building, the plate flying and spinning round and round accompanied by violins, floating and rising, the tune building up, culminating and piercing the air the same moment when the plate smashed the flat screen of the television causing great sparks to emerge.

She reached for the rest of the pie and tossed it toward the window, causing the glass to splinter and shatter with a magnificent sound. She raised the lamp standing by the sofa and smashed the glass table. She jumped to the curtains and ripped them off, grabbed the bookshelf and pulled it to the ground. The books fell through the air and paper flew into the sky as L€ne whirled, her strands of hair decomposing the perfect harmony. She reached for the knife and jumped to the sofa to cut it open, piercing its surface over and over again. The music died leaving L€ne to pant. She stood up straight and smiled after the brief

interlude, adjusting her hair standing up in wisps and ripping her apron off to throw it to the ground.

“Neil, we are over, get your act together, please.”

She left the room and stopped by the mirror, the stain of dried glitter originating from her eyes sparkling in the light. She ripped up her stockings on the side then did the same with her skirt. She walked past the kitchen into the garage as her hold-up tights appeared with every step. She jumped into her golden Corvette with two black lines running down the hood, the roof, and the trunk. The garage opened and she sped away.

She loosened her ponytail, and her golden hair was finally free, swaying as the car rushed away. She went down the road lined by pines until it merged with the highway and hurried away from the cemetery she was willing to live in, coming back to life, fresh air filling her lungs thinking that people are not afraid to merge, they are afraid not to. She wasn't anymore.

THE DEATH

Neil's Gospel

The last paper set after being blown up one last time into the air by a breeze blowing through the shattered window. The television was dark, its glass fragmented, hundreds of cracks running from the edge of the hole toward the periphery. Neil took a last sip of the beer and threw the can onto the floor.

He looked around in the remains of the room. For the first time in many months, there was silence. The now blank television let his mind go, making him understand that he was bored, that he has been bored since his album skyrocketed to the top of the charts, he was bored when he snorted coke, when he had sex, he was bored at the parties, bored at the awards ceremonies, bored in the morning, bored at night, bored beaten by the rays of the sun and bored as the stars caressed him in his sleep, even his dreams bored him to death. He was just existing for the sake of existing, months thrown out of the window, months of a life too short, months lost, never to be redeemed, never to be relived. For the first time his attention shifted from the outer world, turning to face and examine his life.

The television screen flickered, and an image appeared, showing the inside of a shattered room with cans of beer lying all around and a bum sitting in the couch wearing nothing but a pair of stained underwear. It took time for him to recognize that that man was him, that loser was him. He searched for a camera but realized that it was on the other side of the hole in the screen, the orifice created by the flying plate bearing the pie.

The screen was blurred a little and flickered now and then, giving out a hissing sound that made his blood freeze. He stood up and, careful not to step on the splinters, approached the screen. The man in the picture did the same, he bent forward

walking to the screen with caution afraid that a hand would reach out of the hole to grab him. The screen was flickering even more as he examined his battered expression through the cracks of the screen. The hissing grew stronger and louder, and then the screen went black. Neil raised his arm and ran his finger over the edges of the crack feeling the rugged surface grating his skin.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen,” boomed the television. The sound was so loud it caused Neil to jolt in fear. “Welcome to the wheel of fortune. Please welcome today’s contestant.”

An invisible crowd cheered.

“Neil, tell us something about yourself,” said the man in the screen. He had an unnaturally long face with a goatee so sharp it seemed the point of a spear. “Neil, do not be afraid, we will not eat you up.”

The invisible crowd cackled.

“Neil, former super star, now a no one, is here to test his luck. Let’s see if Lady Luck is truly your ally. Today’s riddle is a message.”

The camera moved away from the host, and the wheel appeared with the great board behind it. Fifteen white boxes stood out from the rest of the darker boxes separating the words.

“Fifteen letters and one contestant, please, Neil, turn the wheel.”

Neil opened his eyes to find himself in the studio with the great wheel before him. The wheel had no digits just the colors of the rainbow fading one into the other. He looked up to see the host. His face was a little redder than he first thought. A woman was standing by the board in a minuscule tiny black dress with heels almost a foot high. The woman had short hair, but when she turned around, she had the same face of the anchor.

“What did you expect?” said the man with the body of a woman at the front.

“It is just the two of us,” said the anchor.

Neil saw that behind him, past the curtain of light, the seats were empty. He heard laughter coming from invisible speakers surrounding him.

“Please, Neil, turn the wheel.”

Neil tried to move, tried to run away, flee from this man with skin the color of a lobster’s shell.

“Neil, don’t be silly, spin the wheel. The answer is a message, a message for you.”

Neil felt a force make him bend forward, a force so mighty he couldn't possibly fight it and had to obey it. He pushed the wheel, and it turned round and round, giving out a rattling sound. As it slowed down, the clicks separated themselves from one another and now gave out individual sounds. The wheel stopped. Neil faced the board at the front of the studio.

"G for go-go-girl."

---- ----- G _ -- -----

"G for go-go-girl. Very good, Neil. We have one G."

"How much is it worth?"

"Nothing, Neil, this is just a game in your head. Spin the wheel."

Neil obeyed. The wheel rattled, slowed down, and stopped.

"B for boobs."

"Very good. B for boobs. Let's see."

They turned to the board. A shriek pierced through the air, and Neil felt a pain in his heart. He grabbed his chest and bent down grunting.

"I'm sorry, Neil, no B, I am afraid we must take away some of your years left to live."

"What kind of game is this? You give nothing but take away my life?"

"Basically isn't this what life is about? Turn the wheel, Neil."

Neil obeyed and asked for a T then an H.

---- ----- G _ T _ H _ _ _

Then a C, an X ("Who asks for an X, Neil?"), and a J which drained some more of his life, then an L and a Y.

Y _ _ _ _ L L G _ T _ H _ L L

"Neil, we will give you the last consonant free, so from us to you, a W."

Y _ _ W _ L L G _ T _ H _ L L

"Can I buy a vowel?" asked Neil feeling sweat dribble down his forehead.

“Of course, Neil, go ahead.”

“O for octopus.”

Y O _ W _ L L G O T O H _ L L

“Do you have the solution?” asked the man almost exulting.

“You will go to hell.”

“Exactly, Neil, you will go to hell,” said the anchor laughing.

The anchor started approaching, and Neil, gathering all his might, broke free of the force. He backed toward the darkness, trying to get away from the anchor, but he tripped over a cable. He fell to the floor and felt a sharp pain in his wrists. He opened his eyes and found himself in the shattered living room. He saw two splinters of glass piercing through the skin on his wrists. He pulled them out and blood started streaming down. He saw the anchor walk to the screen and peek out through the hole.

“I see you, Neil,” he sang, “you can run, but you can’t hide.” His hand appeared from the hole, grabbing hold of the side of the television followed by his other hand, pulling himself out of the TV. He stuck his head out and laughed. Neil stood up and ran out of the mansion, jumping into his black Diablo. He started the car and sped away into the pine forest toward the highway.

As he turned onto the six-lane road, streams of blood flowed across the sky originating from a point just over the horizon before him, the color slowly dissolving and coloring the sky red. He heard a bang and saw great black clouds approaching, thrusting bolts to the ground. Far away, before him, a tiny dot appeared, and as he sped down the road, the spot turned into a figure of a man. Neil tried to steer away, but when he saw that it was the anchor, he steadied his direction towards him. He bent forward clutching the steering wheel. The car collided with the body that literally exploded, the body parts rolling down the hood and falling down onto the road behind him.

Neil wiped his forehead in relief and steadied his grasp on the steering wheel. He slowed down a little as the paying booths appeared. He stopped and handed the money to the man whose face was covered by the shadow cast by the shield of the baseball cap he was wearing. The man raised his head, and Neil recognized the spiky goatee.

“Surprise,” said the anchorman shaking both his hands in the air.

Neil stepped onto the pedal, shattering the red and white stripes of the bar standing in his way. In the distance he saw the bridge that led to the city. He checked the rearview mirror to see a police car chasing him.

“Stop the car, Neil, you can’t run forever,” he heard through its loudspeakers.

The bridge started rising, and Neil stepped onto the pedal, knowing that if the anchor would reach him, it would be the end. The bridge rose higher as he drove onto it, speeding upwards, trying to gain enough speed to make the jump. He saw the police car gaining speed through the rearview mirror. The end of the bridge was coming closer, from this point there was no turning back. He closed his eyes feeling his stomach rise, the car flying in the air. The vehicle rose then began to plunder down. Neil opened his eyes to see the car slanting forward and landing on its nose. It turned over, then flipped into the air, and landed upside down.

Neil crawled out of the car alive. He walked to the bank of the river and saw the police car stop on the other side. Just when he thought he was safe, he heard a rumble. A helicopter with great missiles fastened to its side was heading toward him. Smoke rose from one of the rockets, then with a hissing sound, it detached itself from the body of the helicopter and flew his way. Neil began to run down the boulevard lined by palm trees with the great storm clouds approaching from the sea. He heard a boom then a wave thrust him to the ground. He stood up to see the remains of an explosion and a great hole in the place where he stood only seconds before.

He heard the same hissing again and jumped away just in time, surviving yet another explosion. He stood up and turned around to see the helicopter flying toward him, the pilot not caring that he would crash. The palm trees swayed before the red sky as the helicopter landed and slid toward Neil on the asphalt with an earsplitting screech. Neil started running as the carcass of the helicopter was sliding toward him and jumped out of its way feeling the metal grate against his ankles. He opened his eyes to see blood dripping down from both his ankles.

Silence.

Neil saw he was not alone. A girl was standing in the middle of the road facing the other way. He hurried to her, looking at the black high heel shoes with the white socks ending just beneath her knee. She was wearing a school uniform, the pleaded skirt

barely covering her panties, her white shirt ending just beneath her scapula and exposing her back. Her pigtails emerged from the top of her head and arched away from her skull.

“I’m sorry ma’am,” he said tapping her shoulder. “Could you please help me?”

The woman turned around. She took the lollipop she was sucking out of her mouth and licked it with lust, “Sir, could you please hit me one more time.”

“I’m sorry?” asked Neil in bewilderment.

“Hit me one more time,” said the woman grabbing his arm, her face distorted with anger now. “Hit me one more time,” she screamed.

Neil shook the hand off and began to run. He looked around and saw the woman following him. The palms hissed in the wind, and the sky was turning a darker red. He saw the sea lining the road with the infuriated waves washing the shore, the menacing clouds approaching in the distance with world-ending bolts beating down onto the world. From dark alleys figures hurried out one after the other.

Soon he was followed by a neurotic top model tossing phones in his direction, by an anchorwoman dressed in an orange prison uniform, by skinny celebrities snorting coke, by directors molesting children, by a loudmouth lesbian howling his way, by a man with white skin peeling off his face and falling to the ground, by a woman with a spiky bra, by bitchy know-it-all gay fashion snobs, by bulimic child actors.

Neil ran faster than he thought he ever could, but the mob was after him and was determined to catch up. The horizon before him was dark, and he soon realized that the darkness was made up of stars closing in on him. Neil had to understand that he was trapped, surrounded by a galaxy of stars wanting to pull him down. He backed to the wall and felt a knob pressing against his back. When the mob was about to grab him, he opened the door and fell inside. The door closed with a click. The crowd, like zombies, was pressing the ones at the front against the door that opened outwards thus preventing themselves from entering this secluded room.

Neil found himself in a barbershop. He stood up and dusted his clothes off. Through the mirrors he saw his battered face panting with fear. He felt a force make him walk to a chair and sit down. Iron chains appeared from nowhere and, like snakes, slithered up

his body and laced him to the chair, making it impossible for him to move. From the darkness at the back of the shop, he heard a buzzing. The anchor stepped out from it with an electric razor in his hand.

“Off with your head,” he exclaimed, “but first there is a little hairdressing to be done.”

The man walked behind Neil who watched his every step through the mirror. The anchor grabbed his hair and pulled it backwards, making Neil face the ceiling. The cold metal of the razor touched his forehead, and as it slid down his head, his hair fell to the ground. When he was done with his hair, he continued with his beard. When he was done with that too, the anchorman disappeared for a moment. Neil was too scared to look at his reflection in the mirror as the anchor returned with a sharp metal razorblade. He pressed it against his neck.

“What are your final words, Neil?”

Neil felt the cold metal pushing against his skin, and as he gulped, his Adam’s apple slid under the blade.

“I repent, I repent for having lived an empty life.”

“Saying that you repent is one thing, but you must prove it.”

The razor pierced his neck and with a strict motion cut his throat. The pain rushed through him, and the last thing he saw was the mob of stars looking at him through the window with compassion. They didn’t want to kill him, they just wanted him to join them.

Neil opened his eyes and found himself sitting in the sofa in his underwear with the many cans surrounding him. He saw the shattered television, the fallen bookcase, the broken coffee table, and the crashed window behind him. He stood up and walked into the atrium and stopped before the entrance.

He looked around in his house and did not feel at home, as if this were the house of someone different, another person entirely. It was as if he were underwater for too long, not underwater, rather climbed too high where the air was too thin, causing a minor malfunction in his brain, only transient. Now that he fell back to the ground and was able to breathe properly, he was able to refresh the blood that brought relief to the asphyxiated cells. He had returned to his old self. Four minutes is the length one can live without oxygen. Four minutes, and it seemed to Neil three minutes and fifty-nine seconds had passed.

He headed into the kitchen, but when he walked past the mirror, he had to stop, for in the corner of his eyes, he saw another person. He faced the mirror and saw his head, a round ball, white as stone, with two eyes tingling with the purity of the stars. Neil stepped to the phone and dialed a number, then another one.

THE BURIAL

Salome's Gospel

Salome was sitting on the porch with Mary, mother of James and John, and Mary, mother of Neil. She raised the romantically decorated teacup with wild roses running around its side, and after mixing the tea with the golden spoon, she tasted the soothing earl grey that warmed her with its herbal savor. She then put it back onto the saucer that echoed the decoration on the cup with its rim swirling in different forms. She cleaned her mouth with the cloth handkerchief, lay back in the white rattan garden chair, and looked at the two women enjoying the summer sun.

They didn't say anything just bathed in the silence of a home from which the children had left. The rose bushes lining the path leading to the porch bloomed announcing the celebration of life. A squirrel appeared from under the bushes, hurried to the oak trees lining the road, and disappeared up the trunk into the green crown. A little girl rode her pink bicycle with white tires past the house, strands of pink emerging from the steering wheel and swaying in the wind. A plane flew across the sky, and its condensation line drew a heart into the air, moments later spelling out 'I love you Sally.'

The three women smiled, and their hearts broke. They were growing old, and the time of romance, passion, and undeniable pleasure were so far away in a part of life that is not revisitable because it is guarded by the mighty iron gates of time that never let anyone go back only forward toward the most desired and feared precipice of eternal rest.

"You know what I heard?" asked Salome taking another sip. Salome was the lead columnist of the greatest gossip column in the world about scorching topics and uncomfortable details, sparing no one who stepped onto the stage.

“What, Salome? What did you hear now?” asked Neil’s mother not even opening her eyes with an air of inescapable exhaustion.

“Oh, Mary, what is wrong with you?” asked Salome a little offended.

“Nothing, it’s just you and your gossips.”

“Stop it you two,” said John’s mother. “Mary, I know that you enjoy these little gossips too, just as much as anyone else. So, Salome, what did you hear?”

“I heard that when Bruce and Robin are all alone in their mansion on top of the cliff, they dress up and chase each other through the infinite rooms, wearing tights and a cape, into the dungeon where the whips, hooks, and bondages come out. The best part is that they force the butler to watch as they copulate. They say you can hear Robin’s screams of pleasures echoing in the valley.”

The other two didn’t move. Neil’s mother was lying back with her eyes closed, John’s mother was facing the many roses blooming in the world. Salome waited for their reaction of disdain.

“Oh, Salome, listen to yourself. Who told you this?” asked John’s mother

“I don’t know. Everyone.”

“They can do whatever they like as long as they don’t cause any harm to anyone,” said Neil’s mother. “Look at us three, three hens gossiping about. Life is great.” She caressed Salome’s hand asking for apology.

The telephone rang disrupting the idle afternoon. Mary, mother of Neil, gathering all her strength to shake away the motionlessness, stood up. She walked inside as the telephone rang not hesitating the slightest bit, determined to ring until someone answered.

The door with the green mosquito net closed, and Salome watched Mary’s silhouette enter the living room. The ringing stopped, and Salome heard Mary murmur. Initially she had a tone of pleasant surprise that then sank into a state of incomprehension, to sink deeper into disdain and emerge into acceptance and obedience. Salome listened as attentively as ever, desperate to know what Mary was talking about, but she couldn’t make out anything, only a conglomerate of incomprehensible whispers, shadows of words separated with the briefest pauses, turning noise into the rhythm of language.

Mary returned with an air of tactile preoccupation.

“We must leave,” she said.

“Where?” asked Salome.

“You’ll see. Hurry up you two. I’ll start the car.”

Salome looked at Mary, mother of John and James, who just shrugged and stood up adjusting her red dress and putting her high-heels on. Salome smoothed the wrinkles of her deep green dress and followed John’s mother down the porch. Neil’s mother was already sitting in her red sports car that emphasized her deep blue dress. She was administering blood-red lipstick to her full lips. The two women jumped inside, John’s mother in the front, Salome in the back. Neil’s mother put the car into reverse and rolled down onto the road. She started burning the tires on the asphalt then released the brakes, and the three women sped off leaving a streak of burning rubber on the road behind them.

They dashed through the suburbs. As they turned right, they hurried past a home where a man was kneeling before a woman, Sally most likely. Salome saw a golden ring glittering in his hand. A dog with ten balloons tied to its collar was sitting by them. She felt tears come to her eyes.

Salome had been alone all her life, sunken deep in work, proving to herself persistently that being single is great, being alone and controlling your life is the best thing that can happen to anyone. Back then she thought that being single was a blessing, only later did she realize that it doesn’t stay that way for ever. As you grow old, it turns into a curse. This, she understood too late and sentenced herself to a life of solitude knowing that she hadn’t even tried to fight it. She was glad for the young couple, but envied them as well. So, when the dog fled the scene, terrified by the roar of the sports car, taking the balloons away with him, Salome felt a drop of satisfaction in her blood.

They left the neat suburbs behind and turned onto the highway leading around the city.

“Switch the radio on,” said Salome.

A song started playing and resonated in the car. She suddenly felt the music enter her blood vessels. It was light, it was careless, it was a nothing not to be taken seriously, it was life. She felt at the edge of glory. She suddenly understood that among all her sorrow, bitterness, and loneliness she was alive, and this was something that could end any moment. Why be bitter when life is

what it is, something light and easy, something singular but transient, a gift?

“Pull the roof down, Mary, pull it down,” yelled Salome.

The roof started sliding back and disappeared into the trunk. She stood up, not caring about the distress on the faces of the two Maries. She spread her arms embracing the wind and felt it caress her, brush her, not in the way something inanimate would, but sensually like a lover, the lover she never had the chance to encounter and now finally did. The wind caressed her face, slid down her neck, past her breast, going toward her secret garden, blowing through the tropical flowers emanating a scent so sweet. She felt the pleasure burst out from between the legs and rush across her body. It wasn't only pleasure, but happiness. She started laughing and even the two Maries grinned. As she laughed, tears came streaming down her face, rolling parallel to her cheekbone and being carried away with the wind like many stars pouring out from the spring somewhere at the end of the universe where the stars are born.

Salome sat down and lay back in the beige leather seat exhausted.

“What is the matter with you?” asked John's mother turning around.

“I don't know. I think I was just carried away.”

John's mother shook her head. Salome closed her eyes and faced the sky enjoying the tickling rays of the sun. They sped past the city and over the rising bridge, arriving to the pine forest where Neil's mansion was hiding.

The car turned right, leaving the highway and entering into the pinewoods. They rolled up the gently emerging slope and took a left, leaving the main road behind, driving on a very dusty narrow road that turned into asphalt under the pines blocking the sunlight.

They drove for several minutes with the light shining through the hiatuses in the thick pine forest. Nothing survived this darkness, and amidst the evergreen sea, the ground of the woods was dead. After a curve, the golden gates appeared. The car slowed down, and Salome could see the two golden letter *N*'s on the open gates. They stopped before the mansion, and the two Maries got out followed by Salome. She saw the golden Corvette standing in the garage, its door open, parked down in haste. They hurried up the stairs into the atrium.

Neil's mother turned right and entered the living room. They stopped for a second examining the remains of the room then hurried into the next one that looked like a jungle with its many tropical plants. The wall was filled with the heads of animals, the skin of a bear served as a rug, a stuffed panther served as a table, the glass surface fastened to its back, standing right by the zebra-patterned sofa. Guns were hanging over the fireplace.

"Salome, you stay here, Mary, come with me," ordered Neil's mother.

Salome sat down on the zebra-patterned sofa and watched them leave through a glass door into the green house. As the door opened, Salome could hear water splashing and the gentle twittering of birds. She waited for several minutes in the room that seemed so improbable, so unreal, and she couldn't believe this is where the greatest star of all lived, in a megalomaniac mansion, announcing wealth without taste, so unlike his mother, everything here so primitive and mundane.

Many minutes passed, and all Salome could hear was murmurs swimming in the hypnotizing tune of splashing water combined with the chirping of birds. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath from the air around. All she could feel was death, the foul stench of finiteness. The inhabitant of these rooms was pushed into the no-man's-land running through the realm of life and death. Who did this to him?

A few moments later the two Maries returned with Neil on their side. It took time for Salome to recognize him, for he was deprived of his hair and beard. He was serene, a smile ran across his face, and Salome was relieved to see that Neil was alright. A few moments later L'One stepped into the room, her face dirtied by streams of glitter deriving from her eyes. She had turned back to her old self, not the housewife she was becoming next to Neil. Salome rejoiced knowing that her readers would be glad. As L'One left the room, Salome saw that she was at the verge of tears.

Mary stepped to Salome. "Listen here, what you saw no one must know. We ask for your help, and you will be rewarded for your silence. I'll give you a farewell letter. You will be the first to publish it, in exchange I ask you to write about Neil as if he disappeared, hinting he is dead. No matter what happens the article must be in tomorrow's number. Is it possible?"

Salome nodded.

“Please, Salome, it is imperative that no one learns about this. Do you understand?”

Salome nodded once more.

LÉne came back a few seconds later with a white cloth in each of her hands. “Please, Neil, you must cover yourself up in the car. If someone sees you, the plan will be ruined before it even started.”

Salome looked at LÉne trying to solve the puzzle of her expression that not only reflected grief but a doubt of righteousness as well. She knew that this was not the time of inquiries. Neil nodded and left as the others followed him into the kitchen. They turned right by the stove, heading into the garage.

“Oh crap, the garage door, close the garage door,” screamed Mary realizing that anyone could be lurking in the woods after Pilate had discovered this place.

Salome jumped to the door and pressed the red button. Neil dove inside the car as LÉne threw the cloth after him. The garage door slowly closed, leaving them in darkness until someone flicked the lights on. The golden Corvette with two black lines was shining under the neon lights with a menacing paleness. The two Maries and LÉne sat inside. Neil covered himself up properly in the back seat.

“Is everything alright, Mary? What are you doing?” asked Salome still intrigued by the mystery.

“I can’t tell you,” she said. “You can’t come with us. I’m sorry, please understand.”

“Of course, I do, but how will I get home, Mary?”

“Here,” she said tossing her the key. “Take my car, I’ll come for it tomorrow. Oh,” she said remembering that she had forgotten something, “take this.”

Mary reached into her pocket and handed Salome a folded piece of paper. Salome reached for it trembling as if what she was about to receive was a miniature bomb that would be able to destroy the world if detonated. Her heart rejoiced knowing that her newspaper would be the first one to publish the last words of one of the greatest icons ever.

She read the words as the garage door opened, not hearing the car rumble away, feeling unconceivable joy. As she read, she constantly had to remind herself that she was not dreaming, and what she held in her hands was a piece of news that only she knew. The fact that it was untrue did not bother her in the least

because she was used to publishing false information, quotes from unknown, non-existent friends, meddled statistics, and edited photos. She was reading the last words of Neil for all the world would know.

I have failed the world twice, and I am not going to ask for a third chance because I do not deserve it. I have lost my way and willingly but unknowingly chose the road of perdition. I realize this only now, writing my last words. My original message is just, everything coming after that you must all forget. It is not the message that was wrong, but the messenger, thus hate me and not my words. I rose too high, and now I am sinking deeper and deeper. I cannot live with this anymore. I thank you for your love. Please, try to accept my apology for having meddled with your undeserved trust. I could wait for my life to slowly go out, but remember, it's better to burn out than to fade away.

Peace, love, empathy,

Neil'

She folded the piece of paper up and placed it in her pocket then stepped outside as the garage door closed behind her. She looked around in the garden with its many statues imitating masterpieces of the past and felt herself smile as she saw the David or the fountain representing the birth of Venus. She then faced the pine trees surrounding the mansion, representing careless beauty, a masterpiece, light as air, and she couldn't stop herself from thinking that the aesthetic of humanity is so fresh and new, a little theatrical and loud, not like the aesthetic of nature.

She heard a click and saw a camera pointing at her on the face of a man feasting on fame. A black figure fell to the ground, his uniform decorated by Pilate's symbol, the dog. Pilate, Salome's greatest competition. She reached for her cell and tried to call Neil's mother, but her phone was switched off. She then called John's mother, but couldn't reach her either.

She walked toward the car deep in thought. He wasn't a bad man, only the vessel through which the greater hunger was fed. It is not because of him that humanity craves notoriety, talent, and singularity. It is because of their need that he is here.

She started the car leaving the home of the King behind, dashing through the pine forest as the sun set behind the mountains, coloring the world a menacing red.

THE LAST DAYS

NEIL'S LAST TROUBLED MONTHS – DRUGS, SEX, AND LIES; AND THEN HE DISAPPEARED

....After being released from a rehabilitation center, Neil's mask fell off, and his true self was exposed by Pilate. First his friends turned away, and only L€ne, 24-year old singer, stood by him. He began hiding from the eyes of the world and lived in exile in his mansion. Slowly, his girlfriend, L€ne, turned away as well, leaving him alone. What happened after that no one knows. Neil, 24-year-old singer, was reported to have disappeared a few days ago leaving us a farewell note which makes the story even more peculiar. The note will be published in tomorrow's number. So, sit tight.

Neil's childhood was anything but neat and quiet. From young age, he realized that he was different than the others. As he rose to being a star, many started following him, not only as a celebrity, but as a religious leader as well. It was their expectations that he could not fulfill, and the frustration caused by this may have chased him away, perhaps into suicide. Others say it was murder. During his fight against the archaic religions he made many friends but myriads of enemies as well. His growing base of supporters was a threat in the eyes of many. Of course, this is nothing but speculation, and the truth may never come out.

Neil was one of the greatest icons of our time, inspiring many. He will always be missed, and even if he is not the Messiah, he

was the leader of a movement based on love and acceptance. Neil, we love you, and you will always live in our hearts.

--SALOME

Josephine's Gospel

Josephine was sitting on the white sofa in her living room as the sprinklers were showering the summer garden. She listened to Mary's preoccupied voice as she paced back and forth before the fireplace, her every move followed by Josephine with an attentive love that needs years to evolve.

"Are you sure, Salome?"

Josephine heard the voice of Salome, a high pitch murmur of words dashing one after the other and turning into sound coming from Mary's phone.

"Are you sure he is Pilate's man...The first episode of the season will air tomorrow...Right...Ok, I'll talk to her, we must stop him before he ruins everything. Good-bye, Salome."

Mary put the phone down and looked at Josephine from across the room, her silhouette outlined by the morning sun shining through the wide open windows with the green lawn sparkling with the drops of diamonds.

"You must talk to him, Josephine, you were his wife after all," said Mary.

Two sounds coming from a violin, one higher the other lower, followed by three thrusts of the drum signaling surprise.

Josephine felt herself blush as always when this memory reemerged

"Once, but not anymore..."

"You know he can ruin everything if the truth comes out..."

"I know, I will stop him," said Josephine wishing she could run away, not because she feared the conversation, but because she would be reminded what a fool she was back then. "Do you think his plan will work? Was he sane when he planned all this?" she asked.

"I can't say. L'Éne said he was like many years before. He had that same confidence in his eyes, of this I am sure. We must trust Neil."

"Ok, ok, I'll go."

Mary sat down beside her and kissed her cheek. Josephine stood up and left, picking the keys up before she stepped out of

her home. She got into the red convertible and left Mary behind with the sensation of traveling back into the past.

Her heart was hurting so much. She lost her child long ago, the instant when he reached ultimate fame. Each day she prayed to see her son turn back to the innocent child he truly was. Now that Mary told her that he had changed, that he was his old self, she couldn't believe her, not because she doubted him, but because she knew what events would follow. She didn't want to believe Mary, hoping that this would cancel what was about to happen.

She left the suburbs behind and soon found herself in the city with the many skyscrapers rising toward the sky like volume bars dancing to the music of humanity, growing and decreasing over and over again, static buildings filled with life, thriving and boiling, giving beauty to the lifelessness of concrete, iron, and glass.

She stopped the car before the great iron statue of Atlas bearing the globe on its back and jumped out. She walked by the great figure sacrificed to uphold the world, sacrificed to suffer in order for us to live. No one should be sentenced to be sacrificed this way, no one should suffer for the sins of others. This is just a twisted logic that creates a world where the innocent are punished for the misdeeds of the sinners, and the sinners are praised for the virtue of the innocent. This type of sacrifice is meaningless, this sacrifice is evil. She left the sculpture behind and hurried into the skyscraper, its top decorated by silver moons setting one on top of the other.

The glass doors slid open, and Josephine stepped onto the softest red rug that muffled her every step in the atrium with its ceiling concealed by the darkness above. The art deco chandeliers illuminated the way, many glowing eggs with a golden ring around them fastened to golden chains descending from the sky itself. Past the many marble columns she saw busy men hurrying in all directions, chaotic but somewhat organized by an overworldly care, much greater than any human logic, an inconceivable pattern for those who are creating it, only recognizable from the top of the clouds. Through the great windows lining both sides of the hall, light shone through and was reflected by the perfectly clean black marble floor.

She headed toward the two elevator doors, each bearing a painting, one representing a woman, the other a man, both nude

and reaching for the lonely apple on the tree that was carved into the marble between the two doors, rising into the sky with its crown giving shade to the two figures. She heard a ting as the left door slid open, and she stepped in. The door closed and the elevator rose into the sky as Handel's *Hallelujah* embraced her and made her wish this trip would never end, or if it would, then at least it would stop on top of the clouds with the golden gates of heaven sparkling in the distance.

The elevator door opened, and she walked to the secretary sitting behind his mahogany desk. He was a thin and very feminine man. His pink shirt emphasized the red make-up on his cheeks. He was wearing lip gloss which made Josephine even more uncomfortable. The bandage running around his head and the bruises and hematomas decorating his face made Josephine think that this poor man had been kicked out of a car.

The man didn't care to look up, deeply immersed in a work far more important than to be disturbed by anyone. The sphere-like opaque glass of the lamp on his desk shone onto the white paper waiting to be filled with words.

Josephine cleared her throat, but the secretary pretended not to notice. When he was done with the letter he was writing, he folded it and placed it into an envelope. He reached for a candle, lit it, and waited for the wax to drip down onto the envelope, sealing it with the golden stamp lying on his desk, waiting for the molten wax to consolidate and give out the form of a dog the color of blood. The secretary reached for the little bell and rang it. An invisible door opened, and a boy made haste to the secretary who gave him the letter. The messenger hurried away disappearing into the orifice in the wall that closed a few seconds later.

The secretary finally raised his head, and his glasses reflected the light. He pushed them back up his nose.

"How can I help you?" he asked with the unpleasant voice of a vulture's screech.

"I would like to meet Pilate."

"And you are?"

"Josephine..."

The secretary examined Josephine with a dubious expression, not being able to decide whether the woman standing before him was someone important or just a lunatic. He looked into her eyes and understood by the stern look that she was the previous one.

"And what should I tell him?"

“Tell him, that Josephine is here.”

He pressed a red button and bent closer to the microphone.

“What is it?” asked Pilate with a tone of frustration.

“A Josephine is here to meet you...”

“Who? Oh. Tell her to wait.”

With a click, silence returned.

“Please have a seat,” said the secretary pointing to the two sofas by the window.

Josephine walked to the window and looked down on the bustling city below. Standing at the top floor of the tallest building, she saw the city distend toward the ocean. In the distance she saw the silhouette of a great woman with her torch of iron that gave no light, only a decoration, not actually showing the way to anyone, just giving the false impression of fire.

The port was busy with great ships arriving and leaving toward destinations unknown. She saw the many men and women bustling in all directions like millions of tiny ants. As she stood there following their movements, she felt a greater presence looking down on her. She felt comfort and suddenly understood something.

She may lose her son, but they will meet again soon and will be together until the end of time. It really doesn't matter when Neil leaves the world compared to the infinity that was awaiting them. And if God doesn't exist? It still doesn't matter, for she'll live with the knowledge that he does, and even in the last second, she will be happy, knowing that heaven awaits her. When she realizes that there is nothing on the other side, it won't matter anymore because her spirit won't be able to conceive it.

“Pilate is ready...” she heard from behind. Josephine took a deep breath, turned around, and entered, nodding to the secretary.

She closed the great door behind her and stopped in the immense office. Behind Pilate's desk, the vast windows faced the city. The armchair was facing away from her. By the great mahogany desk, two huge elephant trunks emerged from the black marble floor, before it there were two leather sofas. She stepped onto the buffalo skin carpet and walked to the desk waiting for Pilate to notice her. There was no other furniture in the room, and her steps echoed in this great cave on top of the city.

The chair turned around on its axis bearing Pilate. His smile was the same, friendly but poisonous. He seemed like a vampire ready to feast on its prey whenever he gets hungry. Not so orange as in the television, rather pale white. Josephine tried to smile, but she knew that her smile was more of a grin of disgust than anything else. A huge silver Persian cat was purring away in his lap. Its leather collar with the many silver spikes shined, and she noticed that Pilate was wearing a leather glove on his right hand that appeared now and then as it glided through the thick fur of the cat.

“Well, well, well. Look what the cat brought in.”

“Hello, Pilate.”

“Please, do sit down, my dear wife. I would like to stand up and greet you, but I am afraid Whiskers would wake up. We don’t want this tiny little pudgy cat to wake up, do we?”

Josephine obeyed and sat down into the leather seat, noticing how much smaller and lower it was compared to the one in which Pilate was sitting. He looked so much bigger than she was, but she knew that this was nothing but an illusion, a trick played by the lesser, the wizard of Oz sitting in this cave at the top of the world.

“No, Pilate, we wouldn’t want that. What happened to your hand?”

“Oh, this?” he asked grinning to himself. “It’s nothing, just a prop to intimidate my guests.”

“You really did like to be the homosexual nemesis type. Isn’t it strange we were married long ago?”

“Oh, how stupid we were, fearing our parents and entering into our marriage thinking that our sexual orientation was a perversion we had to hide...The world has seen crazier things than this, still...it was quite a demented idea,” he said then laughed in a manner only the insane can. At the beginning it came from deep down his lungs, its pitch growing higher and higher ending in a cackle of a jackal.

“Do you want something to drink?”

“Water would be great.”

Pilate leaned forward, pressed a red button, and spoke into the microphone.

“Could you please send in some water and a strawberry milkshake for me?”

“Yes, sir,” said the voice of the secretary through the speaker.

Pilate lay back in his leather throne and gave Josephine his usual sardonic grin.

“So, Josephine, long time no see. What happened to you in all these years?”

“Nothing.”

“That’s not much, is it?” he asked caressing Whiskers. “Oh, the drinks are here, come little doggy.”

Josephine looked the way Pilate was talking and couldn’t believe her eyes. A young man came in from a flap door in the marble wall. He wasn’t wearing any traditional clothes, but he wasn’t naked either. He came in on all fours and was wearing leather paws on his hands and feet. Fastened to his face was a leather muzzle, its straps uniting at the top of his head and forming two leather ears. As he walked closer, Josephine saw that his genitals were forced into a tiny pouch with a great golden lock on it. Fastened to its back was a golden platter with a cup of water and a milkshake. The young man stopped, and Josephine reached for her cup. As the man approached Pilate, she saw that he had a butt plug ending in a leather tale. The man stopped before Pilate who reached for his milkshake.

“Who’s a good dog? Sit, Snoopy, sit.” The man sat down, and Pilate patted his head. Whiskers opened her eyes and sat up glaring at the man-dog. She walked to the edge of Pilate’s knees and scratched the man’s face with its sharp claws, blood dripping from his wound.

“Now look what you did. Bad doggy, bad. Get the hell out of here.”

The dog stood up and left.

“Is this truly necessary, Pilate?”

“Oh, Josephine, he is not a hostage or anything, he can leave whenever he likes, this is what turns him on. He is twenty-four, let him decide what he likes. Isn’t this what Neil wanted to teach the world? That no one has committed sin until they harm another person or themselves.”

Josephine heard his words but somehow couldn’t understand them because of the shock caused by what she witnessed. This expression was probably visible on her face as Pilate said, “Oh, Josephine, after all you’ve been through you’re still intolerant. Is it so hard to understand that normality has millions of faces, is it?”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Now, what should I do with you, Whiskers?”

Pilate bent forward and pressed another button. Josephine heard another door open. She saw a mouse run out of the wall. Whiskers jumped down and carefully approached its prey, moving close to the ground. When Whiskers was close enough, she leaped, but the mouse fled just in time, and a never-ending chase began fed by an ancient dispute never to be forgotten. Neither of them knew what they fought about, still, the blind hate compelled the cat to chase the mouse.

“Why have you come, my sweet Josephine?”

“You know why I am here for.”

Pilate gave a silent giggle, then turned toward the city, and continued without looking at her. “This is not so simple.”

“What do you want Pilate? What can I give you in exchange?”

“News. I really don’t care what you give me as long as it has more value than these photos.”

“There is nothing I can give you. Why must you be so evil, Pilate? What if you would be good, just for once?”

Pilate smirked once more and turned toward his desk, fixating at a tiny pink pill lying on his table.

“It’s not as easy as that, Josephine, nothing is black and white. In fact there is no black and white only grey, the indifferent, plain, and simple grey.”

Pilate reached for the pill and threw it in his mouth, taking a sip of milkshake to wash it down.

“What is that, Pilate?”

“Oh, it’s nothing, just something to broaden my mind a little.”

Pilate leaned over his desk and pressed yet another button. Josephine bent forward, for she had to see how many more buttons were there to press. This was the last one, and she was relieved because she couldn’t bear these unpleasant surprises.

She heard a deep rumble, and the wall at the right began to shake and sink into the ground revealing hundreds of screens placed neatly one next to the other, forming newer and newer lines of muted monitors, each screen showing something different. The last line appeared, and the wall disappeared into the ground completely. Pilate reached for a diamond encrusted golden remote control and pressed a button on it making the screens roar. All Josephine could hear were words, a nauseating vomit of syllables, an incomprehensible river of chaos. Pilate

stood up and walked to the screens facing them. Occasionally he would turn his head as if he could make out order in the insanity.

“Come here, Josephine.”

Josephine obeyed and walked to the roaring wall.

“Look at the numbers beneath each screen.”

Josephine stepped closer and saw the many numbers increasing and decreasing every second as if they were alive. “What are they?”

“Each screen shows the most important channels and the numbers beneath the screen their popularity. Many families volunteered to be part of the program, and with the equipment in their houses, they can express their grade of entertainment with numbers. Each time they see something they like, they give it more points, and if something bores them, they give it less. The numbers change according to the show’s popularity.”

“But how can you follow all these numbers?”

“You have to open your mind, Josephine. By the way this is my job, to react to the need of people. Don’t look at me as if I were evil because I am not. I am just their vessel that gives them what they want, what they crave. I couldn’t care less whether it is life, death, torture, sex, love, beautiful or horrible.”

“And what do they want to see now?”

“The need of the present evolved from the past, the star culture is stronger than ever, but it shifted from being innocent to something darker. Long ago they wanted to see them rise into the sky, they wanted to see gods that prove that life is not so ordinary, but not anymore, this is not enough, they want more. They want to see the downfall, the fraud, they want to destroy the cult and drag the stars back to earth.”

“Is this all they want to see?” asked Josephine intrigued. She lay back in her leather seat actually enjoying the conversation.

“Of course not. I told you it is not that simple. It’s just an emerging current, nothing more.”

“But who destroys them? The viewers?”

“Only partially.”

“But how?”

“They turn away. Look, look, look. Think of the stars as scuba divers. When someone holds down their oxygen tube they start suffocating and are capable of anything to achieve your compassion so that you let them breathe.”

“So, basically, you are saying that the audience is the embodied sadistic evil?”

“No, no, no. Not at all. They won’t hold down the tube unless they have a reason to. This is why these pictures are so valuable to me. The proof that he is alive is one of the greatest news in the world, never heard before, uncovering a fraud that made them look stupid. If I give them the admission to kill, they will cling onto me because they can calm their conscience knowing that it wasn’t them who threw the first stone. This way I get what I want, ultimate notoriety.”

“But how do you give them the permission to kill?”

“By showing them that even the stars are human, faulty and mortal. I don’t have to even lie. Only the amateurs lie, I don’t. Fraud cannot be destroyed with fraud, only by the truth. I can lie about the stars but why should I when all I need to do is expose their lies? They fall, and I sparkle with virtue. Pilate the avenger of justice. It is not I who destroy them. I just give the screen that shows it. What is predestined to come down will come down, whether there is a lens or not.”

“So you say that both the viewers and you are innocent and sinful at the same time?”

“Well, basically yes. The only victims are the stars themselves who don’t have the luxury of privacy, don’t have the luxury to be humans. If I may speak in our defense don’t think of me as a butcher that gives the audience blood because this is what they crave because I can give many things apart from massacre if this is what the audience wants. And now we arrive to the one thing that can be more valuable than these photos...”

“Which is?”

“Oh, Josephine, just think a little. What do people want to see even more than the downfall of the chosen one. What gives the people hope?”

“If they rise...”

“Exactly. Is he coming back, Josephine?”

Josephine nodded. “This is what Mary says at least. I can’t say, I wasn’t there, but this must remain a secret.”

“And it will, I won’t publish the pictures if you promise that the first interview with him after he returns will be on my show...”

“Thank you, Pilate, thank you, I knew you were a good man.”

“Wait, wait, wait, hear me out. I’ll postpone the first episode. If he doesn’t come back by next week, I am sorry, but I must make a living as well.”

Josephine looked down and smiled. “Of course, should I sign something?” she asked bluffing.

“Josephine, don’t be silly, we are friends...”

Pilate returned to the table and sat back in his great leather seat. Josephine faced the screens one last time then approached the desk. Pilate searched in his drawer and tossed the pictures and the negatives onto the table. Josephine picked them up and observed them.

“Tell him to hurry. You know what they say,” warned her Pilate, “if you are dead for too long, you are dead definitely, if he hides for too long, no one will care...”

Josephine nodded. “I have to leave, Pilate...”

“Already? Don’t you want to see the artificial pond at the top of the building? It represents Dante’s fifth circle with many bodies contorting in agony at the bottom of the pool, it is truly exclusive.”

“I’d love to, Pilate, but I really must leave now.”

“It was nice seeing you...”

Josephine turned around and left. As she opened the door, she saw Whiskers playing with the corpse of the mouse, throwing it up into the air and making it fall into her mouth. She swallowed it with a prolonged gulp, and Josephine could swear that Whiskers winked, *tink*, with her dead-blue eyes.

She hurried past the secretary who was now polishing his nails. She could feel his eyes upon her as she stepped into the elevator and began with her descent in the soothing music embracing her once more. She walked down the main hall with the marble pillars on both her sides and stepped out into the sunlight.

She jumped into the red convertible and dashed through the city, leaving the many skyscrapers behind being replaced by the great oaks of the suburbs. Her heart felt lighter knowing that she was heading home to Mary, furthering herself from the intricate world where nothing was simple, and everything was so much different than its true self that it was the same through an incomprehensible contorted logic that departed from a point and returned back to the same point after an immense but futile journey through infinity.

LÉne's Gospel

LÉne opened her eyes to see she was in Neil's childhood room. She examined the posters hanging on the wall, stars long forgotten, people belonging to an era long lost, sparkling only for a few years in contrast to the life of humanity and falling into oblivion, remembered by fewer and fewer as the generation dies one by one.

She turned in her bed and noticed the corner of a newspaper. It was early, so she reached for it to see it was a *Pentgirl*. She opened it and started flipping through the pictures and felt uncomfortable seeing the pubic hair of the women growing unopposed, not trimmed or completely shaven. She just couldn't understand how anyone could find it attractive, yet here it was, used by Neil many a time during his youth. She looked at the clothes some of them were wearing, fashion so distasteful, so vivid, the colors fighting one against the other, lacking harmony. Fashion, it comes and goes, leaving no trace only to be resurrected in a few decades so that it can die again. Just like someone killed and revived over and over again, a punishment too harsh for anyone.

Everything in human life is transient, people and fashions are remembered for hundreds of years, some even for thousands, but will they be remembered in a million of years? Will anyone remember the Updikes, the Bret Easton Ellises, the Márquezes, the Ayn Rands, the Händels, the Wagners, the Strausses, the Dvořáks, the Disneys, the Bergmans, the Fellinis, the Lynches, the Madonnas, the Michael Jacksons, the Britney Spearses, the Nirvanas, the Queens, the Lady Dadas, and the Crucifixion Reloadeds? If humanity survives for that long, all this chaos will be immortalized in artifacts which children will look at with awe mixed with fear, belonging to a world so barbaric and out of date. The technical achievements, the music genres that now rock the world, everything will seem banal, comic, and primitive.

Here she was with Neil, the meaning of her life hidden beneath the ground, separated by a slab of stone, only a few feet away yet so far. The past two days they just visited his tomb, idling there for a few seconds then leaving as if there was nothing else to do. All she wanted was a last glimpse, to see him one last time. Neil was on the road predestined to him thanks to LÉne and the rest of

his friends who had the courage to turn away. They made him step back onto his road making them, in a way, murderers.

“L€ne, we are leaving,” she heard from downstairs.

She realized that the clock by Neil’s old bed was not working properly, so she jumped up and quickly searched between Neil’s old shirts until she found one resembling the flag with stripes and stars. She quickly put it on and cut off one of its sleeves and shoulder part, making it fall down one of her arms, unveiling her tender shoulder. She put on her shorts and jumped into her cowboy boots. She went into the bathroom and cleaned her mouth with a cup of whiskey just like his grandfather did every morning then hurried downstairs.

“Have you overslept, L€ne? Your hair’s a mess.”

L€ne looked in the mirror, shrugged. “Just the way I like it.”

They hurried to the car, jumped in, and rocketed off toward the graveyard. The suburban houses flowed by them one after the other. A group of women was gossiping. The red-head looked at the sports car with disdain, the growl of the motor disrupting the fake illusion of calmness. The group of women seemed young, but through their eyes, L€ne saw that they were tired, tired of the fight against aging and wanted to give up, but something didn’t let them, as if they had signed a contract demanding them to stay young forever, or at least until the show is on. The neat houses slowly gave place to the woods.

The car took a right and headed up a gravel road leading through the black iron gate guarding the dead as if people were scared that the corpses would awaken and dance into the city attacking anyone who, unlike them, was alive. Between the many marble graves, the grass was ever so green, healthy, feeding on the decaying corpses. Dandelions decorated the green grass here and there, yellow stars in the galaxy of green. The great trees protected the road from the blazing daylight. The graveyard was empty, yet L€ne did not feel alone and felt the presence of the dead waiting in patience for her to join them. Shivers ran up and down her back as she vowed that she would not join them, somehow she would outwit them. Somehow.

The car slowed down and came to a halt. Mary and L€ne jumped out with a basket filled with flowers. They walked up the winding gravel path toward the top of the hill. Neil’s mausoleum appeared, surrounded by the dead who cannot speak, cannot reach the media, the live one that is. L€ne thought of the

newspapers of the underworld with the headline 'Neil has come to visit us'. She thought about the corpses standing in line before a great table where Neil signed their rotting pieces of paper that disintegrated into dust if touched too harshly.

The gravel path rose and led around the mausoleum to the front facing the valley. Mary was leading the way, and L€ne saw her freeze. When L€ne arrived to the front, she stopped as well, the basket falling to the ground, the bread, the milk, and the ham hidden under the flowers rolling away. L€ne saw that the marble slab was moved to the side and the mausoleum was empty.

L€ne went inside and felt the suffocating smell of finiteness. In the corner of the block she saw something sparkling, the white linen. She picked it up and hurried outside giving it to Mary who took it by the two corners and left the cloth to fall, pulled to the ground by its own weight. A face appeared on it, Neil's face, the dust giving out its contours.

"Where is the other cloth?" asked Mary.

"There was only this one, he must have taken it away with him."

They smiled at each other because he was back, his determination was not an illusion, he truly repented and was out to make up for everything he screwed up, delivering a message of hope and not only empty words. Their eyes began to sparkle as the mother and the spouse understood that this was the end, he was leaving and nothing was more important to him. L€ne felt the world crumble around her and feared it would collapse right on top of her head.

Cleopas' Gospel

Cleopas and Anonymous were walking down the street past the carcass of a car withheld by bricks in the setting sun in the periphery of the city. A bunch of bums were standing before a can with flames emerging from it, gently braising rats floating over the heat with the help of sticks pierced right through their anuses and coming out of their mouths.

In a dark alley a silver cat shrieked and fled the scene followed by anorexic dogs, their eyes burning red. In the basketball court, youngsters were playing, hip-hop rising from the huge stereo standing at the side. The ghost of a boy with gentle hazel eyes and

bruises running across his face was watching them play, grasping the metal wires of the fence.

They walked past the decadent mall. Prostitutes were pacing the road, hurrying to the cars stopping by the red light, bending into the vehicle, the upholding of their stockings appearing under the piece of cloth they call skirts. A huge black transvestite was smoking a cigarette, the smoke rising from his mouth like from a stove bearing the forgotten Thanksgiving turkey slowly turning into charcoal.

The playground stood empty, the swings fallen to the side. On the other side of the road an old lady with purple hair was hurrying home, carrying a golden cage with a pigeon in one hand and balancing a ball of strawberry ice cream on a cone in the other. Inside an alley, hidden by the shadows, Cleopas saw a dark figure smoking a cigar. They hurried by a beggar talking to himself.

“Fifteen letters and one solution. The grand prize is one million dollars. Do you have the answer?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know, don’t know, don’t know, don’t...know...don’t.”

It was getting dark, and they were hurrying home before the night fell on them, far too dangerous to stay outside this time of day. A moth flew their way and Cleopas dodged it.

“Do you think he is really dead?” asked Cleopas throwing down the butt of a cigarette and trying to step on it. Instead of stepping on it he almost lost balance and tried to regain it as if nothing had happened.

“Who?” asked Anonymous, doing as if he hadn’t noticed a thing.

“Neil.”

“This’s what everyone says except for the police. They didn’t find the body, so, technically, he’s just lost,” said Anonymous.

“I know, I know, but what do you think?”

“Who knows, maybe. Maybe he just had enough and fled to the island where Elvis Presley, James Dean, Michael Jackson, and Amy Winehouse are having the time of their lives.”

“I really love talking to you,” said Cleopas sarcastically.

Anonymous smirked and rubbed his shoulder to Cleopas in apology. They walked down the abandoned road with sirens moaning in the distance.

“Have you been to the Electronic Chapel?” asked Cleopas.

“Once, a long time ago.”

“And what did you find?”

“Nothing.”

They walked down the road, the red clinker bricks of their building radiating a few blocks away, when a figure staggered out of a dark alley. He was wearing a white sheet thrown around him like a cape and forming a hood, his face concealed by its shadow, a figure like death himself, yet there was nothing death-like about him. He was the opposite, he was like the angel of life. The figure fell onto his knees then collapsed onto the pavement, clearly exhausted.

Cleopas and Anonymous hurried to the man and tried to pull him up, but the man was not with them. He tried to break free, and as he squirmed in the grasp of their hands, his cape fell back revealing a bald head. They looked into his cloudy eyes that seemed familiar, yet they did not recognize him.

“What do we do, Anonymous?”

“We cannot leave him outside. If the gangs raiding the city spare him, the dogs will most likely tear him apart.”

“We cannot take him home, what if he is a murderer or a lunatic?”

“Him? He cannot do us any harm. Something tells me we must save him,” said Anonymous.

“You are right,” said Cleopas remembering words he heard so long ago. “It would be wrong to leave him here.”

They pulled the body up and placed the burden onto their shoulders, the man’s arms embracing them as a drunkard does with his friends. They pulled him down the road and up the stairs of their building.

The front door opened, and a rat scurried out. The foul stench emanating from the wall struck them as new every time. The wallpaper was peeling off here and there, and through the cracks, cockroaches hurried away. They pulled the man up the stairs and down the narrow, mildly lit corridor. They passed a closed door and heard a baby cry, a woman screaming for help, and a man roaring with rage.

They stopped by their door, and Cleopas fiddled in his pockets until he found the keys and opened the door. He switched the lights on, and the neon tubes flashed for a second then gently enlightened the room. The only piece of furniture in the decaying room was a green sofa with the sponge appearing through the

hiatus of the musty, green cloth. They placed the body down on it. Anonymous stepped to the TV lying on bricks and switched it on, its sound filling the room.

The man groaned and waved toward the set, so Cleopas thought it was better to switch it off. The room went silent. The man looked around and was conscious for the first time.

“Water,” he whispered and Cleopas obeyed, jumping to the kitchen and reaching into the cupboard that was missing its door, grabbing an opaque glass and bringing him the water.

The man drank it up with a single sip and asked for another one and another one. After he was done with his third cup, he took a deep breath. “Give me a cigarette.”

“Are you sure?”

“It’s a bad habit I could never shed properly. Just give me one.”

Cleopas threw him the box. The man took out a strand and lit it. He closed his eyes and lay back in the sofa as if he were just after the greatest sex act in his life. The paper and tobacco turned into smoke, gradually morphing into a butt at the bottom of the can of beer serving as an ashtray.

“Do you have anything to eat?” asked the man staring at the blank screen of the television set.

“We have chips if that’s fine with you,” said Cleopas a little ashamed.

The man nodded and he tossed him a bag. The man opened it, throwing the flakes into his mouth one after the other. When he was done, he crumpled up the bag. Anonymous sat on the windowsill smiling to himself.

“Why did you save me?” asked the man.

“I don’t know,” said Cleopas. “Anonymous said it would be a good idea.”

“What do you want from me?”

Cleopas scratched his head knowing that he should be offended, yet he wasn’t. “Nothing,” he said cheerfully.

“Why did you save me?” asked the man again.

“I don’t know, you needed help.”

“You are lying.”

“Look, Sir, if you don’t want to believe us, the door is open, you may leave. Someone said that hurting another being that means no harm to any other is unjust. Leaving you there on the road is equal to hurting you.”

“But how did you know I meant you no harm?”

Cleopas shook his head and clapped. "Faith, I guess, faith that humanity is good and only few are evil. If you decide to murder us, so be it, but I have faith in you."

Anonymous laughed at how syrupy Cleopas could be, and Cleopas saw his eyes sparkling in an affection much stronger than love.

"In me?" asked the man, marveling at the words he just heard.

Cleopas looked into his clear blue eyes. "Oh, my God, it's you..." he said stepping to the man to kneel down to kiss his feet, his shoes portraying great holes through which the bruises of his skin winked through. "What happened to you?" he asked still kneeling.

"It's been a long road trying not to be seen or recognized," answered Neil.

"Where are you going?"

"To reunite the *Crucifixion Reloaded* one last time."

"Oh my God, oh my God, this is incredible. You are my hero. Please, please will you sign your album for me?"

Cleopas hurried into his bedroom with a single mattress before the shattered windows and reached under it for the album, the only one he ever bought, then hurried back to the living room, handing it to Neil along with a pen. Neil signed it.

"I am really tired," he said. "I need some rest. Please don't tell anyone you saw me. No one," pleaded Neil.

"Of course, of course, the bathroom is right there across the room."

"I am too tired to stand up." Neil lay across the sofa closing his eyes, using the white cloth as a blanket. He fell asleep as Anonymous and Cleopas tip-toed to their room, shutting their door silently.

"Oh my God, it's him," said Cleopas marveling at Neil's signature.

"Don't be silly, Cleopas, he is just a bum and nothing more."

"I recognized his hair, the hair I loved so much, and his beard."

"What hair, Cleopas, he was completely bald?"

Cleopas looked at Anonymous, and by his expression, he could tell he wasn't joking, but still Cleopas saw the hair and beard, he saw it on his head and face. He lay down hoping it was him, believing it was him, knowing that when they would wake up the next day, he would be gone.

James' Gospel

James opened the door, making the bell signaling the arrival of a new customer ring, and stepped into the dark and dusty fish shop followed by Peter, Matthew, John, and Philipp. It was dark inside, the shades were let down, and the light only entered through the open door. The tiles on the floor were missing here and there, the cashier was empty and silent, asleep for so many years.

James stepped to the counter remembering the many summers they had spent here with John, working for their pocket money when they were children. He ran his finger on the smooth surface then looked at the finger turned black by the dust, specks of the dead always settling down, fought against it by the living, trying to rid the world from the proof of decay unsuccessfully, until the living give in, and they too, turn to dust.

“So here we are,” said James to the others standing in the center of the room just looking around in the darkness of the shop, doubting that reopening the fish shop was a good idea, scared to say it out loud not knowing what to do as an alternative. All of them played along.

“Let’s see what the situation is in the back,” said James trying to switch the lights on, the click of the switch not followed by light. They took their cellphones out of their pockets and made way toward the back, archeologists in a tomb long forgotten, a tomb waiting to be rediscovered, waiting to be reopened.

James walked to the fuse box and switched it up. The neon lights blinked a few times before turning on completely, casting their dead light onto the visitors. The refrigerators began humming like priests of a sect. The radio at the front started pouring the music out of it. They opened the refrigerators one after the other. Empty.

“How much money do we have, Philipp?”

“Not much I’m afraid, not much. After we paid the producers and all of the fines for not releasing our second album, we either renovate the shop or buy fish to fill up the stock. If we buy fish, we won’t be able to sell it because no one will step in here, not after the sterile cleanliness of the malls, but if we renovate, when we open, we won’t have anything to sell.”

“What do we do?” asked John, pulling up the shades and letting the sunshine in, a light too weak to revive the dead.

“Fuck,” said Peter.

Ting, ting.

They heard the bell ringing and looked at each other in question. Peter shrugged and hurried with the others to the front of the shop where Queen’s *Don’t stop me now* was filling the room. A figure was standing in the dimness, the neon light reflected by the bald head of the visitor. He was a bum speaking to his feet.

“Do you have any fish?” asked the visitor

“Excuse me?” said Peter fiddling with his hands.

“Do you have any fish?”

“No,” said John losing his temper.

“Then check again.”

They all froze with a hope of recognition, afraid to move, fearing the presence would disappear along with the feeling that maybe they were not alone. Peter was the first to break the composition and walk to the back in silence. They heard the freezer open, giving out a sound similar to when a grandmother kisses her niece. “Mwaah,” they heard.

“Guys... you *must* see this.”

They all ran to Peter to see the refrigerator filled with fish. They jumped to the other refrigerators in turn, opening them up, all of them filled to the brim. They looked at each other and started laughing, not because their material problems had been solved, but because he was back.

They walked back to the front of the shop, and the bum was gone and gave place to a man of godly posture, of divine bearing, his hair falling toward the ground, untamed and free, the beard manly and strong. He raised his head and his light-blue eyes pierced the dimness of death. Light burst through the entrance creating the impression of an aura embracing the figure. The manifestation of God.

It made them kneel to the ground, on the missing tiles of the fish shop, its simplicity forgotten and changed by the emanation of this figure, making them feel as if they were standing in a golden throne room on top of the clouds.

A shadow covered the light.

“Guys, guys, I found someone who is willing to buy all your instruments for a few hundred dollars...” said Thomas stepping into the shop, stopping at the threshold to look at them kneeling before this man. He faced the bald man standing in the entrance

then turned toward the others once again. “What the hell are you doing?”

“You will need your instruments one last time...” said Neil.

“And who the hell are you...?”

“It’s him, Thomas, it’s Neil...” said Peter

“Who, this bum? What are you on? Shrooms?”

“It is him, you dumbass,” said John.

Thomas stepped to Neil and looked at him closely. He raised his hand and put it onto his cheek and stared deeply into his eyes then staggered back in surprise.

“It is him...” he said in awe.

“Doubting Thomas,” said Peter and they all started laughing knowing that as a child he was always taunted with this name.

“Fuck, I *am* Doubting Thomas, I should’ve known better.”

“Stand up everyone,” said Neil. They all obeyed. “I’m back, there is no use for me to apologize because it would be nothing but a group of words, words that must be filled not with abstract meaning but with actions.”

“What are we going to do now?” asked Peter.

“One last show, a show that will blow everyone’s mind, the grand slam, the greatest finale mankind has ever seen. The ultimate form of entertainment that will not be topped by anyone for thousands of years to come. A message of hope. Perfection.”

They looked at each other and nodded. Unable to restrain their joy, turning back into adolescents, they hugged each other and laughed, pure laughter deriving from the cleanest recognition that we are not alone.

THE ASCENSION

Pilate's Gospel

Pilate lay back and closed his eyes. The final of the Cross-factor had finally come and a long, painful path was coming to an end. He knew that in all they did a good job, and the most talented two are competing to step into the mirage of immortality.

What made Pilate restless was the fact that even he did not know who the special guest was. He was not only restless but a little let down as well because only now did he understand that he was nothing more than a prop, his importance defined by the role he fulfills in the hands of others. Pilate was not allowed to take a look behind the scenes, and this made him realize the frailty of his omnipotence. His edginess disappeared, giving place to melancholy.

Neil was gone, and he knew that it was partially because of him. The media and the crowd form each other and create an entity, its will made of the desires and repulsions of its components. This entity is composed by many vectors pointing into different directions adding up and steering the river from within. It is not an entity with a conscience, it is not a living being, it's an amorphous river that drowns some of its victims while makes others surface only to disappear once more for eternity or just provisionally.

He felt remorse grow in him because of what he did to Neil, but it was too late now, what was done was done, and all he could do now was to obey the will of the people and drift down the river like a piece of wood hoping that the river would be merciful to

him just a little bit more, just enough to gather more money and be able to live happily until the end of his time.

He wanted to leave the city and live on a farm, but he was afraid of the nothingness that would await him when he achieves his ultimate goal. He smiled as he remembered the first time he decided to gather a little more money and stop. He couldn't stop even if he knew very well that he was rich beyond imagining. Something wouldn't let him. It was fear, fear of an empty life that was followed by nothing but death.

He opened his eyes and examined the rest of the jury sitting next to him. Eve placed her chin onto her arms lying on the table, listening to the anchor's endless litanies. Her neo-Greek profile reminded Pilate of the classical beauty of Venus, the beauty that cannot be grasped and cannot be tackier, the aesthetical exclamation of beautiful boredom, plain perfection, a neutral surface that reflects all looks and fails to hold them lacking any type of tension. Her hazel hair flowed down onto her shoulder, and in her expression Pilate saw nostalgia, saw her realization that time slips away no matter how hard you grasp onto it. She was one of the contestants long ago, but so many things happened since then, and she wished to be in the finalists place again. She knew by experience that the fake stardom they give you here lasts for a few months then you are lost and gradually forgotten if you don't begin your pedaling to stay up on the surface, to be visible just a little bit more.

Next to Eve, Pilate saw Adam, the sole proprietor of the franchise, the man who gives the world fading stars, and with this, he is absolutely satisfied. He lay back in the leather seat with the air of confidence and ownership. In this studio he was the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and end and everything in-between.

They are the jury, and as the fourth, there is the will of the people that of course is biased. Through faint hints of words, the secret portrayal of the camera, they choose as freely as puppets in a show. This is not manipulation, it is just showing them the best merchandise, the one that can be sold, the one that can be led, the one that can be made to be reborn over and over again, to sell again and again until the flow of money dries out, and they are thrown away like a used handkerchief.

The shiny floor of the stage reflected the many spotlights from above. The futuristic interior seemed progressive, reminding

everyone of the past scenes of sci-fi movies, not resembling the future but the past. Nothing new, everything seen already, offering comfort to the older generation and the younger one as well, giving them a false certainty that nothing will change, no one has to adapt, rocking them into an awoken sleep of calmness.

The anchors stood in the center of the stage, looking young and alive, not too young, around their thirties, reachable to everyone. The woman was attractive, not like the otherworldly Eve, rather like the available girl next door. She had a maternal bearing that appealed to everyone, warming even the coldest heart. The man's charm hypnotized the women, his humor reached the men, and everyone was satisfied.

Both finalists are talented, not in a revolutionizing way. Their average superiority is what the audience wants, nothing too new, and nothing that makes them want to think critically of the world. They want someone that is not like them, someone that they can raise into the sky until the envy makes them want to drag them down and drown them into the mud. Hope, envy, hope, and envy until the end of time. The audience wants to have fun, nothing more, and everything in the show is fun, perfect fun, perfect fame, perfect world, perfect mediocrity.

“And now, ladies and gentleman, the time has come,” said the male anchor with a tone of excitement making his voice flicker. “You can vote for the two finalists for a little more time, call the phone numbers, send them text messages, make their dreams come true.”

The male anchor faced the female anchor who continued, “Yes, every single vote can change their fate, maybe it will be your single vote that will decide all. Think of how much they worked to entertain you all these weeks, a vote is not much. So call, call, call...”

“...and text, text, text. Now it's time for our special guest to arrive. I can reassure you that you are in for a treat,” said the man winking. “What you are to witness now, many will think is a miracle, and it is in a way. You chose our channel, and we will reward you with something no other channel can give you. Lie back in your seats and witness the wonder.”

The two anchors left the stage, and Pilate did as he was told, lie back in the comfortable leather chair. He could not deny that he was just as excited as anybody else.

The lights were switched off, and the studio was bathing in impenetrable darkness. Everybody was facing the great screen waiting for the introduction. A deep cello started playing a monotone tune piercing through the black room, embracing everyone and lifting them up higher and higher. Stars appeared on the screen, and everybody started flying through space as the stars sped by faster and faster. The cello was accompanied now by violins trembling in fear. The audience was speeding through space when the first words appeared, and a baritone voice read them, the voice echoing, defeating the instruments and sending chills up and down the spines of the men and women expecting something that would blow their minds.

“One billion albums sold.”

The stars were moving faster and were now continuous lines that began forming a tunnel.

“Ten number one hits.”

The tunnel was turning unanimously white.

“Returned from the dead.”

At this moment the audience gasped, including Pilate. He knew that similar gasps emerged from the people at home staring at their television sets, traveling through the tunnel just like the screen in the studio. He felt fury build up in him that he tried to hide.

Words appeared at the end of the tunnel that couldn't be read, but were growing visible. Everyone knew who the special guest was, yet no one could believe the realization. They saw many things in television, death, torture, destruction, but not this, not resurrection, resurrection on live TV.

The end of the tunnel was coming closer and closer and in a few seconds they were shot out of the tunnel and stopped before two words written in white.

“*Crucifixion Reloaded*,” they heard the voice, and everything went black again.

Five spotlights were switched on, and five figures emerged from the ground, Peter, John, James, Matthew, and Mathias. The words on the screen turned around on its axis and glittered. The cellos and violins stopped, giving place to trumpets announcing the glory of television, the undeniable wonder that so many hate yet is so entertaining and moving many times, allowing the viewers to experience things that they couldn't experience otherwise.

The trumpets gave place to an archaic beat decorated with electronic effects, so typical of the age, rising from Peter's turntable. The screen slid open silently, the floor behind it opened, and Neil emerged. His beard was strong, his long hair tumbled down with a confidence of existence. He was wearing a white robe that shone in the darkness. He was bare foot, so simple and perfect in every way.

The rest of the band joined Peter's beat. Neil raised the microphone and started singing with his sweet tenor voice that soothed everyone and made them forget all their troubles and worries. The music sped up, and as he jumped into the air and landed on his knees, sliding a few feet, smoke and flames spat into the air at the edge of the stage scorching the eyebrows of the ones sitting in the first row causing the smell of burnt hair to rise into the air.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

As he stood up, glitter fell down from the sky sparkling like the stars of the Milky Way. The music was culminating, and when the audience thought the world would explode, hundreds of dancers joined Neil from behind the stage and from the audience itself, all dressed in white. The variation part began, and Neil gave the microphone to one of the dancers and started dancing so fast that the audience thought he would fall to pieces, but he didn't. One of the dancers returned him the microphone, and he continued.

"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it

gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works.”

The variation ended, and the music slowed down. The dancers left faster than they had arrived. Neil started singing, collecting all his power, singing louder and louder, higher and higher until his voice was like the squeak of a dog’s plastic ball. The audience thought his head would explode if he would continue, but it didn’t. The music built up once more, rising toward the universe for one last time.

”Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The next instant Neil threw the microphone away, spread his arm, and faced the roof. The electronic music stopped, and the trumpets returned. The studio started shaking, and light burst through the roof as it slid open. Neil’s white robe was burning red in the rays of the afternoon sun. His toes left the ground and he started rising higher and higher. The audience could not believe their eyes as he was floating out through the roof and rising toward the sky. The roof closed, and the studio was dark once more as the violin and cello returned. The violin was the first to give up, the cello played alone for a few more seconds then died as well.

The tension was palpable as the studio’s lights were switched back on after the performance was finished. No one dared to disrupt it in anyway, scared that this mirage would disappear into thin air, the same way as a soap bubble does, leaving behind nothing but a hiatus that would never be filled again. The anchors stepped onto the stage, and everybody started applauding unanimously, standing up in ovation. Pilate saw that some of them were crying, and their tears sparkled like distant stars in distant galaxies. Pilate nodded his head with recognition toward Adam who just smiled and lay back in his chair telling the world ‘Yes, I did it again.’

“We will return in a few minutes, right after the break,” said the male anchor.

Judas’ Gospel

Judas and L€ne were sitting on the white couch staring at the screen with the great city embracing them. They did not say anything to each other, there was no need. The advertising began. “Sox, the softest polyester socks in the world,” they heard from the television.

Judas faced L€ne, and her words still rang in his ears. ‘May I come in? I cannot be alone, I am scared. Are you watching it?’

Judas looked at L€ne now and saw her battered face. She was broken.

“May I use your bathroom?” asked L€ne turning to him, not actually seeing him, her eyes sparkling.

Judas nodded. She stood up and disappeared into the bathroom. He heard the window opening, its hinges ungreased for years.

The sun was setting outside. A sparkle caught his eye. It was a single speck of glitter swaying in the wind. In the next seconds more and more specks followed it, uniting into a stream waving toward the city.

Judas knew that something was wrong. He jumped to the door, knocking hastily.

“L€ne, L€ne, is everything alright?”

No one answered.

“L€ne, open the door.”

Silence.

Judas, collecting all his strength, kicked the door in. He found L€ne lying against the tub, her head tilted to the right, immobile like a statue, her face without expression, a razor in her hand. Glitter was flowing out of her wound on her wrist and down her palm to the ground to be raised by the breeze and leave with it. Slowly her figure started shaking not physically but between life and death. Starting from the tip of her fingers she started turning into glitter, rising higher and higher, spreading toward the chest, then moving toward her head and down her legs. She was a statue of glitter for a second, each speck a different color. The breeze entering through the window turned into a mighty gust that blew

her away as if she were made of sand of millions of colors. She left without a trace.

Judas walked back to the living room window and saw glitter across the sky, falling down like flakes onto the world, but no one noticed, only two people. Everyone was staring at the screen and waiting for the winner to be announced.

Pilate's Gospel

The tension of the live show broke as the advertising began. The many masks fell off revealing tired faces because it took them all their might to make the show fluent and light as air, as if it were natural for things to go down as they did, like a mild spring flowing down the hills.

Pilate's rage culminated. Josephine lied, she did not warn him that Neil was coming back, and he knew that her vow would never be fulfilled now. He could show the pictures of Neil, but there was no sense, not anymore. Neil had returned, and the photos now proved nothing. He was back, and this was the most important of all. Pilate gave Neil to the world, and now he needed something to top the previous news or else the audience would turn away in boredom. Pilate's ship was sinking, but he was determined not to give up.

Adam stood up and hurried away. Pilate knew he had to follow him, he needed news, something, anything. Adam stopped at the back stage entrance waiting for someone. Pilate hid behind the props and lay low, not to be noticed, and prepared his phone, ready to take a picture any moment.

A few seconds later a man appeared, wearing a black hoodie with a skull decorating its back, a snake emerging from one of its sockets. The man turned a little, and Pilate recognized the profile. It was Neil.

"You did a great job, Neil, thank you for the appearance," said Adam rejoicing.

"Believe me, it wasn't for you, it was for a better cause," said Neil facing the ground.

"Of course. Where will you go? What will you do now?"

"Disappear," answered Neil after a few seconds of silence.

"Are you coming back?" asked Adam.

Pause.

"In a few thousands of years."

“Very funny,” said Adam snickering. “What did you think about the special effects? Pretty cool, huh?”

Pilate examined Neil’s expression and saw the sadness of the one preparing for the departure, the luggage waiting at the door, the apartment empty, a part of life never to be redeemed. Neil smiled looking at the point of his shoes and answered without facing Adam. “It was great, really great. I couldn’t have done a better job.”

“Great. I must really go back. Hurry up before the paparazzi arrive.”

Neil nodded

“Good bye,” said Adam, and Neil stepped outside muttering words of farewell. The door closed with a click, and Adam hurried away without noticing Pilate hiding in the darkness.

Pilate hurried to the back door and opened it to peek outside. The last rays of light died beneath the horizon, and everything went dark. He saw Neil standing in the back alley among the trash containers filled with the many plastic bags overflowing, like a still of a basket of fruits. Neil looked around but did not notice Pilate watching him from behind.

Neil stood still, and Pilate’s blood froze as streams of light started dashing across Neil’s body, glowing through his skin. Pilate started videoing with his phone as the streaks of light moved faster and faster, covering his body, turning him into a white figure illuminating his surrounding with a light so sharp it seemed to pierce through the cloth of reality. He seemed like a statue out of molten iron but much brighter than that, brighter than the sun itself. Pilate squinted, but felt no pain, only a pleasure that erupted from his eyeballs and dashed through his brain.

Neil knelt down, and Pilate heard a whistling sound that began growing louder. The concrete around him started melting, making him sink a little. Pilate heard a magnificent bang, and Neil dashed away into the night sky leaving a streak of the essence of light behind. He rose through the dark sky filled with glitter. Neil pierced through the specks and seemed to become one with them. The moon started burning, illuminating the night.

The world was staring at the screen and waiting for the results, listening to the male anchor say, “And the winner is...”

No one looked out of the window. No one noticed that over the city where stars are born a river made of the mixture of glitter and

light was leaving through the moon that was brighter than the sun itself.

Pilate stopped recording and fell to the ground. He felt the world crumbling around him as he crawled back toward the stage bumping into the props here and there. He lay against the wall and started crying, hearing Adam's voice filled with distress, as if he knew what had happened, what humanity had done once more, not able to break the cycle, postponing the arrival of heaven to the world, giving place to years of agony and suffering.

"How could this happen? Right before the results? Someone put the lights back on. Do something. The viewers will switch away. Someone. Anyooooooooooooone," screamed Adam in despair.

The lights went out and Pilate knew not only in the studio, but the world itself, making Earth bathe in complete darkness for the second time in history. The lights did not come back on, and this show would go down as one of the greatest fiascos in television. Pilate knew that this was the revenge of the child that was sent away prematurely two times and who knows how many times more.

What had they done?

Pilate replayed the video. The camera hadn't recorded anything. The whole screen was white.

NEIL'S TWITTER. Harm no one or die trying.