

The Voice

A Novel

Daniel K. Geren

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For my best friend, Dean, who knows what it feels like to want to kill someone so badly, you can taste it.
And, for a dear, sweet, friend, Dee, who . . . well, who just knows.

Book I
The Voice

I

Sweet Memories

1996

On that warm spring morning, Craig Darius Harrison sat on the rooftop of the Administration building. He sat behind the parapet, not because he was afraid of being seen (he wouldn't be seen until he *wanted* to be seen), but because he was exhausted. He hadn't had a good night's sleep in . . . forever. And he had gotten more exercise, just this morning, than he had in a long, long time. His stolen, .30-.06, scoped rifle was propped between his legs for the same reason. He waited . . .

Somewhere in the canopy of the tree which bordered the building he was sitting on, a bird chirped and he knew it was a male calling for a mate. He didn't know how he knew this (probably a PBS program), he just did. And this made him think of his own mate, well, his ex-mate, and his family; his ex-wife, Mary, their daughter Christine and their son Paul.

Christine the eldest of their two children had been a beautiful child with that long, blond hair, those big, soft, blue eyes, those chubby, freckle speckled cheeks, that adorable, little, button nose and that cute, pouty, little mouth. She had always been his favorite and, of course, she played it for all it was worth.

Their son Paul had been a different story. A little hellion from the moment he was born it seemed; he was always getting into something and most of it not good for him. But Craig supposed that was what being a boy was all about. He, himself, had had a similar upbringing.

Like the time he and Mary had caught him in the bathroom standing on a chair that he had somehow managed to drag in there (?). He was in front of the bathroom mirror with shaving foam all over his face and a bloody, shaving foam-filled razor in one chubby, little hand (he could not have been more than 3 ½-years-old). He had a few cuts on his face, but that appeared to be the extent of the damage.

"What are you doing?!" Mary had asked, her small hands on her hips, surprising him into turning around.

Craig, leaned on the door jam and stifled a giggle. He knew. The little tike was imitating his father. Craig found this both flattering and hilarious, in the same moment.

"I'm shaving like Daddy does!" he exclaimed, the look of guilty pride unmistakable on his handsome, freckled, little face.

"Oh, no you don't, little man." Mary seemed to be pretty upset with the little rug-rat as she snatched the razor out of his hand and began cleaning up the mess he had made, wiping the foam off his face and applying bandages to his few cuts. As she did this, she explained to him that only big people "shave like Daddy does" and told him he must not do this again, at least until he was older.

Of course, it wasn't until later and he and Mary were in bed that Craig could contain his mirth no longer.

"What are *you* laughing at?" Mary asked in an accusatory tone.

"Did you see the look on his face? It was priceless." This prompted another peel of laughter.

Soon Mary was laughing with him. “Yeah, it was a *little* funny. But don’t you dare tell him that. I don’t want to be cleaning bloody faces until he’s old enough to shave.”

Or the time he, Mary and Christine (she had just turned 4-years-old and was, in fact, the year before Paul had been born) had gone on a camping trip in the mountains to the East of the city, Ridgmont, the largest in the state, in which they lived. It was just a short hike to the lake where they would spend the night, no more than a couple of miles.

Along the way they came across a fairly good size stream. It had a bridge, which was nice. When they got to the other side, they stopped to fill their canteens (Craig didn’t participate in this he didn’t want to take his rather heavy backpack off and so had Mary fill both of theirs; her pack was much lighter). When they had them filled and everyone had drunk their fill, he and Mary got up to leave and got back to the trail. They walked a short distance before turning around (where was Christine?). She was still back at the stream. She was crouched down, staring, fixated, it seemed, into the water.

“Don’t worry, I’ll get her,” Craig told Mary, “go on ahead, we’ll catch up.”

Craig walked back to where Christine was crouched. “What are you waiting for? Come on.”

“I’m waiting for the water to run out,” she said simply, as she continued to stare at the water.

The mind of a 4-year-old, Craig thought, *where do they come up with this shit?* He had to resist the urge to roll his eyes as he gave a little chuckle, “I think it’s going to be a while.”

“How long?” she turned her head to look at him.

“A lot longer than we have. Now come *on*,” he wasn’t angry with her. It wasn’t that. They were burning daylight and needed to move, now. Perhaps, she thought he was angry based on what she did next. She rose and turned, thin shoulders slumped, head down and sighed. The “do-I-*have*-to-go?” sigh of which he and Mary had become so accustomed. She’d use it when they were in the park or at a friend’s house and he and Mary would announce it was time to leave.

Oh my god, kids, he thought, *so dramatic . . . and so predictable*. He regretted the thought almost as soon as it entered his brain, however. Here she was a *4-year-old* his *4-year-old* and all she wanted to do was wait for the water to run out. It seemed so simple to her.

He crouched down in front of her until the bottom of his pack touched the ground, “You know, I didn’t mean to be cross with you, don’t you?”

When she didn’t reply, he reached down, cupped his hand in her chin and brought her head up so he could look at her. “Don’t you?”

She looked back at him with those big, soft crystal-blue eyes which, although they looked like chipped ice, nonetheless, he was convinced, if she merely looked at it, she could melt ice with.

“Yes, Daddy.” she didn’t sound at all convinced, but he let it slide.

“Maybe I’ll explain it all to you someday, sweetie, but right now we have to leave.” Knowing the mind of a 4-year-old, (the inevitable “Why?”) he went on to explain. “Do you see the sun up there?” he pointed off to the West, then let his hand fall back to his side. “Well, when you can’t see it anymore it’s going to get dark really quick. We want to set up the tent before that happens. Do you understand?” he added hastily in order to avoid the inevitable, why?

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Good, now let’s go. All right.”

“Okay, Daddy.”

“I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you go see if you can find the biggest pinecone around here, and we’ll keep it as a keepsake? Okay?”

Her face lit up like a Christmas tree on Christmas day, the stream and all the mysteries of water forgotten. And she was off before he could say, “lickity-split.”

“Hey, come back here. I’m not done yet.” he said and stood.

She turned to look at him but made no move to come back.

“I want you to stay where your mother or I can see you. Okay? We don’t want you to get lost in these big ol’ woods.”

“Okay, Daddy.”

When he caught up with Mary, she asked, “What was that all about?”

“She wanted to wait for the water to run out.”

She giggled. “Really?”

“Yep.”

“What did you tell her?”

“Oh, I explained about rainfall, snowfall, glaciers, water, in essence I gave her a high school geology lesson.”

“Oh, you did *not*.” she said as, still giggling, she made a mock attempt to slap his shoulder, which he shied away from.

“I know.” he giggled now himself as Christine picked up a pine cone, compared it to the one in her other, chubby, little hand, decided against it, tossed it back to the ground and took off in search of a bigger one. “I told her we didn’t have time to discuss it now. But I told her to go find the biggest pine cone she could to keep as a keepsake.”

Thinking back on it now, Craig could hardly believe all of that had happened nearly twelve years ago. Where had all the time gone? It was as if he had been caught in some kind of time warp, where he was the only one in the world unaware of its passage.

What happened to us Mary? He thought. *Where did it all go wrong?* But, of course, he knew the answer to that. In fact, “the answer” was one of the reasons he was sitting up here in the first place. As for the other reason, well, he supposed he knew the answer to that, as well. The Voice. It always came back to that, didn’t it?

II

Images

“Hey, you still around,” he seemed to ask the still warm air.

-*“Yes, I am.”*-

“Could I ask you a favor?”

-*“I suppose it depends on what it is, now doesn’t it?”*-

“Could you do that thing you do with the images with my kids?” he asked The Voice.

-*“Kind of miss them, do you?”*-

“I don’t see how it’s any of your business.” he had learned not to trust It when It asked him personal questions. “All I want to do is see them again, before . . . well you know.”

-*“Sure, I know, Okay. Your wish is my command.”*-

He also knew this not to be true, but did not argue the point (he had found this to be an exercise devoid of point or purpose like playing Rock, Paper, Scissors . . . with yourself).

The next thing he knew he was looking at each of his kids, just as if they were sitting right in front of him instead of 185 miles away in school. The most amazing thing about this (and it always amazed him, it didn’t matter how many times he had seen The Voice do it) was the fact that they looked just like they were there, in the flesh, real flesh and blood!

He knew from past experience, though, that were he to try to touch them they would disappear without a trace. He also knew that The Voice would not be bothering him for at least as long as the images remained in front of him (he supposed this had something to do with the amount of energy expended in bringing the images to him). Now all he could hope for (keep your fingers crossed, kiddies) was that It could not hear him speaking as well.

He took the stolen rifle cleaning kit from his back pocket and started breaking the rifle down in order to clean it (as a kid, he could almost do this in his sleep); as he did this, he began talking, even though he knew it was doubtful they could hear him.

“Christine, Paulie, oh God, I don’t even know where to begin . . . ”

Some 185 miles to the west a 15-year-old girl named Christine Julie Harrison and a 10-year-old boy named Paul William Harrison were both sitting in classrooms in schools two miles apart, Christine in first period History with Mr. Jerrington, who hadn’t shown up, yet, and Paul, listening to his 25-year-old teacher talk about fractions. On this particular day things were about to change for both of them and in a hurry. At the sound of their father’s voice, they both sat up straight, dropped their pencils, looked up with a look of complete and utter surprise on each of their faces and said, at virtually the same instant, “Daddy?”

III

Chance Meeting

1978 - 1985

“... Well,” he closed his eyes, “I guess the place to start would be when I met your mother. After all, were it not for her, I never would have gotten where I am today. Not that I blame her, mind you . . .”

He could still remember the first day he and Mary had met. It, too, seemed as if it had happened just two seconds ago, instead of nearly eighteen years. In fact, he was sure that were he to open his eyes at this very second, he would be transported back in time to that very magical moment. He opened them anyway, nothing had changed; he was still sitting on the roof of the Admin building, still holding the stolen rifle in his hands. He let out a sigh and began cleaning the rifle anew as he spoke to his kids.

He had been a delivery boy, delivering pizzas to office buildings, mostly, during the day. He had just graduated from high school the year before and, like most kids his age, had absolutely no idea what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. It was summer time, so he figured he had plenty of time. He had absolutely no idea what was in store for him on this particular day, however.

He was dressed in the usual delivery boy attire: blue jeans, T-shirt (this one had Van Halen World Tour emblazoned on the front; the back of this shirt had the cities and dates in a grid format), tennis shoes, the always appropriate pair of headphones blasting Heavy Metal into his numb ears.

As fate (luck?) would have it, he would walk into an elevator on that particular day, and his life, as he knew it, would change and for the better.

As he walked into this particular elevator, a small gasp came from the far corner, where a woman stared at him. His heart leaped in his chest for a moment, but, still, he found this a little unnerving. He took up residence in the other corner. He took several glances her way to make sure she was not staring at something else. She wasn't.

She was a rather gorgeous little creature. She stood all of five-foot nothin' and was wearing a charcoal gray business suit, which emphasized small breasts, a slim figure and the flare of her hips suggested something rather pleasing as soon as she decided to walk away from him. Other than her round face, full lips, and chubby, freckle speckled cheeks with the cutest dimples, what drew him in were her big, sparkling, emerald green eyes and her straight, flame red hair which was cut short, over the ears, and in the back. Parted on the left and brushed back in a feather cut, she had just a wisp of bangs, which seemed to dance across her forehead every time she moved. Too gorgeous for words, as his Mom had been fond of saying, although, he barely remembered his Mother, anymore.

The young lady standing in the opposite corner looked to be around 18 or 19-years-old, in other words, just about his age. He wouldn't find out until the next night that he was pretty close to the truth. It seemed she had just turned 18 not two months ago. Needless to say, the attraction was immediate and, to his somewhat shocked surprise, as he would find out in a couple of minutes, mutual.

She continued to stare at him until the elevator came to a stop and several other people got on. At this point she looked away for a second, as if to assess whether these new people were worth staring at, then turned her attention back to him. The elevator continued for a couple of floors before the doors opened to let the other people off. When they had exited, he turned to her and asked, “do I have something on my face?” as he pulled off his headphones and put them around his neck, the music still blasting away and set the two pizzas he was carrying on the floor of the elevator to his left.

“No.” was the only response he got. And oh, that voice nearly made him melt. It was a kind of husky rasp but still quite feminine. Very sexy.

Somehow, he managed to keep his composure as he continued, “well, could you please tell me why you are staring at me? Do I remind you of someone, because I don’t think we’ve ever met?”

“No.” the same response, and hadn’t he been expecting her to say something like, “You’ll have to excuse my voice. I’ve had a cold for the past few days,” and break the magic? But she never did, and the magic remained (at least for him) to this very moment.

“Well, do you mind if I ask why then?”

“Because I think you are possibly the most handsome man I have ever seen,” she said as she pushed off from the corner where she was standing to close the distance between them, until she was standing in front of him and staring up at him with those gorgeous, green eyes.

As he gazed into those big, beautiful eyes he couldn’t help but be reminded of a picture that had hung in his room since he was in grade school (he had no idea where it had come from, but he assumed his Mother had a hand in it). The last time he’d seen it was when he’d moved out of the farm house and into an apartment in the city. The picture was of a kitten. It was sitting in an alley with a garbage can and garbage strewn behind it and graffiti on the wall. But this was no ordinary kitten. This kitten had huge green eyes, perhaps half the size of its head. Her eyes weren’t half the size of her head, but still . . .

The blood rushed to his cheeks and he knew he was blushing. And here was someone who was not afraid to tell you if you had something stuck in your teeth. In fact, this is pretty much what had caused him to fall in love with her in the first place, her ability to be unabashed, by anything. “Oh, come on. You’re kidding me . . . right?”

He didn’t consider himself to be particularly handsome. If anything, he considered himself pretty average looking. He was suspicious of people, strangers, who complimented him. What was she after? It couldn’t be money. He had very little. And considering how he was dressed, she must know that. He decided she must not have met very many men in her life if she considered him the most handsome man she’d ever seen. And, he decided further, that that was just fine with him.

“No, I’m not. Would you like to have coffee some time? Van Halen, right?”

He wasn’t sure if she meant his shirt or his earphones, but it mattered little. He was in love. He pointed at his earphones and when she nodded, he handed them over to her. She put them on and said, “Ooooooh, I love this song.” Van Halen’s *Jannie’s Cryin’* was playing on his Walkman at the time. She looked up at him and smiled a row of perfect, dazzling, white teeth then she shut her eyes and began moving her head in rhythm with the song as she mouthed the words.

All he could do was stare as the wisp of bangs danced, in a kind of stunned disbelief, and he had to give her credit; at least she didn’t try to sing (he had a strange feeling this would have broken the magic, as well). If he wasn’t in love before then this was the kicker.

Then the elevator was coming to a stop; she handed the headphones back to him, said, “my stop,” and prepared to get off.

“Hey, wait! How do I get a hold of you?” he’d just met the woman of his dreams, and he wasn’t about to let her get away that easily.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I thought you were psychic.” And with that she began to laugh. She had a sensual laugh and had to remind him, between guffaws, to press the hold button on the elevator. Soon she was laughing so hard, tears were streaming down her chubby, freckly cheeks. Her laugh was infectious, and, before he knew it, he began laughing, as well. It was nervous laughter, at first, before her laughter caught him and he was laughing just as hard as she was.

She began digging through her bags, still laughing, looking for a pen or pencil presumably. When she found a pen, she took his hand and wrote her telephone number on the back of it. Her hands were so tiny! Her fingers especially were, well, short, not fat, just short and delicate. “I’m sorry about that,” she was saying. He forced himself to tear his gaze away from her fingers and look up into those big, beautiful, deep, dark, emerald green eyes. “But, you know, sometimes, I just crack me up,” she finished.

“Yeah, I know the feeling,” he said, feeling somewhat perplexed.

And with that, she exited the elevator. As she walked away, not looking back, and just before the elevator doors closed, he was pleased to see that the flare of her hips wasn’t a misnomer. She did indeed have a rather nice backside.

He would find out over coffee the next night that her name was Mary Beth O’Dett. An Irish name if he had ever heard one. It seemed she came from a long line of O’Detts. It also turned out that she was in that particular office building that day to go to an interview for a job at a local law firm to help pay for her schooling. She was going to be a law student and had big and ambitious plans. From there they discussed all sorts of topics ranging from the current hit movie, to the current hit music, to sports, to the state of the world. They found out they had a lot in common.

As these things go, they were married in (what she called) a beautiful ceremony on June 23rd of the next year. Christine would be born a year later, in 1980 on July 27th and Paulie five years after that on November 20th.

IV

The Move

1979 - 1987

It had been agreed that since Mary was already in school that Craig would support her through, and when she graduated, she would support him through. Those last 7 years of law school (8 years all told) had been incredibly tough on him and their marriage. He had found it difficult to stay in one dead-end job after another. He, after all, was not getting any younger and the compulsion to support his family with a well-paying career, instead of these \$5.00 and \$6.00 an hour jobs was almost overwhelming. But God love her, Mary always supported his decisions, even when it meant they might not eat next month or have a roof over their heads. Luckily for him, he always seemed to land on his feet through those rough years.

Then Mary finally graduated in 1986 this would have been. She was a brilliant student graduating *Sigma cum Laude* and from a pretty prestigious university. The graduation ceremony was boring as hell (weren't they all?), but he somehow endured until Mary went up to the podium to receive her degree. Then he stood and cheered holding little seven-month-old Paulie, who squirmed throughout the entire ceremony, under one arm and little 5-year-old, soon to be 6-year-old, Christine's hand with his other hand. Mary looked down at him from the podium and smiled. He was so proud of her in that moment he felt like he might burst apart into a million pieces.

Before he could go to school, however, Mary needed to do two things: first pass the state Bar exam and second find a job. The first one was easy, as he knew it would be, for her. She passed the Bar exam on the very first try. Although the second took a little longer, it still didn't take her long. In fact, before the summer was out, she would land a job. There was just one minor problem. It just so happened to be clear across the state, some 400 miles away. This wasn't that big a deal to him. All he had tying him to this place was family, and besides, his sister, pretty much his only immediate family member he was really close to, was living in Riverview, the city in which they would live. He could leave his \$6.50 an hour job any time he felt like it.

Mary, on the other hand, did not find this move as easy as he did. She came from a very close-knit family, and all of it was currently here. She'd also made a lot of friends at school and found it difficult to leave them. But a job was a job, even if it meant a certain amount of sacrifice. And so, they'd picked up and moved into a tiny little two-bedroom apartment. The job she'd found, working at the County Public Defender's office, wasn't a lot of money, but enough to support him through school. Knowing how ambitious she was though Craig knew it wouldn't be long before she started her own practice.

They mutually agreed that he should wait a year before going to school in order to save the money necessary to do this. When they had saved a couple of thousand dollars, he knew it was time.

The very first thing he needed to decide on was which school he wanted to go to. There were four universities in the general area and four two-year colleges.

He didn't feel a two-year college would give him a career, but instead, a job. So, they, decided a university would be best. But the biggest university was nearly fifty-five miles to the south. This meant a daily commute of over one hundred miles; he refused to do this. The next biggest university was about fifteen miles directly east and housed in a small city of about 10,000 people. Although a thirty-mile daily commute wasn't something he wanted to do, it would appear as if this would end up being his only choice. Because the third and fourth universities, while based in Riverview, were religious ones (not that he had anything against religion, it was just that neither religion was one he had ever practiced. Besides he had no idea what kind of requirements they might have and quite frankly didn't want to find out). And, so, they decided on the second university. Now he had to decide on a major.

He remembered discussing it one night with Mary after both kids had gone to bed.

"I think you should become a chef. You're a marvelous cook", she'd said.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Cooking is fine when it's just for you and the kids or when we've got a small amount of company, but I don't think I could handle the stress of cooking for a large number of people. I'm afraid I'd panic and do something stupid, like adding strychnine to a dish."

He was kidding, of course, and she giggled, the desired result. He loved watching and listening to her laugh. "I kind of doubt they keep strychnine on hand just so you can poison the patrons."

But it was mostly true, nonetheless. He had worked for restaurants in the past and the hectic environment wasn't what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. He liked to take his time while cooking a meal, besides restaurants tended to use strict recipes, while he liked to experiment with ingredients.

"But you know what I mean." he said.

She nodded then thought for a moment. "Okay. Why don't you learn how to program a computer?"

His mind said, *now there's an idea*, but his mouth said, "But I already know how to do that." And, indeed, he did. They'd mutually decided when she was still in school that a new computer would help her schooling as well as his ("right after I finish" she kept promising). They bought it using the money from her student loans. It turned out to be a new 286 IBM clone. God, the thing had cost them an arm and a leg, but it was well worth the money and effort. A relative math whiz, he found computers fascinating, and soon he was programming it to do all sorts of things, keeping track of their finances, lotto pick programs, games for the kids, virtually anything that came to mind.

"I know. But you don't have any formal training. Besides, can you program any computer out there?" When he shook his head, she went on, "I didn't think so. And wouldn't it be great to have formal training, to learn how to program one properly?" she held up her hand as he started to protest, got up out of the chair she was occupying, walked over to where he was sitting on the couch and sat in his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck. He wrapped his arms around her waist.

She continued, "Let me finish, okay. I'm not saying that you don't know how to program a computer properly." she kissed him lightly on the nose. "What I am saying is: wouldn't it be neat to learn how to program in different languages and how other people do it? Maybe give you some fresh perspective on some of the programs you've written and on any you might write in the future. Anyway, it would be great to turn a hobby into a career? Wouldn't it? Besides, it'd be easier to find a job, excuse me," she held up her hand again, "career if you've got that cool degree under your belt."

This was one of her more annoying habits. Her gentle art of persuasion. He knew that this was part of her job, but did she have to bring it home? In this case, however, she just so happened to be right. He had no "formal" training on how to program a computer; he had only programmed in a language called Basic and, although he was really quite good at it, it would be great to get a fresh perspective, maybe learn a few

more languages as well. Besides with a degree in the area of computers he could easily turn his hobby into a career. And wasn't that the ultimate dream, to turn something you loved doing into something that paid money. And, so, it was decided. Computer Science would be his major.

He carried her to bed and they made passionate love. They fell asleep in each other's arms that night each contented that the world was as it should be. They were, of course, wrong.

V

Nighttime Visits

1987-1990

His first two years were relatively easy ones. He aced all of his courses. Of course, he knew things couldn't go this well forever. And he was right. But everything *was* going just wonderfully (at this point in time at least), life was grand, life was, in fact, just hunky-dory, thank you very much, until one fateful night in mid-September, just before his Junior year, when The Voice first started talking to him.

It came to him at night, always at night (well, in the beginning anyway) when he was somewhere between sleep and wakefulness. Between dreams and reality. At first it would only utter nonsense words like - "*derhim*" - or - "*zifdum*" -.

He remembered quite clearly the very first time It said words (?) to him. It was mid-September (two nights before the beginning of school, the summer winding down). He was in bed with Mary and was just drifting off when a somewhat faint voice said, - "*Zobit dox umbrack*"-. It was something like standing in the middle of an auditorium with speakers lining each wall and having someone stand up on stage and whisper ever so softly into the microphone.

- "*Zobit dox umbrack*" -

He sat up in bed, his heart pounding. "What?"

Mary reached over and turned on the bedside lamp, then rolled over and looked up at him, "What's wrong?" she asked in a sleepy voice.

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" she was attempting to rub the sleep out of her eyes.

"I just heard someone or *something* say, 'Zobit dox umbrack'. I know it wasn't you; it wasn't your voice."

She sat up next to him. As she did this her small, slightly drooping left breast poked out of the tank top she was wearing, she didn't seem to notice or care. "It said *what?*" she now seemed fully awake and interested.

"It said, and I know this sounds, crazy, strange, or whatever, but it said, 'Zobit dox umbrack.' "

She began to giggle.

"What's so funny? It nearly scared me to death!"

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said between giggles as she reached out to put a hand on his arm, "it just seems like an awfully *weird* thing to say, don't you think? I mean, what was it trying to say? Its name? Where's it from? Mars?"

She began to laugh. Soon she was laughing so hard, she was doubled over and slapping the mattress. And before he knew it, he was laughing right along with her. When they had calmed down enough to speak, he said, "You're awful, Mary." This had become somewhat of a "thing" between the two of them. He or she would say, "you're awful." Then, the expected response . . .

"But not half as awful as you," then they'd both laugh again. It was no different this time. When they'd calmed down again, she leaned over and kissed his cheek, "come on. You were dreaming, sweetheart. Go back to sleep." With that said, she turned out the light, slid back under the covers and rolled over.

"Yeah, maybe you're right." But he knew she wasn't. He *hadn't* been dreaming. That voice had seemed to come from everywhere *at the same time* and from *outside* his head. That was the spooky part, the scary part. He knew how crazy that sounded, but it was the only way he could describe it and still keep a fair portion of his sanity intact. He lay awake for a long time after that, more than a little afraid of going back to sleep and hearing

("Zobit dox umbrack")

that voice again.

And he did not hear that voice again, that night. In fact, it would be another month and a half before It spoke to him again. This time, however, It did not say "Zobit dox umbrack", instead It said - "*Zifdum daubat ungormot*", and what was more, what was truly frightening was that the voice *seemed* to be getting louder. This time he did not wake up Mary to tell her about the voice he had just heard. Instead, he just lay next to her and trembled for what seemed hours before he finally drifted off to sleep again.

He would hear The Voice, as he had now become accustomed to calling it, off and on for almost four more months before it started to say any real words. It still came to him just as he was drifting off to sleep, but these nighttime visits were becoming more and more frequent. And, yes, The Voice was most definitely getting louder.

He never told Mary about these earlier incursions into his sleep or of most of the visions, which came much later, until it said a real word, a word he could understand.

It was a late, cold, January night. He was nearly asleep, the comforter they'd received as a wedding present from her parents pulled up tight to his chin, when It clearly said, in a rather conversational tone, - "*Dead*". He sat up in bed, the comforter falling down to his waist, forgotten. Once again, his heart was doing a bass drum rhythm inside his chest.

"What? *What did you say?*"

This last part woke Mary. She, once again, reached over and turned on the bedside lamp, then rolled over and sat up, alarmed. "What's wrong? Oh, my God, you're white as a sheet!"

"Shhhhhh!" Then in a softer voice, "listen. Who's dead?"

"Dead? What the —", Mary started. But he interrupted her.

"Shhhhhh!"

Then to his amazement it repeated itself, - "*Dead*".

"Ha! Did you hear *that*?"

"Hear what?"

"You didn't just hear a voice say, 'Dead?' " he was a little amazed, a little disappointed and somewhat hurt and perplexed all at the same time.

"No! Come on now, honey, you're scaring me."

"I'm scaring *you*. How in the hell do you think *I* feel? Oh, I'm sorry." he said as a look of surprise crossed her face. "Are you okay?" he asked her. He was as much concerned for her as he was for himself.

"I'm fine. How are *you*?"

He gave a small terrified sounding chuckle, "I think I'm losing my mind."

"Oh, come on. That's ridiculous. It's just that you've been under a lot of stress lately. That's all it is, really."

Now that he thought about it, that voice did seem to come to him just before a big test, the start of the school year, the start of a new quarter. "But —" he jumped as a knock came at their bedroom door.

It was Mary who said, "Yes."

Christine popped her head in the door, "Mommy, Daddy, I heard shouting."

"It's okay," he said to Mary, "I'll take care of her. You go back to sleep."

"Are you sure? You still look pretty pale."

"Oh, I'll be alright." The concerned look on her gorgeous round face caused him to put a hand on her arm and say, "really."

With that he got out of bed and took Christine back to hers.

When they arrived in the room she shared with little Paulie, he turned on the light, tucked her in and sat on the bed next to her. It was at this point that she asked, "Daddy, what was all the shouting about?"

"Daddy was just having a nightmare. You know what they are, don't you?" Of course she did. She had been having what she called, "bad dreams" almost all of her short eight years of existence.

"Are those the bad dreams?"

"Yes, honey, they are."

"Are you going to die?"

"God, no, whatever gave you that idea."

"Sometimes I dream about being all alone. And someone in my dream tells me it's because you died."

"Well, don't worry about it. Go back to sleep. I'm not going to die. Okay?"

"Okay, Daddy."

He stayed until she had drifted off, then got up and went back to bed, turning out her light on the way.

VI

Julie's Demise

January 29th, 1990

Julie Anne Harrison had had just about enough. This was the very last straw. She picked up her purse and coat from the chair next to the door, opened it, stormed out, and slammed it shut, all of this to the sounds of her boyfriend's protestations. She'd had it with this man. Just who did he think he was anyway? She stomped to her 1965 Plymouth Barracuda (her baby), opened the door, got in and slammed that door, as well, locking it just to be sure. She knew what was coming. And here came Ted, as if on cue, running out of his house and rushing to her car.

"Come on, Julie. It was just a joke. What's wrong with you?" he said through the glass of her rolled up window.

Just a joke my ass! She raged inside her head. *What the hell kind of idiot would say something so stupid?*

"Well, I guess the jokes on you then. Don't expect to see me again! Ever!" she fumbled her keys out of her purse, inserted the second one from the emblem "JULIE" into the ignition after several attempts, and with shaking hands turned it. The key chain had been a birthday present from her sister-in-law, Mary. *Oh, Mary, why didn't I listen to you? You told me this guy was a jackass.* She shook her head to clear the thought. Ted was attempting to open her car door. Good thing she'd locked it. She reached over to the light switch, pulled it, reached down to the gear shift located on the hump between the bucket seats, shifted into reverse, turned her body so she could see behind her and stomped on the gas. Ted was screaming at her now. Good. Let him scream. Asshole. She reached the street without incident and left Ted screaming in his driveway.

She tried desperately to concentrate on the road. It was the end of January after all. The roads were a little slippery, but not all that bad. It had been a fairly warm January; hell, it had been a fairly warm winter. But that notwithstanding, she knew she had to be careful. It had snowed a couple of inches just the day before and there were still patches of ice on the road. Her apartment was clear across town, and she wanted to get there in one piece, if at all possible.

But her mind kept returning to the night she'd just spent with Ted. It had started pleasantly enough for a six-month anniversary. They went to dinner, as planned. The restaurant Ted took her to was incredibly romantic. The lights were turned down low. Soft music was playing in the background. He ordered steak and potato. She ordered lobster with all the trimmings. Oh, it had been great. Just fantastic.

Then it was off to his place. This was nothing new to her; they'd been doing this almost ever since they'd started going out. They made out, as per usual. A rather funny thing happened then. He began going just a little too far. She wasn't a prude, in fact, far from it; it was just that she wasn't ready to have sex with Ted, yet. And this was something she was at a loss to explain, even to herself. Perhaps she was afraid of disappointing him in bed. Or perhaps it had something to do with what Mary had told her about four

and a half months ago when she had asked her how she could be so comfortable with her body. "Because your *brother* is so comfortable with my body. Is there any other reason?" she'd said. And no, there really wasn't.

She'd made it clear to Ted that sex just wasn't an option at this point in their relationship. Well, apparently not clear enough, because the next thing she knew, he was taking off his clothes and attempting to take off hers, as well. She told him to stop. He didn't. She slapped him. And things started to get ugly.

He stopped what he was doing, looking at her as if she were Satan risen. She attempted to apologize, but he wasn't having any of it.

"What'd ya do that for?" he seemed stunned and looked so pathetic, sitting on his couch with his hand covering his cheek, that she almost laughed. It was probably better that she didn't, although, she doubted it would have ended any differently if she had.

"Come on, Ted. You know why."

"Why don't you enlighten me, sweetheart." he said "sweetheart" with a kind of savage sarcasm she'd never heard come out of his mouth before.

"Because, I told you, I'm not ready for that yet."

"Well, don't let me step on your morality." he started to get dressed.

"I said I was sorry. What more do you want from me."

"For starters you could stop being such a bitch." Okay. Fair enough. Maybe she had been a bitch, but did that give him the right to call her one to her face? No. It did not.

"Well, it might help if you wouldn't call me one to my face!" she got off the couch, prepared to leave.

"Oh, come on," he grabbed her by the arm. "Now I'm sorry," he said as he attempted to kiss her on the mouth.

She smiled through the kiss, "really." Maybe the evening could be saved after all.

"Yeah. Besides, who would want to make it with an ass *that* fat?" he smiled and attempted to pat her butt. But her smile dropped like a high school sweetheart being dumped on prom night. Besides she was already out of his grasp and moving toward the door. Already bruised from being called a bitch, this was by far the very last straw.

Well, she reflected, *it wasn't like their relationship had started out under the best of circumstances anyway*. They had met in a bar. This was something she was not used to. She, as a rule, did not pick up men in bars, but her girlfriend, Sandy, from the office, had insisted they go out and have some fun. "You're overworked. You need to go out and have a good time," was her argument. When Julie initially rejected the idea, Sandy had become insistent. Eventually, Julie was won over and they went out.

Soon after arriving at the bar, Julie found herself having a good time in spite of herself. Sandy and she were sitting across from each other in a booth in the far corner gossiping about work, the men at work, what assholes they all were, and laughing at their own silliness, when Sandy whispered above the music in the background, "Don't look now, but there's a guy sitting behind you who keeps looking at us."

This prompted Julie to look behind her. "Where?" she said, somewhat drunkenly.

"I said, don't *look* now!"

Julie turned back around and started giggling. Sandy joined her. Between giggles, Julie whispered back at her, "Kin'a cute ish he."

"Who? I didn't even show you who it was!"

"I dunno, *whoever*." This prompted a peel of laughter from Sandy. Julie laughed right back at her.

"He's coming over here!" Sandy whispered urgently. "Try to act natural."

"Fat chance." Julie said, loud enough for the people sitting behind Sandy to turn around scowling. "Sorry." Julie said to them sarcastically. Sandy turned around, gave them an evil look until they turned back around and whispered at Julie, "Oooops!"

"Yeah, Oooops."

Then the man from across the bar was standing over them. "You girls look like you're having a good time tonight."

"Oh, we are." They said in unison. "Jinx." They said together again, laughing and pointing at one another.

"Mind if I join you?" The man from across the bar, who would later turn out to be Julie's boyfriend, Ted, asked. And he was cute, with those big dreamy blue eyes. His dark hair was cropped short with a baseball cap riding on top of it (this one had the Nike swoosh symbol embroidered on the crown). His cheeks were finely chiseled. His nose was kind of pointy, but she could live with that, and his muscles seemed to ripple under his shirt whenever he moved.

Sandy and Julie looked at one another for a moment, as if considering this proposal. Finally, Julie scooted over, "Sure. Have a seat."

"You'll have to excuse my friend. She's had a few too many." Sandy smiled at him.

Ted sat next to Julie as she said to Sandy, "have not," reached for the beer in front of her, took a long swallow, belched and laughed at her own foolishness.

They talked for awhile, after they'd made all the formal introductions, about each other ("Where're ya from? Why're ya here?"). When midnight rolled around, it found Ted still sitting at their table, talking. He was obviously flirting with Julie (much to Sandy's consternation). Sandy would ask him something ("So, Ted, what do you do for a living?") and instead of directing his answer at her, he would direct it at Julie.

When 12:30 rolled around, Julie discovered she needed to pee. She asked Ted to excuse her, he slid out, she followed, and grabbing Sandy by the arm she made a drunken path to the bathroom.

When they were in secluded shelter of the bathroom, Julie turned to Sandy and said, "Oh, my gaw! He'sh gorgeoussh!"

"Okay. Now I know you're drunk."

"Whad, you don't thing sho." Julie tried to sound hurt.

"Oh, he's cute, all right, but gorgeous, give me a break. Don't you have some business to take care of?"

"Oh, ah'mosht forgot." Julie staggered to the nearest stall, opened the door, went inside, closed it again, pulled down her pants and panties, turned around so she was facing the door (this was far from easy in the confined space of the stall and in her present inebriated state, but she managed, somehow. "Perseverance pays off" was what her Dad would have said), sat down and let go. Oh, Christ, that felt good. "Sho, ish he ah leash goo ooking," she yelled through the door.

"Oh, I suppose. It sure is easy to tell you don't do this a lot."

"Whadoya mean?"

"Christ, you can't hold your liquor worth a shit. Are you about done in there?"

Julie tried to focus on the toilet paper roll to her right and failed. *Ah the hell with it*, she thought, and grabbed at it with an arm that was almost too weak to even lift. She unrolled a healthy chunk and dabbed herself. "There aw done." Now all she had to do was get off the toilet without falling on her ass. After a couple of tries she was standing on her feet. She reached down to pull up her panties, lost her balance and sent her head crashing into the stall door. "Ouch!" Damn that *hur!*

"You all right in there?" Sandy asked from the other side.

"Yup." she tried again, this time reaching with only one hand while the other steadied her on the top of the stall door. Finally, she managed to get both panties and pants up. She opened the door rubbing her head, stumbled out and said, "I washn drinkun liquor, I wash drinkun beer."

"Oh, I know. See what I mean."

Julie tried to look puzzled, caught a glimpse at herself in the mirror and started laughing. God, her face looked so ridiculously *stupid*!

"What's so funny?"

Julie, still laughing, tried to say, "Oh nothing. Let's go." And discovered she couldn't. Instead, she just kept laughing.

Sandy did not like this, not even one little bit. She grabbed Julie by the arm and led her out to the bar.

When they got back to the table, Ted was waiting, and Julie was still laughing. "Everything come out all right?" he asked, smiling at something he did not get. It took a moment for this to sink in for Julie, but when it did, she let out another peel of laughter, this one all but doubling her over. She almost lost her balance but somehow managed to keep it.

"We better get out of here, before Ms. Laughs-a-lot gets completely out of control," Sandy said, ignoring the wave of laughter coming from her friend at the mention of "Ms. Laughs-a-lot".

Ted looked at Julie, "could I get your phone number?"

"I kind of doubt she's in any condition." When Sandy said this, it sobered Julie up a little bit. But just a little bit.

"I can sho gif 'im my nummer." Then to Ted, "Got a piesh of paper, shweetie?" she nearly fell into him when she turned to face him but caught her balance at the last second smiling stupidly up into those gorgeous baby blues. Ted produced a cocktail napkin and a pen. She scribbled her number onto this, handed it back to him, not really expecting to ever hear from him again. But as fate would have it, he would call her the very next night and ask her out for the following weekend. She, of course, accepted.

He'd seemed nice enough on that first date. *Maybe this was because he wasn't around any of his idiot friends*, she reflected. The very instant one of his friends (or any man for that matter) would show up, it seemed, he would start to tease her. These remarks were mostly aimed at how big her butt was. The only problem was, she didn't think it was all *that* fat. Well, okay, maybe it was a little big, but she'd seen worse. *A lot* worse. Like gee, honey, why don't you move your fat ass so I can see the TV? Or, why are you eating *that*? Don't you know what that's going to do to your fat butt? Hahahaha.

Then there were those stupid blonde jokes. God, she hated those. What do blondes wear for earrings? Their ankles. Hahahaha. What do you call a blonde who dyes her hair black? Artificial intelligence. Hahahaha. Oh, yeah, these were *real*/funny. That was unless you happened to *be* blonde, like she was. He always told her she took everything way too seriously. That she needed to lighten up. And she supposed this was true, but she could hardly help who she was, could she?

She remembered taking him to her brother and sister-in-law's place for dinner one night about a month into their relationship. Craig and Mary usually liked the current man in her life. And although this would be an exception to that rule, she ended up defending him. Why she couldn't say. He had been a complete jerk, especially to Mary, after all.

They had both liked Aaron, her previous boyfriend, and, for that matter, so had she. She wasn't sure, even now, why they had broken up in the first place. Perhaps they'd just grown tired of one another. Perhaps they'd grown so accustomed to one another that they started taking each other for granted. Whatever the reason, it was over now. Or was it? Maybe she'd call him when she got home. They had, after all, remained friends. This was probably due to the fact that they'd been together for over two years (and living together

for the last six months of their relationship) when they finally called it quits. Yes, she decided, I will call him, if for no other reason than to have a shoulder to cry on. Then she was going to call Mary and tell her that she was right after all.

This night at Craig and Mary's would turn out to be an unmitigated disaster, well, for her anyway. That was except for one tiny bright spot and her name was Christine. The very instant she walked in the door, she discovered she now had an attachment growing from her legs: a 9-year-old (just turned not two months before) little girl. Julie picked her up. Christine chattered, on and on, about how long they had taken getting here (God that kid could talk a mile a minute. This had to come from her mother's side of the family. Julie's family tended to be a little quieter and a little more reserved, and that included Craig, who, admittedly could be just hilarious when he wanted to be but, for some reason she had yet to figure out, refused to do so in front of strangers). Christine scolded her for not being more timely in her arrival, and then told Julie about her latest school project. Christine asked if she wanted to see it, and Julie said that, of course, she did. They both excused themselves. "I won't be but a minute. I'll let you guys get acquainted." Julie said. Then Christine was dragging Julie off to her room to show off her latest trophy.

When they got there and Christine had closed the door, Julie asked her, "So, what do you think? About my new boyfriend, I mean."

"Oh, he's cute. But he's also pretty mean." Christine turned to her night stand and picked something up.

"What do you mean by that?" Julie tried not to sound indignant, Christine was an adorable kid after all, but Christine seemed completely unperturbed by it.

Christine turned to face her, holding what looked at first glance to be a small blob made out of glazed clay, "I don't know," she said shrugging one small shoulder, "he just looks mean, that's all. See!" she held up the small blob. Julie took this delicately, turned it over in her hands. Now that she had it a little closer to her eyes, it looked like a small animal. "Puffy!" she exclaimed with joy and triumph. Puffy had been Christine's cat before she was run over by a car some seven or eight months before.

Christine was clapping her hands, obviously pleased that Julie had recognized Puffy in what was little more than a couple of ears on top of a small glob of clay with a thin little line of clay wrapped almost completely around it for a tail.

"Oh, it's beautiful! Can I have it?" This had become somewhat of a game between them. Whenever Christine had something of obvious value to her, Julie would ask if she could have it. The answer was always the same and was no different this time.

"NO! You can't have it!" Christine was giggling now, then her face turned serious. "Daddy says that Puffy is in heaven now. Is that right?"

Julie knew Christine wasn't questioning the voracity of her father's claim. She was simply looking for another opinion, something to put her mind at ease. Julie wanted to comply with her wishes but at the same time knew it would be useless, not to mention senseless to lie to the girl. She picked Christine up into her arms, "Ya know. I really don't have the foggiest."

"Really?"

"Really." Julie touched Christine's nose with the tip of her finger. "Shall we go out and join the others?"

"Okay."

"Well, okay then." And Julie gave her a bouncy ride into the kitchen.

#

The conversation was pleasant enough through dinner until dessert rolled around. Mary had made one of her famous pumpkin pies, and oh, it was scrumptious. This was one of Julie's biggest weaknesses (and of

course Mary knew it). Pumpkin pie. She loved pumpkin pie! She had, in fact, smelled it cooking as soon as she walked in the door. She took Mary aside after going into Christine's room and said: "is that pumpkin pie I smell."

"Yes, it is. I hope you like it. I've been experimenting with the cinnamon."

"Oh, I'm sure I will."

Then the time to serve it came, and Ted started in. "You aren't really going to *eat* that, are you?" he said, looking directly at Julie.

"Yes, I am. It looks and smells great, doesn't it?" she tried to sound upbeat and to distract him. She knew what was coming, but she'd be damned if she was going to say no just to please him.

Ted shifted his attention to Craig, "Women. Don't have the foggiest idea what's good for them, do they?"

"What do you mean?" Craig said as he shoveled a mouthful of pie into his mouth.

"What I mean is," and here he turned his attention back to Julie, "a moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips."

"Oh," Craig attempted to salvage the conversation although he did little to help matters, "I don't know. I actually prefer a woman with a little meat on her bones. Especially around that area of the body."

"Oh, I can tell." This produced a big frown from Craig and an even bigger one from Mary. But God love them, they didn't push it. This was just as well, because it would end up being the very last thing Ted said in their company all night. Julie would attempt to get him engaged in the conversation several times after dessert was eaten and they were sitting in the living room having coffee. But Ted was having none of it. He would simply grunt when asked a pointed question and look off in another direction. It wasn't until later and they were in the car that Julie found out why. "Your brother is kind of out there, isn't he?"

By this time Julie was fuming. "Oh, I wouldn't say that," she said through clenched teeth, "he's always been the most level headed one of the bunch."

"Okay. What was all that bull about him liking women with big asses?"

She came very close to breaking up with him at that moment. What gave him the right to judge women based on how big their butts were? "Maybe he does. Is that a crime or something?"

"It seems pretty obvious that he does. I mean did you see the size of Mary's ass. Holy shit! You know, you should have warned me about that."

"And just what was I supposed to say, 'oh, by the way, my sister-in-law's butt is about half the size of Rhode Island!' Come on. Could we change the subject, please?"

She called Mary the next day, even though she knew what the verdict would be. She did it more to apologize than to ask her opinion, but she knew she wouldn't get off the phone without getting a big earful from her somewhat opinionated sister-in-law. And she was right. "Hello, Mary, thank God you answered the phone instead of Craig. I don't think I could face talking to him right now."

"Oh, hi, how are you?" In the background, the sounds of a football announcer. Mary was trying to cover for her. "Honey, I'm going to take this in the bedroom. Could you hang this up when I get there." Mary said to Craig.

Then faintly, Craig answered, "sure, honey. Don't be gone long. The Rockets are going to win this one, I can feel it."

There was a moment of transition, the sounds of the announcer and Craig's protestations when a Rocket would miss a pass. She really didn't see Mary's fascination with football. Okay, so maybe being raised in a house full of boys did help. Mary had four brothers after all, all of them older, but she'd had three when she was growing up (all of them older as well) and no mother since she was 8-years-old. This was, no doubt,

the reason she and Mary got along so well, well, that and they both shared the same body type: pear shaped. But she also knew it was more than that.

Mary was like the sister she'd never had. She was someone Julie shared all her secrets with, someone who was always there for her no matter the circumstance, someone who wasn't afraid to tell her the truth, even when it hurt, even though, Mary's advice was generally good for her.

Mary and Craig's family had become Julie's surrogate family, in a manner of speaking. It had become somewhat of a custom that whenever Craig and Mary needed some time alone, away from the kids, they called Julie to baby-sit. Julie would always drop whatever plans she had going at the time, which were usually nothing, just for the chance to spend some time with Christine (she'd gotten pissed off at them one time when they didn't call her). When Julie wasn't going out on a date or working, she usually found herself at her brother Craig's apartment, anyway, even if they hadn't called her to baby-sit, talking to Mary, Craig and Christine and, sometimes, even to little Paulie.

These visits always ended with a huge hug from Craig and his admonition, "You take care of you. Promise me."

She knew she'd never get away unless she said, "I promise." So, she did. Every time. And she'd always follow those words with a big hug of her own.

But Julie still hated football. In fact, she didn't know the difference between a guard and a quarterback and quite frankly didn't want to learn.

She heard a muffled Mary yelling at Craig to hang up the phone on the other end of the line. A faint click, then Mary was speaking: "how are you? Really."

"I just called to apologize for Ted."

"Let's worry about Ted in a minute. How are *you*?"

"I'm fine. Really I am."

"Are you sure? Those were some pretty mean things he was saying. Who gives a good God damn how big your derriere is?"

This was something else Julie liked about Mary, her complete inability to use vulgar language. Oh, sure, she'd swear now and again, but you'd never catch her saying something like, "tits", "ass", "shit" or even "butt". Apparently, Mary was raised in a household that taught that proper young women did *not* use vulgar language. Period. End of story. "Oh, I know. But he really is a nice guy, once you get to know him."

"Oh, I'm sure he is. But is he the right man for you?"

"Gee, Mary, I don't know. Why don't you enlighten me?" Julie said sarcastically. *Don't get defensive. You knew this was coming, after all.*

Mary acted like she didn't hear the sarcasm in her voice. "Since you asked. I will." *Okay. Here it comes,* Julie thought, and she was right, again. "I don't think that any man who *can* be cruel is worth having. Period. Dump him. Now. Before he says or does something that is going to really hurt."

"Okay, Mary, I'll think about it."

"You promise?" The door opened in the background and, a little dimly, Craig's voice said, "the Rockets just scored."

"Okay, hon, I'll be in in a minute." The door shut again.

"Yes, I promise. Could you tell me something?" Julie didn't really need to change the subject. She knew Mary was finished. She'd said her peace and whether Julie took her advice or not was up to her. As far as Mary was concerned, the subject was closed.

"Sure, hon, what is it?" Now Mary was back to the sweet, lovable person Julie had grown to love. *What on God's green earth did my brother do to deserve her,* she thought and not for the first time.

“How can you be so comfortable with your body?”

Mary laughed, that deep throaty laugh of hers, what Julie’s Dad would call a “good belly laugh, the kind that comes from deep inside”. All Julie could do was wait her out and wonder, *what did I say that was so funny?* Mary suddenly sobered and said, “because my dear, your *brother* is so comfortable with my body. Is there any other reason?”

“No, I suppose not. Well, I’ll let you get back to your game.”

“Okay. Now, you’re sure you’re alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Okay, then, goodbye.”

“Goodbye.” After Julie hung-up the phone she thought long and hard about what Mary had said. The only problem was she would end up thinking about it for another four months before things came to a head.

#

And now, as she drove down the somewhat deserted, snow and ice littered streets, she couldn’t help but wonder why she stayed with Ted as long as she did. She sure didn’t love him. Of this she was certain, but she did like him an awful lot. *God, why do men have to be so stupid?* She pounded the steering wheel in frustration. The tears came then. She attempted to knuckle them away from her eyes with little success. This, unfortunately, left her with just one hand on the wheel and blurred vision, not necessarily a good thing in late January on icy streets, because the next thing she knew her car was fishtailing. It took some doing, but she finally got it back under control.

“That was close. I’ll have to be more careful.” she said out loud, her tears forgotten and her heart thumping like a wild gorilla in her chest, her ears pounding with every beat. She checked her speed. Good, safely under the limit. Next, she checked the rearview mirror and instantly did a double take. There was nobody behind her, as she passed under a streetlamp. It was her face that drew her attention. Underneath all the runny mascara, the smeared lipstick, it looked like she had aged a good twenty years in the span of . . . how long had it been since she’d looked in a mirror? A couple of hours? Three maybe? It mattered little. *Oh, come on. The streetlights are just playing tricks on you. It is dark outside after all. That’s all it is, really.* But was it? She turned her attention back to the road before curiosity got the better of her, and she looked back into the mirror. But before she did, she reached down to the light switch and turned on the dome. It was true! She had aged! This frightened her more than anything ever had. Where once there was a smooth cheek, now there were wrinkles. Where once her hazel eyes had been smooth around the corners, as well, now there were worry lines. *What’s happening to me?!* She returned her attention back to the road briefly. Then looked back into the mirror, again. And as she looked at herself, it seemed the wrinkles were getting worse. There! A wrinkle appeared as if by magic on her forehead. *No! This isn’t happening!* She touched her face and all signs of aging disappeared. *Okay. Now I’m seeing things. This cannot be good.* She was still puzzling over it, touching her face and looking into the mirror, when a shrill voice, one she’d never heard before screamed at her,

- “Look out!” -

She had no time to wonder where that voice had come from. Hell, she didn’t even have time to think, for as she turned her attention back to the road, a bus with the words “24 Downtown” tattooed above the windshield was barreling down on her. She attempted to swerve back into her own lane. She might have made it, too, had her car not decided to hit a patch of black ice at that moment. Sudden terror gripped her heart as her car refused to swerve! Instead, it just kept moving straight ahead, in what looked to be a head-on collision with that ginormous vehicle! Sheer, unadulterated panic took full control of her body, as she stomped both feet on the brakes, way too late to do any good. But this did nothing. Her car continued to

slide at the same speed! It honked its horn in the same moment she screamed and covered her face with her arms in a criss-cross in a vain effort to protect her head. Then, she was screaming no more as the bus *slammed* into her car, driving the steering column into her chest, *crushing* her ribs and her scream in a split-second. Her head snapped forward, back, forward and back, once again, then rocked slowly forward. She was dead before her head stopped moving.

-“And even as the bus drove the steering column into her chest, even as she understood with perfect clarity that she was going to die, in fact, just before her head would snap forward for the first time, in those very last moments of life, she wasn’t thinking of her brother, Craig. She wasn’t thinking of her sister-in-law, Mary or her niece or nephew, Christine and Paulie. She wasn’t thinking of the rest of her family: her father, Jack, her other two brothers, Brian and Jason and their wives. She wasn’t even thinking of her now lost boyfriend, Ted.

You see, Julie was raised in a church that believed it was the only true church on the entire face of the earth. And while this was far from unusual, she did nevertheless believe it for the longest time. That was until she went to college and discovered a different truth. This truth was not in the form of another religion. This was, instead, in the form of scientific fact. Julie would end up majoring in biology, and this one decision would change her life forever.

She stopped going to church in the middle of her Sophomore year and did not return. This wasn’t so unusual either. A lot of kids do the same thing. But at the time she really didn’t think much of it. All three of her brothers had fallen away from going to church, as well. Even her father, the one who had insisted they all go when she was young (‘because that’s what your mother would have wanted’ was all the reason he ever seemed to need), had stopped going as soon as she had moved over here. She wasn’t sure even now why he’d chosen to do so. Perhaps, losing the baby of the family had been too much. Perhaps, with all of the family grown up and on their own, he just didn’t see the need anymore. Whatever the reason, she didn’t blame herself, had, in fact, never even given blame a second thought. What her father chose to do with his life was his business, and she saw no reason to interfere with that.

So you see, just before Julie died, just before her head would snap forward, back, forward and back, once again, then rock forward, she was wondering if she would make it into the Kingdom of Heaven. She was in for a surprise, however, because her soul would have a very different destination. A very different destination indeed.”-