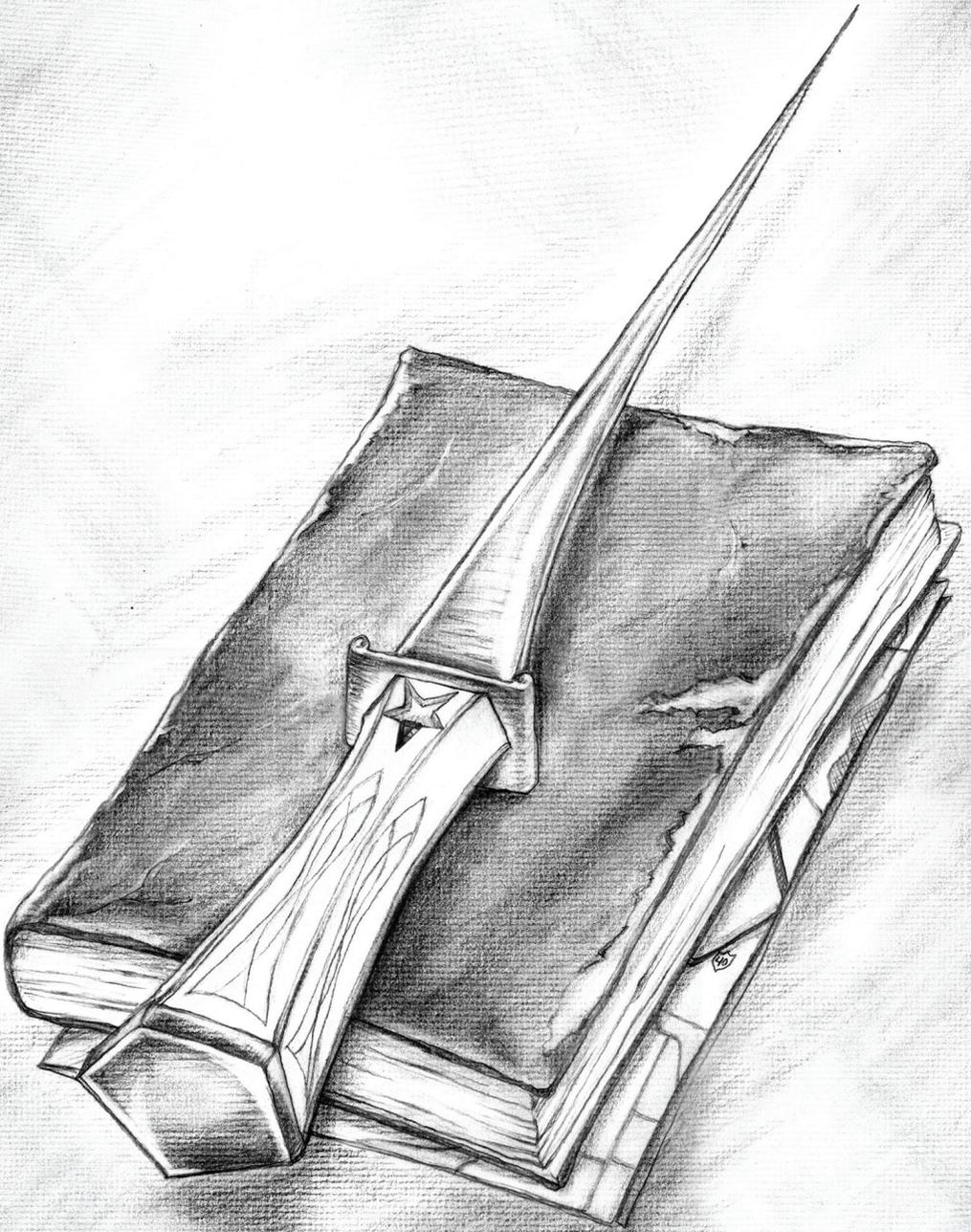


JOURNEY  
OF THE  
DAGGERS

[THE COMPLETE 2012 TRILOGY]

A NOVEL BY  
PETER GALARNEAU JR.





*Fallis*

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The Worms Within Us (1994)

The Edge of Hell (1994)

Blood Barbers (1996)

Muldoon's Nursery (1997)

### **Novels**

The Cubit: The 2012 Trilogy I (2008)

The Djed: The 2012 Trilogy II (2009)

O-Time: PUSH\* (2010)

DEDICATED TO:

Nelda, Forrest and Bobbi  
*For providing support for it all*

The Drunken Sausage  
*For providing a place from it all*

Peter Galarneau Sr.  
*Author of the son*

Arah Edgel Galarneau Cox Maloney  
*Who finally found Paradise*



## FOREWARD

It was near midnight on December 31, 1999. I'll never forget it. Beyond thinking about Prince and how he wanted to "Party Like It's 1999," I could not assure myself that all of the lights would not go out, that all of the computers would not shut down, that Mankind would not, in the next five minutes, find itself without the electronic means to support itself. The Computers would finally win. And my poor ass, along with thousands of others, standing dazed on, or near, the Roberto Clemente Bridge in Pittsburgh, would become nothing more than statistics. In all of my well-reasoned, left-brained conglomerations of experiences, I still imagined, on that starry night, that life was going to change in some dramatic way that made all of the idiotic soothsayers...intelligent.

Didn't we all?

If the clock turning "00" would have been the end of the world, then all of us—me, my wife, my brother-in-law, everyone I cared about (which suddenly included a couple of thousand people standing on a bridge)—would have met a collective, untimely death, one that had been invented by man, accelerated by man and promulgated by the information channels that man had crafted.

And that got me thinking...about End Times, about all the End Times that had already ended. You know, like the ones said to be predicted by Revelation. Names such as Joseph Smith, William

Miller, The Watchtower Society, Herbert W. Armstrong, Jim Jones, Pat Robertson, Osho, David Koresh, Marshall Applewhite (the list really is very long) surfaced. Of course, so many of these “prophets” took with them too many innocent lives. These “prophets” were the antitheses of what prophets were really meant to be. For every Good there is Evil. For every real prophet there is a false prophet and in many cases, it’s hard to tell them apart.

Taking the idea one step further, I started wondering why good people turn bad, why that wonderful mother who leads PTA meetings and takes SUV loads of kids to soccer practices ends up throwing her own children into a lake. What gets into people? What makes them turn? What nests inside us waiting to be released and what is the “thing” that induces such darkness to surface? Something ancient? Certainly, something not created by man. Something like... the Cubit, an antithesis in its own right.

I have always believed that the very best way to scare someone is to base a selected fear on truths rooted to reality. I started thinking about Revelation, rereading it for the umpteenth time, and how rote the idea was since, if you follow the scholarly theologians’ way of thinking, Revelation is nothing more than a sign of its own time. But that’s not how most of us think about the final book of the Bible. We think like fundamentalists. It’s more exciting this way. We get to ask ourselves a whole slew of What If questions that can never, really, truly have answers, not unless you ally those answers to first-century Rome, and what fun is that?

Unfortunately (for me anyway), there are as many interpretations of Revelation as there are those who believe in it. And that can be quite daunting to wrap one’s head around. So, in my search for an End Time that we could all believe in and that provided for me and my readers lots of possible twists and turns in plot, I chose an End Time rooted in reality—one that is just around the corner and was created by no one who has been alive for about a thousand years.

The ancient Mayans had their Gods but their calendar was not based on belief and therefore their End Date is not up for interpretation. The ancient Mayans used the Earth and the Sun and the planets and the stars as ultimate predictors and who can argue with such celestial magnates? Unlike the Bible that never really dates anything, for me, the Mayan calendar dated everything, beginning 26,000 years ago. How could such a primitive culture know of the precession of the Earth? How could such a primitive culture know that at the culmination of a 26,000 year cycle, the Earth and Sun would align on the Galactic Center? While Europe debated the flatness of Earth and how our planet was the center of the universe, the Mayans were documenting facts that would have proven these European thinkers wrong. And that primitive culture nailed down a date that would have, today, scientists and faith-mongers alike promoting ideas that *will* happen on December 21, 2012. What if this will be the end of the world...or, at least, the end of the world as we've lived it?

It's a human necessity to think about What If? The world that we know can't work correctly without a big, heaping helping of the unknown. What if everything had shut down on December 31, 1999? We will never know because, of course, Y2K was only as important as a calendar day clicking forward. The year 2000 came, nobody died on that beautifully yellow (they call it gold in Pittsburgh) bridge, and we all drank something to commemorate our continued, ignorant control of this planet.

Earth...

Time...

Humanity...

No wonder there continues to be a quagmire of confusion that ultimately culminates in masses of people wandering aimlessly on yellow bridges in big American cities waiting for The End.

Computer "geeks" told me I was going to be changed (and perhaps die) one second after December 31, 1999. I didn't believe

them, only after I found that, since nobody threw me over the yellow bridge, I remained standing and everyone else looked depressed.

It was the first day of the new millennium: a day I had always looked forward to, more in regret of getting older than of the scant significance of the date (still, I did collect bottles of water and cans of green beans). But it was also a time for looking forward to the next End Date scenario. That is when The 2012 Trilogy was born.

You see, I AM only human and I will always drive myself crazy thinking about how people die (particularly me). How much better is it to die not alone, but with everyone else on the planet? That is why, I think, we hold onto these extinction scenarios. We live as social creatures and we should, therefore, die as social creatures. As one. Together.

So what does The 2012 Trilogy have to do with all of this opportunistic End Days' forecasting, the unending sagas presented by the rich exclamations of past fears, present ideals, and future ramifications emboldened by electromagnetic mind feeds?

It has nothing to do with them at all! It has to do with you and me and perceptions. Because, like all dates, December 21, 2012, will come and pass. Either humanity will continue to live by such Gregorian time capsules afterward, or some other planet will witness the bright light of a distant primitive culture as it quits.

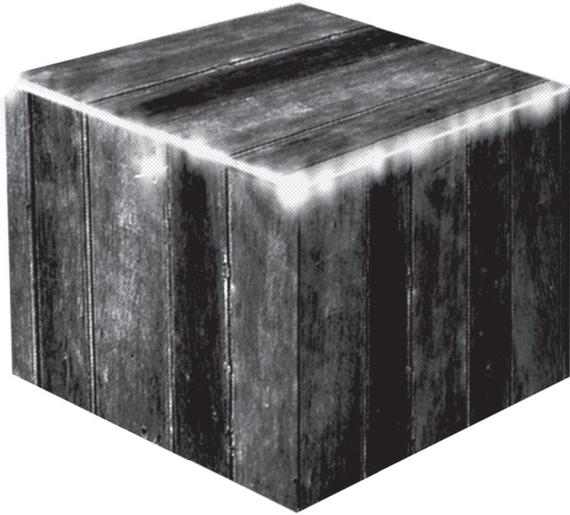
But...sorry...there I go again.

Prophesying.





BOOK ONE  
THE CUBIT





# THE CUBIT

## PART I



THE CUBIT: PART I  
ENDANGERED  
SUMMER 2007

Lenny's mother had warned him about the dangers of hitchhiking.

"I said, LET ME OUT OF THIS CAR!"

The driver's fist struck Lenny's left eye. The driver growled, "And I said, shut 'yer goddamn mouth!"

The station wagon fishtailed around the sharp corner at Pickett's Crossing and accelerated, sending a box, the size of a small coffin, to the back of the cargo bay and into the rear hatch. Behind them in close pursuit fishtailed two Kansas State Police cruisers. The lead cruiser lost its slide, hit the gravel shoulder and scraped the guardrail with a metal-to-metal screech that easily overpowered its siren.

The old man began mumbling again, talking to the steering wheel, slamming his large fists against its hard plastic. He looked in the rearview mirror and then abruptly at Lenny.

"See! I told you they were chasing me. Christ, they're gonna kill us both."

The old man whimpered. His eyes drooped; wrinkles rippled from the horrified brown marbles in sagging circular waves. He'd not slept in a long time—at least, that's the story he'd given Lenny when he'd picked him up that afternoon.

Lenny had been waiting for an hour at a 76 station near I-70 when the

dusty 1984 Oldsmobile Custom station wagon had pulled in.

“Where you headed?” the old man had asked while topping off his tank.

“Pickett’s Crossing, Kansas.”

“Kansas!” The old man had scratched his gray stubby chin. “Yeah,” he’d said. “Kansas. They’ll never think of that.”

“Excuse me?” Standing on the other side of the pump, Lenny had not heard the old man’s mumble.

“Oh, nothing. Forgive an old man and his blabbering. I’ve not slept in several days.”

He’d replaced the pump, had plucked a twenty from a thick wad of bills and had shoved it at the station attendant who’d walked from the garage to stare precariously when the old man had pulled in. “Come on, son. We got miles to cross.”

Just a lonely soul out for a relaxing weekend drive, Lenny had thought—a simple farmer who’d suddenly decided that Pickett’s Crossing, Kansas, would make a wonderful destination even if it was five hundred miles out of his way.

And the wad of money? His life’s savings? Or, more realistically, blood money picked from a dead convenience store clerk, bank teller, or gas station attendant.

Lenny should have known. He should have listened to his mother.

It wasn’t until they’d crossed the Missouri line into Kansas that Lenny had become concerned. The old man had become increasingly jittery, keeping his eyes more on the falling sun than on the road. He’d stopped talking about his lovely wife who’d died a few years back, about his grand kids (one of which had died recently), and about the beautiful state of Missouri and all the good years he’d lived there. Then, when the sun had disappeared and night had grown dense, the old man had clammed up altogether. He’d stared at length in his rearview mirror, often weaving across the four-lane interstate and onto the grass median or rocky shoulder like a blindfolded drunk driver.

That’s when Lenny had noticed the box. Turning out of curiosity to see what attracted so much of the old man’s attention, Lenny had seen it in the cargo area shoved tightly against the back side of the rear seat.

A wooden box the size of a small coffin.

Lenny had remembered their earlier conversation—the recent tragic death of the old man’s three-year-old grandson—and Lenny had wondered. The box seemed to be just about the right size for...

“Shit!” the old man grumbled as one of the police cruisers rammed the tail of the station wagon. The old man hit the brakes, the cruiser collided

with the tail bumper, glass from the rear hatch imploded, and the coffin rushed backward then forward, crashing into the back side of the rear seat as splinters of window stabbed Lenny's head and neck. The crumpled front end of the police cruiser sped up alongside the station wagon and veered into the rear door behind the old man. The squelch of the police cruiser's PA startled Lenny.

"Pull the fuck over, Professor Cower! You ain't got no escape this time! We'll make sure of that!"

Lenny saw two uniformed outlines in the front seat of the cruiser. The passenger raised his revolver and fired. Lenny flinched as the bullet webbed the front windshield, having missed his nose by the smallest inch.

"I'm gonna blow your goddamn head off," the officer warned, "if you don't stop this shit right now!"

The second cruiser came up from behind and smacked the tail of the station wagon as the lead cruiser continued to press the car from the left. Suddenly, the professor jerked the steering wheel hard to the right. Lenny saw the rushing guardrail as it snaked by his door at sixty miles an hour. He lowered his head and clutched the seat, readying himself for impact.

But none came.

The professor had found a side road, had abruptly turned onto it. Lenny raised his head in time to see the fiery inferno as the police cruisers collided, flipped, split the guardrail, and disappeared in a tumbling blaze down a steep embankment on the far side of the road.

The professor sat rigid. His foot seemed glued to the accelerator pedal. Stalks of corn a month from harvest sped by on either side of the station wagon, slapped the headlights and windshield as if trying to prevent passage. "Okay, kid. Where to now?" he grumbled.

The voice seemed far away. Lenny's mind was too busy sorting out the terror of being kidnapped and shot at. Hell, the cop's bullet had almost taken his head off. He stared at the windshield, his left eye swelling, and imagined his brains scattered across the dashboard, blood pasted in sticky masses to the webbed glass. Absently, he groped his face with his fingertips, assuring himself that his head was still there.

*Kid*, someone was saying. God, how he hated that name. His stepfather had always called him that. The wife-beating alcoholic had once threatened to blow Lenny's brains out, had placed a .44 magnum handgun right to his temple and had pulled back the hammer. "Okay, *Kid*," he'd slurred. "Tell me who the fuck your mama's been whoring around with."

Of course, his mother had never "whored" around with anyone. The accusation was his stepfather's Jim Beam delusion and Lenny had told him

so. That's when his stepfather had pulled the trigger on an empty weapon. Click! And Lenny had seen his brains and blood scattered throughout his bedroom in much the same colorful way as he now saw them stuck to the windshield. The fear of death in 3-D Technicolor. It had made him sick then as it did now.

"Goddammit, kid! You're from around here. How do I get back to the main road?" The professor pulled a gun from under the seat and pointed it at him. "I said, how do we get the fu...?"

Lenny puked in a thin stream onto the dashboard, then turned and continued spraying across the gun and the professor's lap.

"Shit!" the professor yelled and stomped the brake pedal. The station wagon jumped off the dirt road into the corn field, sliced through green stalks, and settled in a cloud of heavy dust. The professor quickly opened his door and rolled out. "Shit, shit, shit," he growled as he scoured his lap with dirt and crumpled stalks.

Lenny had the opportunity to run but his stomach was in control of the situation. He hiccupped a tiny amount of bile and rolled out of the car. The crisp smell of broken corn stalks deodorized the acidic stench of vomit. He took a deep breath, removed his shirt and wiped his mouth and chin, then spit the remaining taste.

The professor crossed in front of the station wagon's headlights and Lenny turned to run. "Wait!" the professor demanded. Lenny stood still, believing the gun was pointed at his spine. "Please. I need your help."

"You might as well shoot," Lenny said, "I'm not aiding and abetting any criminal."

"Ease up. I don't have the gun. And even if I did, I wouldn't shoot you." Lenny heard the shuffle of the professor's feet, felt him at his back. "Turn around, for God's sake."

Lenny thrashed out as he turned, throwing a kick to the groin and a backhand to the face. But the professor was quick—too quick for someone who looked to be nearly sixty years-old. He kicked Lenny's leg out from under him while grabbing his wrist in the same motion, then tossed Lenny aside as if batting away an annoying insect.

"Listen!" The professor knelt. "I haven't enough time for this. You're just going to have to trust me." The professor stared into the broken cornfield. His eyes were wild, intense. His nose flared, sucking in deep breaths. His hands played nervously with broken corn stalks. "They won't stop until they retrieve the Cubit," he whispered to the summer breeze, his voice quivering, acknowledging some fact that apparently scared the living hell out of him.

"The Cubit?" Lenny said.

The professor grabbed Lenny's upper arm and pulled as he rose. "Sorry about all of this. I shouldn't have involved you. It's just that...I needed some help. I'm getting tired. They won't let me sleep. The last time I had a solid meal was in Philly and that was two days ago."

"I thought you said you were from Missouri," Lenny said, backing a step from the professor's wrinkled stare.

"I lied."

"And your wife—your grand kids?"

"Dead as I've said. Murdered in their sleep the night I took off."

*Murdered*, Lenny thought. Now that made more sense than any of the lies the professor had told so far. Of course they'd been murdered—by the good professor no doubt. The police chase, the gun under his seat, his crazy mood swings and occasional unleashed anger, each a check mark in the "yes" column for Lenny's description of a psychotic killer on the run.

"Hey kid—listen to me." The professor grabbed Lenny's shoulders and Lenny flinched. "I'm not going to hurt you. You got that?" Lenny's tears dropped and the professor shoved him away. His eyebrows drew tight with anger. The folds around his eyes deepened. "You think I killed them, don't you. DON'T YOU!" Lenny nodded. "It wasn't me, dammit." He slammed a fist against his thigh. "It wasn't me."

Suddenly, the professor stiffened. He looked around like a bloodhound on the scent. The station wagon had traveled twenty yards from the dirt road into the cornfield. The engine had died but the lights were still on. The rear hatch had opened and lying in the trampled stalks halfway between the station wagon and the road was the box. It lay askew on a tiny ridge of plowed earth and glowed red from the taillights.

Lenny stared at it, thought that a three-year-old could easily fit inside, that maybe a wife—if chopped finely enough—could have been stuffed inside as well.

The box shifted on the mound of earth as if something alive was inside. And then a knock—knuckles on wood. Something inside the box wanted out. The rapping of knuckles turned into the thrashing of fists as the trapped beat feverishly from within the box.

"Let—them—out," came a voice, seemingly from within the box. The pronunciation was slow, disoriented, sounding like a cassette tape running at half speed. "Let—them—out—now."

Standing on the dirt road, a shadow highlighted in pink, was one of the state troopers.

"Can't—you see—they—want out—pro—fes—sor..." the trooper said while raising his revolver.

“Tough shit,” the professor responded, standing near the opened passenger door, eyeing the gun that lay in a puddle of puke on the front seat.

The trooper fired and the professor jerked backward. Lenny dropped to his knees as the professor dove through the shattered rear passenger door window, flipped into the car, and grabbed the gun. The trooper ran into the plowed lane created by the station wagon as the professor brought his gun out and steadied it on the roof of the car.

Bang!

The trooper lifted off the ground and fell flat on his back ten feet from the box.

Lenny crouched at the professor’s heels wondering what to do. Everything was moving too fast. There was too much information and too little time to sort it out. Murders, gunfights, psycho killers—Come on! He was just hitchhiking home to see his mother for Christ’s sake. *Let them out*, the trooper had said. Let who out? Of what? Shouldn’t his demand have been, *Halt, you crazy murderous scumbag or I’ll blow your damned head off*. Didn’t anyone watch T.V. around here?

*Stop thinking, Lenny, and act.*

*Save your ass.*

*Get the gun from the professor.*

Lenny dove at the back of the professor’s legs, yanked them up and away and the professor went down. He grabbed the gun and pointed it at the professor’s head. “Enough of this shit! You hear me?” The gun shook in his hands. His voice trembled. His body quivered. This was much different than in the movies. Real guns, real blood—*really* a matter of life or death. “You... You stay there or I’ll blow your—” *Go ahead. Say it. Or I’ll blow your goddamn head off. Clint Eastwood would say it. Hell, he’d do it; he loved blowing holes in things*. But Lenny couldn’t say it, couldn’t do it; he just wanted to go home and get this nightmare over with.

Fortunately for Lenny’s cowardice, the professor was in no shape to go anywhere. The trooper had shot him in the right breast and his stomach was gashed open from the shards of window glass that he’d dove through to get the gun. His mouth worked as if he were chewing gum and Lenny moved closer, pointing the gun haphazardly at the bullet hole in the professor’s chest.

“Watch out,” the professor gasped and slid an arm through the crumpled corn stalks with his index finger pointed in the direction of the felled trooper. Lenny jerked, thinking the professor was stretching for some hidden weapon.

“You killed him, man,” Lenny said now steadying the gun with both hands. “There’s nothing to watch out for except you.” That’s what Clint

Eastwood would say, he thought.

“No. Not dead. Never dead. Watch out.” Blood trickled from the corner of the professor’s mouth and red bubbles escaped as he coughed up more.

In the distance, a gun fired and Lenny felt the buzz of a giant insect nip his left ear. He turned. The trooper advanced with his revolver raised. Lenny dropped as the trooper fired another round.

“Hey!” Lenny yelled. “I’m innocent! I’m one of the good guys!”

“Don’t let him get the Cubit,” the professor moaned. “Trust me.” He closed his eyes and exhaled.

“The Cubit? What?”

The trooper had acquired the box and was now carrying it back toward the road. “Hey, professor. He’s got the Cubit. Professor?” His hands shook. He wasn’t Clint Eastwood. In fact, his actions resembled those of Clint Eastwood’s victims. Men too big for their britches. Men too scared to draw and shoot straight. Men who were kids.

*What are ya gonna do, kid? Draw or whistle Dixie?*

The state trooper turned and fired again. The bullet missed his head by fractions of an inch; he heard it buzzing, like a fly stuck in his ear. Was he actually going to shoot a cop?

*You gotta start livin’ or you gotta start dyin’—*

“Yes, Clint. I know,” Lenny yelled out then squinted and fired two rounds. The trooper flinched and returned fire as Lenny dropped face first near the rear bumper of the station wagon. Something stung his shoulder; glass shattered in the distance. His right arm went numb and, lying face down in the cornfield, he transferred the gun to his left hand.

This was it. He was going to die. He should have known better than to ignore his mother. He should not have hitchhiked. Hitchhiking was the same as stealing, she’d say, and stealing was against God’s Commandments. He could see her crooked finger slashing the sign of the cross in a cumulative gesture of accusation and forgiveness.

The crunch of snapping corn stalks assaulted his ears and a scorched black shoe appeared in front of his nose. The trooper’s pant leg was burned away and in the red taillight luminance, a bare, bubbled calf and shin offered Lenny the nauseating odor of burned flesh. A shoe heel prodded Lenny’s spine. A toe poked his ribs. Lenny gasped.

The trooper’s breath became deep and excited, sounding like a mad scientist who’d just seen the first jerky signs of life from his monster masterpiece.

And then—

Click!

It was his stepfather again, pointing and firing an empty .44 at his head. Again, the visions of brains and blood in his bedroom—across the dashboard. His stomach churned.

*Not this time, coward,* Clint had the nerve to remind him. *You keep that puke to yourself.*

Click! Click! Click!

Lenny quickly rolled and lifted his gun with a wavering left hand, leveled it at—

But, it couldn't be alive—the trooper—this thing. It stood naked. Bone poked through brittle black skin across the length of its body. Its genitals, dangling directly in Lenny's line of sight, resembled an unattended weenie roast at a Boy Scout camp. The pin from the trooper's badge punctured its left breast and dangled from abused, blackened tissue. The badge had a bullet hole through its center. The flesh around the things lips, nose and eyes was totally burned away leaving a grin full of teeth, a white stare, and a broken jaw. It struggled to breathe, sucking air through dime-sized holes just above the charred gum line as it gawked with two lidless eyeballs down the barrel of Lenny's gun.

But this was a human being, wasn't it? Lenny thought. What if the guy was just burned real bad—maybe the fire had gotten to his brain and had burned some part of his logical center. He could be just whacked out, disabled, not knowing what the hell he was doing. Yeah—that had to be it. Lenny couldn't shoot someone who wasn't responsible for their own actions. Besides, it was against God's Commandments to murder.

*Shoot the Mother Fucker!* Clint demanded.

The thing that had been a Kansas state trooper kicked the gun from Lenny's hand. Its black shoe tore loose and followed the gun into the cornstalks. Lenny's body wanted to roll away as the thing leapt at him but his mind was too busy listening to advice from his mother and Clint. Bony fingers wrapped around his throat, tightened their grip. A gritty trail of brittle flesh broke from the things flexing hand and fell underneath his shirt. Its bulging eyeballs, gnashing teeth, and whistled gasps floated within a black mask above Lenny's face.

Lenny beat and shoved with his left arm as his throat was strangled but this only broke away more burnt pieces of the thing's body. Soot came out of its nose and fell into Lenny's gasping mouth. The trooper's white teeth hovered over his lips as if it wanted a kiss and this took Lenny over the edge. His mind shut down. His vision dulled.

Before blacking out, Lenny saw the white glimmer of what he thought was the holy light.

Heaven was dark red and it kind of smelled like Kansas. Lenny opened his eyes, believing himself dead. The pain had eased in his shoulder but his right arm remained mostly functionless. He rose with the intent of propping himself with his left elbow but hit his head on the rear bumper of the station wagon. It was still night. He was still in the cornfield. He wasn't dead, this wasn't heaven and worse: all of it—the professor, the gun fight, the burnt thing—had not been a dream.

Lenny kicked himself from under the car and wearily stood. First, he examined his shoulder, bending toward the red glow of the station wagon's taillights for assistance. The bullet had passed cleanly through the meat near his collarbone. What little blood he'd lost was drying in a splotchy half-moon above his breast. Then, he gave the station wagon a troubled stare. Somehow, the box that the professor had called a Cubit had jumped back into the cargo area, had closed the rear hatch and had turned off the engine. Finally, he noticed that the professor and trooper were gone.

Lenny slipped around to the front of the station wagon while looking back across his injured shoulder. Corn rustled in the dim red taillights. An arm rose from the cover of the stalks, revealing a wrist and five fingers that were tightly wrapped around a knife. Down went the wrist, stabbing what hid in the cornstalks, then back up to reveal wrist, fist and knife. Something screeched, sounding, to Lenny, like the villain Scorpio when Eastwood shot him in *Dirty Harry*.

Then...silence. The professor stood.

Lenny looked for the gun and found it sitting atop the Cubit in the back of the station wagon. He ran for it as the professor yelled, "No!"

As Lenny fingered the steel of the pistol's barrel a small blue spark grabbed his left pinky. There was a gentle tug that lasted for the slightest moment, an electrical tingle not unlike the static touch of hand on metal. The blue spark changed to red so quickly that Lenny was not sure the vision had occurred at all. And then the gun was in his hand. He turned it toward the approaching professor though his eyes remained where the blue-red spark no longer existed. He leveled the gun.

"The Cubit," the professor said. "You touched it."

"No. You're wrong. Stand back or I'll..."

Lenny then noticed the knife in the professor's hand. Its blade was quite long and it appeared to glow in the station wagon's taillights.

"Put it down," the professor demanded with a bit of exasperation and a lot of fatigue. "The gun's empty."

Lenny fired. Fired again. Click. Click.

The professor snatched the empty gun and flung it into the back of the station wagon. "Let's get out of here," he said, then added something before he fainted and collapsed that Lenny thought was quite strange. "You've got to protect me. Help...please."

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The drive would take less than fifteen minutes. Lenny sat on thin remnants of the vomit he had swiped from the car seat before climbing in. His right shoulder ached and he could lift it only enough to manage the steering wheel. The professor's injury looked more serious. A large red spot soaked his plaid shirt on the same side as Lenny's injury but his was a few inches lower, more centered around the upper breast than the collarbone. In the dashboard's dim light, Lenny saw a drop of blood trickle from the professor's mouth. The injured man no longer gazed apprehensively into the rearview or side view mirrors which meant that he was either satisfied they were no longer being chased or that he was much too tired to care.

Lenny turned onto a dirt road that led to the Bender's farm. A newspaper protruded from his mother's mailbox and Lenny stopped to fetch it. As he exited the car, he suddenly felt that he'd made a grave mistake. He suddenly realized that he had now placed his mother in great danger, not from the professor so much as from those that were hunting him. He suddenly realized his own selfishness, how getting home and climbing into bed with a warm, home-cooked meal in his tummy was all that had been on his mind. As he snatched the large Sunday edition of the *Topeka Capital Journal* from rusted steel, he gazed hopelessly in all directions, into the middle-of-the-night solitude. The smell of corn rustled his nostril hairs as a thin wave of wind rolled across the darkness. He imagined a legion of burnt, ashen state troopers converging on his mother's house. He imagined Clint Eastwood leading the charge. Clint was no longer big, tough and good-looking. He was now bubbly, torched, and grotesque. He could not see them now but he felt that they were on their way. Somewhere beyond the corn. Somewhere, stalking.

When Lenny climbed back into the station wagon the professor was looking at him with a silent stare that acknowledged understanding. Now you know, the stare said.

Two miles down the front road, between a hundred acres of unplanted farmland (barren due to the neglect of his stepfather) sat the Bender barn and farmhouse. Two years ago, before his father's death, the Benders had made a pretty good living on cotton and corn. Today, Lenny's mother survived as

a self-employed seamstress for the Pickett's Crossing community. Her new husband, Albert, had sold nearly all of the farm animals, including several dozen head of cattle, horses, and a pair of prize-winning Labrador Retrievers that had brought substantial added income to the Bender household, not to mention notoriety. Cash from this 'liquidation' had gone to feed Albert's alcohol and gambling addictions. It would not be long before the land itself would be traded for booze, cards and craps. It all depended on how lucky Albert remained at the Vegas tables. It all depended on whether cheating would one day get the best of him. How Lenny prayed that his stepfather's card-counting would one day summon some large man named Vito to a hotel suite on the outskirts of Las Vegas with a gun in hand and bullets marked for cheating Albert Stine. Perhaps Lenny would return home for good, help his mother get the farm back on its feet, help his mother get her life back together. Right now it was impossible. Lenny was afraid of Albert. Lenny had very little courage. Lenny could not protect a fly from a spider with a can of Raid in hand. The puke at his feet was a reminder of his cowardice, a summation of his life really, a putrid digestion of lost chances, lack of responsibility and selfishness. A tear emerged and dropped to the red stain encircling his right collarbone. Crying was not a manly thing to do either.

He figured it was somewhere close to two in the morning since the Sunday paper was already in the mailbox. Paper delivery was very efficient in Pickett's Crossing. The paper's circulation depended on early delivery to early-rising farm folk.

He doubted his mother would be awake, doubted even more that she'd appreciate being intruded upon on the Lord's day of rest, and was certain that a stranger at her doorstep would not sit well. She trusted few people outside of the Crossing's community. Her extreme reclusion had started after his father's tragic death and had only become worse since Albert's continuing yard sale of all that she and her husband had built together.

As she'd promised Lenny in a letter he'd received a week ago, Albert would be in Vegas. It would be "safe" for him to come home and see his mother. He could help her clean up the barn and do a few field chores. He could share a little love that had become so elusive between them.

Albert's car was not in the yard. His mother's F150 was. As he turned to park beside the truck, the headlights revealed the Ford's rusty shade of white paint. When he switched off the station wagon the professor sighed, closed his eyes and propped his head against the car door window. A circular pattern of breath-fog emerged against the window at the point where lips touched glass. And then he said something that made Lenny think he was dreaming again.

“You need to kill yourself,” he said with shallow breaths. “When it comes out, and it will, you need to kill...” His eyes fluttered as if he were about to pass out. “...to kill you.”

Lenny’s gaze shifted to the wooden box then back toward the professor.

“The Cubit,” the professor said. “Yes. And it won’t be long.”

Lenny remembered the tiny blue-red spark of electricity no stronger than that of a static charge. He remembered his arm tingling. He remembered that the moment had lasted much longer than the split second it took for the tingle to subside. He rubbed his left hand and now studied it, turned it in the palm of his right hand which still did not work well with the bullet hole through his collarbone. When he looked up again, the knife was in the professor’s hand. Lenny flinched.

“Take it,” he said. “It’s the only way.”

Lenny immediately reached forward but paused just inches from the blade. It glistened as if containing a light source of its own. To take it would involve him further. He would become a murderer of children and wives. He would get his own little box and...

The professor shoved the haft of the knife into Lenny’s motionless hand. And as Lenny began to study the weapon which looked more like a dagger with a long thin blade, three things happened simultaneously. The professor passed out, the porch light came on, and his mother emerged with shotgun in hand. She chambered a shot and pointed it at the trespassing car.

Lenny didn’t want to emerge from the station wagon with a weapon at two o’clock in the morning while his mother pointed a loaded shotgun at his head, so he quickly tossed the dagger in the glove box.

“Mom,” he yelled as he opened the car door. “It’s me...Lenny.”

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Janine Bender would not lower the shotgun until she was absolutely sure that the man in the car was really her son. Albert’s latest acquaintances made her untrusting of all strange cars, especially those that appeared on her doorstep in the middle of the night.

She moved across the porch to her right, avoided a pair of wicker chairs that she’d refinished last week, and poked the barrel of the shotgun across the hood of her pickup to the two men sitting in the front seat of an old station wagon.

The porch light reflection bouncing off the car’s windshield made it difficult to see. The passenger appeared motionless, head to window.

Something stained his shirt but she couldn't tell what it was. The driver was her son; she could see him clearly as he stood from the car. His thin brown hair cropped above the ears outlined the small face of a boy who'd moved another six months toward manhood since she'd last seen him. His shirt was also stained in about the same location as the passenger's. She looked past him, following the gray outline of the front road beyond the barn, until she was satisfied that nothing else was out there.

"Mom," Lenny repeated. "Please. Don't shoot."

It was then that Janine realized she had the shotgun pointed at her son's head and immediately lowered it. "What in Moses' name are you doin' out here in the middle of the night, Lenny?" Janine gazed at the man beside Lenny as her son emerged from the station wagon. "And who's that? You know me and strangers."

"He's hurt real bad." Lenny walked around his mother's truck and ascended the five wooden steps to the porch. "He gave me a lift but then we had a little..."

"And you?" She grabbed his shoulder, lightly. Lenny flinched. "Are *you* hurt real bad?" She pulled him closer to her with one arm while setting the gun on the wicker table with the other.

"Oww," he yelped and pulled away like a little boy whose mother had just touched his little boo-boo.

"Gun shot," Janine said, surprised. "Who in Moses' name has been shooting you?" She turned him to look at the hole in his shirt where the bullet had exited.

"Long story," Lenny said, exasperated. "The professor—he's worse off. Probably needs a doctor."

Janine held her son gently by the sides of his head, looked into his brown eyes for answers that she was certain would not be revealed until much later, if at all. "Doctor!" she said. "You know me and doctors." She didn't wait for an answer; she could see that Lenny was concerned. She didn't like strangers and she didn't like doctors but she couldn't turn away an injured man, especially on the Holy day. She'd have to repent for months. "Come on. Let's get him inside."



His mother was much grayer than when he'd last seen her. She looked as old as the professor though Lenny was certain she was at least ten years younger. Her eyes were grayer as well having shifted from azure shortly after his father's death. It had been a strange transformation: blue eyes to

gray. He'd never heard of a person's eyes changing color in the middle of adulthood. It had started with little gray flecks here and there. Now the pupils' were completely gray. They walked together to the passenger's side door of the station wagon.

"He doesn't look well," his mother said. "Lost a lot of blood."

Lenny opened the door slowly and the professor's body slid sideways. He was awake but terribly weak. Lenny helped him into a sitting position.

"We're going to move you inside," Lenny said. The professor responded but Lenny could not understand. He slurred as if drunk. "We're gonna need your help. Okay?"

Lenny reached under the professor's left thigh and arm and scooted him toward the edge of the seat. The professor helped, but not much. When Lenny looked around for his mother he saw her standing motionless and staring into the cargo bay of the station wagon.

"Mom. A little help. Please?"

She remained motionless.

"Mom—"

Lenny was about to lose his balance. His thin frame could not withstand the professor's weight much longer.

"Ka-yaa-buut," the professor moaned. "No Tuuchh."

It took Lenny less than a second to realize what the professor was saying since, simultaneous with this understanding, Lenny watched as his mother leaned into the glass-shattered rear window, her right arm stretched toward the Cubit.

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It was the feeling associated with knowing something no one else knew. It was the feeling that she'd seen it somewhere before but was uncertain if it had been something real or something that had been a part of a dream. It felt like desire and fear and helplessness wrapped together into one extremely unwanted emotion. She could not control herself. She had to touch it. Every fiber of her Christian being screamed for resistance, and this caused her arm and hand to shake as she reached into the station wagon.

"No! Mom! No!"

Its smooth wooden surface was a foot away. She hesitated.

"Don't touch it!"

A little red star was buried in the wood at its top edge, centered, as if serving the function of a hasp but it had no latch. It winked at her, or so she thought. She smiled. Giggled. She hadn't giggled in years. The pads of her

fingers wanted to gently caress it...its electricity...and in one quick motion, she was suddenly jerked forcefully backwards.

“Mom!” Lenny screamed.

She glared at the box, at Lenny, at the man who now lay on the gravel driveway after Lenny had let him fall. The man attempted to roll onto a knee, pushing himself upward with his good arm, before falling back onto the gravel.

“Come on, Mom,” Lenny said, exhausted. “Let’s get the professor inside.”

The man whom her son had called the professor had only enough strength to allow the limited combined efforts of herself and Lenny to guide him into the house and onto the couch. His blood quickly marred the green and white fabric and Janine thought, briefly, how terribly difficult it was going to be to remove those stains. The professor eased onto his back without aid from either of them, blinked a few quick times while studying the ceiling, then closed his eyes. A few driveway pebbles were stuck in his short, matted gray and white beard and Janine brushed them away.

“Go to the bathroom and get me a couple of washcloths,” she said to Lenny. “And bring me a small pan of cool water.”

Lenny exited the living room and disappeared into a hallway that led to the bathroom as Janine unbuttoned the professor’s shirt and peeled it from sticky skin. She rolled the right half of the shirt to fully uncover the bullet wound. Blood still oozed from it, creating a darker pattern in the center that resembled a red star.

And she was suddenly back outside, dazed and confused, wanting to caress the smooth wood surface of the box in the station wagon. The red glistening star. The desire. The fear. Uncontrollable.

“Here ya go.” Lenny’s voice broke the spell. “Is it bad?”

She grabbed both washcloths from her son’s hand, dipped one into the plastic mixing bowl that Lenny had filled with water, then folded it lengthwise and draped it across the professor’s forehead. She wetted the second washcloth and began mopping up the sticky mess of blood from the skin surrounding the wound. She rinsed the washcloth several times until the bowl of water turned crimson.

“He’ll live for now but I’m afraid the bullet is still inside him,” she said over her shoulder, not looking at Lenny. “I’m afraid he’s going to need a hospital. Don’t know what the bullet’s done to him inside but he needs to have it removed.”

The professor suddenly snapped his eyes open and started to rise but was gently forced down by Janine’s hand.

“No,” he demanded without shouting. “No doctors. No hospitals. No policemen. They’ll find me if you do. They’ll find the Cubit. You can’t let that happen.” He grasped Janine’s hand and searched her gray eyes. “*You* can’t let that happen.”

She immediately connected the word ‘Cubit’ with the wooden box outside. Again, there was that feeling of knowing something but not remembering just how you knew it.

“You’ll die without help,” Janine demanded and reached forward to flip the wet washcloth on the professor’s forehead.

“The dagger,” he moaned. “Use the dagger.” Then he closed his eyes and became silent. His breathing came in short spurts. A tiny runner of blood emerged from the right corner of his mouth. Janine guessed that he had little life left.

“What about this dagger?” she asked Lenny. “You know what he’s talking about?”

“Yeah. It’s out in the car. But I don’t understand how it’s gonna help matters.” Janine rose from the professor’s side and turned to her son. “I mean, he used it to kill a cop.”

She could have asked him to explain in more detail and probably would later. Right now she believed that the man on the couch would soon die. She didn’t know what the dagger was nor how it could possibly help the situation but the professor’s last words had been: *Use the dagger*.

“Please get it for me,” she said and reached forward to pull the collar of Lenny’s T-shirt away from his neck. “Once we take care of him, I’ll dress you up.”

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Lenny’s first thoughts were those planted by Stephen King’s *Children of the Corn*. His mother had never allowed him to watch that movie while growing up in a cornfield. Those images were not conducive to a healthy, young Kansas mind. And Lenny had found this assumption to be true when he’d finally seen it in his University of Texas dorm room just last week. His roommate had rented it. It had not been Lenny’s choice.

Now, as he stood on the porch, he wondered where “he who walks among the corn” might be. Had the professor really killed him? Or was the dead state trooper out there still? Was *he* walking among the rows just beyond the porch, waiting for cowardly Lenny Bender? His imagination coalesced into a fear that had him looking in every direction. He stepped from the porch and scampered to the back of the pickup, brushing the bumper with his blue-

jeaned thigh hard enough to embed a rust red streak into the fibers. By the time he reached the passenger-side door of the station wagon, he'd freaked himself out so badly that a Sunday morning crow, looking for an early meal, made him squeal when it flew a few feet above his head. He gasped in much the same way as he'd done while watching *Children of the Corn*.

Once inside the station wagon, he slammed the door, breathing hard, trying to regain composure though the puke-encrusted seat was a gentle reminder of his cowardice. He snapped open the glove box, thinking as he did so that a blue-red spark might shoot from its black depths and abruptly cause Lenny to abandon his effort. Cautiously, he stuck his hand in; the dagger's blade was quite sharp; he was not interested in the pain that it might cause. He was a coward, a paranoid and scared little boy who should have never gone hitchhiking.

His hand shuffled across a folded piece of paper, a small book and the haft of the dagger. He grabbed all three items and set them in his lap. The folded paper was a map that charted southwestern highways through Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. The professor had highlighted in yellow Interstate 40 as it ran through the top half of the three states. In Arizona, the highlighting continued south from Interstate 40 through Flagstaff and ended in the city of Sedona. The professor had drawn a yellow circle around Sedona and Lenny guessed that this was his intended destination.

The book was about an inch thick and a bit smaller in width and height than a regular sheet of notebook paper. The cover was worn and felt like cloth. There was no title. When he tried to open the book, all of the pages seemed stuck together except for the center spread. Strange symbols were written on one of the two center pages. He closed the book to reveal an image of a dagger embossed in gold on the back cover. A star, much like the one on the Cubit, was etched in the dagger's haft. He rubbed his thumb across the star's edges; it felt warm.

His attention shifted to the dagger in his lap. It, too, had a star embedded into the haft just above the blade. It, too, felt warm in his left hand. He moved the dagger into his right hand and a pulse of energy moved up his arm and into his shoulder where the bullet wound still throbbed. A tingling sensation massaged his collarbone; it kind of tickled. He shoved the book and map into the glove box, closed it, then rubbed his shoulder; the throb decreased. The pain was subsiding. He still could not lift it easily without accompanied pain but there was no denying that it felt better.

When he exited the station wagon and ran to the house, he didn't notice that the red star centered at the top edge of the Cubit was glowing and that lying on the ground behind the station wagon, encircled by the star's red

light, was the crow which had frightened him just minutes before. It writhed in the red glow until Lenny entered the house, then became stiff and still as the red star on the Cubit also died.



Janine finished cleaning the blood from the professor's chest and moved his legs and arms into a comfortable position on the couch. The bullet hole still oozed and she quickly mopped stray dribbles with the washcloth.

"This thing just might do the trick," Lenny said in the doorway. "It has some..." Lenny struggled for the right word. "It has some kind of electricity in it. It helped my shoulder."

"What are you talking about?" Janine rose from the professor's side and studied the dagger in her son's hand.

"I don't know. I felt a kind of electric tingle that went all the way up to my shoulder. Look, my arm moves a lot better now." Lenny raised and lowered it twice. "It is still painful but at least it moves."

Janine pulled back the collar of his T-shirt. Had she blinked, she would have missed it. And even after some of the flesh at the edge of Lenny's wound seemed to magically stitch itself back together, Janine could not believe it. She rubbed her eyes.

"Let me see that," she asked, stepping back. When Lenny gave the dagger to her she studied the haft's smooth, white surface. The top and bottom of the haft were fatter than the middle and were capped in gold. It was chiseled in such a way that it had five sides. A star embellished one of the sides just above the blade which curved seven inches in length to its very thin point; glistening in the living room's lamplight, it revealed no imperfections. Janine cupped the dagger in her hand but felt none of what Lenny had described as electricity. She waved it through the air a few times, first overhand then underhand not knowing why she did so.

"Mom." Lenny pointed at the professor whose face had become pale. "Give it to him."

She placed the dagger in the professor's unconscious right hand but she could not get his fingers to wrap around the haft. The red jewel in the star started to glow. She snatched it back, and felt its warmth and electricity.

"Do you hear that?" she asked Lenny.

"What?"

"That noise—that hum."

"No," Lenny said. "No hum."

But Janine heard it.

*Mmmmmmm...*

The dagger's glow began to pulse with the sound.

*Mmm...Mmm...Mmm...*

And then Janine, for reasons she would never understand, moved over the professor's chest and positioned the point of the dagger above the bullet wound. How shoving a sharp object into this man's flesh was going to save him, she didn't know. But it seemed to make sense. Slowly, she inserted the blade a quarter of an inch into the bloody wound. Lenny gasped and rushed forward, but was propelled backward by his mother's left arm.

"Not now Lenny," she urged.

"But you're..."

"Shhh!!" She turned to her son. "Do you want me to kill this man?" She didn't wait for an answer, "Then be quiet."

A full inch of the blade disappeared into the professor's chest. The farther the blade went, the brighter the star jewel glowed. Janine wondered how close the blade was to the man's lung; she wondered if she was cutting away vital arteries or veins. She was schooled in first aid but not surgery. Down the blade went through flesh that presented only minor resistance. The red jewel grew brighter.

And then the dagger met an obstacle that Janine was afraid to push through. The blade was in at least four inches and filled the bullet wound at the skin's surface completely. She believed she had struck bone since only the slightest nudge of the dagger met with staunch resistance. The jewel blazed red. Her arm trembled. The professor stirred, said something unintelligible, a mumble with no meaning.

Janine began to draw the dagger out of the wound but as she did so, she felt a gentle tug as if the man's body did not want the blade to be removed. She lifted with more force.

One inch emerged—two inches—like a medieval sword from a fleshy stone.

Three inches—four.

Both Janine and Lenny gasped simultaneously. Clinging as if magnetized to the point of the dagger was a half-inch, misshapen piece of metal. The bullet was coated in blood and was blunted from its impact with the professor's body. With the blade and bullet out of the professor, the jewel in the dagger's haft faded and the bullet dropped onto the professor's shoulder where it rolled, creating a narrow trail of blood toward the center of his chest.

Janine snatched the bullet, rolled it between thumb and index finger, then dropped it into the plastic bowl of red water. She wiped the professor's chest, rinsed the washcloth several times, then wrapped the blade of the

dagger with the washcloth.

“I don’t know, Lenny,” she said, expecting questions. “I just don’t know. It is a miracle. In the name of Moses it is a miracle.” She turned to face him. “I’m going to guess that your friend here will recover, but he’s going to need some rest. He’s lost a lot of blood and I don’t think even this has the power to replenish it.”

After dumping bloody water into the bathroom sink and placing the bullet next to the sink’s faucet, Janine retrieved a blanket from the hall closet and draped it over the professor. The color was returning in his face and this satisfied her belief that he would recover. She took her son by the hand, placed the dagger in the pocket of her housecoat, and headed for her special room, the one she kept under the house.



Janine and Michael had agreed on the internal basement shelter the day after a Category 3 tornado had destroyed the north end of Pickett’s Crossing. It had missed their farm by just a few miles. Had the tornado taken a different track, one to the south of town, much of their crops and perhaps even their home would have disappeared into the late June summer afternoon.

The only discussion they’d had was not if they needed a shelter but where it would be located. Most storm shelters were external but Janine had seen in an issue of *Family Circle* how internal storm shelters were economical, safe, and could double as an added room when not being used to protect the family from imminent harm. If the Benders were to decide on an internal shelter, they would have to build an addition onto the house. The cost, with the addition, would be nearly double that of an external shelter. And this is where their discussion—which was never an argument but a “discussion”—had heated by the smallest degree. Janine and her husband never fought but the added investment which would essentially add two rooms to their house was one of those rare moments when discussion neared the intensity of an argument.

Could they afford it with a ten-year-old child whose complex move into adolescence was just around the corner? Certainly, the weather could never be predicted. Tornadoes aside, drought could hit and decimate their crops. Or perhaps their crops would become infested by some of the diseases or insects that Michael had read about in *Agricultural Digest*. They needed the extra \$10,000 as an investment that would always be available for such “just in case” circumstances.

Janine had always wanted an addition. The house seemed just a bit too

small, especially with Lenny requiring more and more privacy as he grew older. She had discussed the prospect with Michael on several occasions and Michael had always told her, as he did when the idea of a storm shelter arose, that they needed to be frugal, watch their expenditures. Disaster could strike anytime and they had to be ready for it.

But the Bender farm had been prosperous for five straight years. Their newest venture—that of raising AKC registered black Labradors—was starting to show a profit. It was time to stop thinking about all the bad that could happen and do something for themselves.

This is where Janine’s side of the “discussion” had won out. They had waited so long for something bad to happen that they were not enjoying the good while they could.

Had Janine known that within the next ten years, her husband would be dead and much of the Bender assets would be sold, she would have put the money that an external shelter would have saved them into an account that, today, would be of great use. Some amount of savings would have helped her run from this collection of bad memories and move some place special, a place she often thought of as paradise. A place with sandy beaches and ocean waves where small-town friendly people knew you by name. A place far from here that was, just like in the *Wizard of Oz*, somewhere over the rainbow.

Janine gazed at the snapshot photo of a scene from the *Wizard of Oz*. The professor and Lenny were both fast asleep upstairs. It was just a little before dawn and she could not get back to sleep. Her mind was preoccupied with the picture. Dorothy was leaning against Auntie Em’s wooden wagon wheel singing about rainbows, pretty little bluebirds, and why oh why can’t I. Janine sympathized with Dorothy. Why oh why couldn’t they? Dorothy was stuck in a world of grown-ups and rules. Janine was stuck in a world of alcoholic control. And just like in the *Wizard of Oz*, along came a professor to offer them both the hope of miracles. She didn’t know what the professor’s name was upstairs but doubted very seriously it was anything close to Marvel. The man upstairs, however, had something even the Wizard did not, a magic dagger. One that could draw bullets from bodies. One that, by its simple touch, could heal and certainly kill. The professor’s dagger was as marvelous as anything in the world of Oz and perhaps, just perhaps, it could help Janine fly from here, just like pretty little bluebirds, to her own Oz—to her own paradise.

The storm shelter, which doubled as Janine’s private room, was adorned with several pictures in frames that depicted images of what she believed to be paradise. Along with the movie scene from the *Wizard of Oz*, there were pictures of sunny warm places, each showing sandy beaches and crashing

tidewaters. One was a shot from a beach just outside of Cancun, Mexico. Another depicted a shoreline along the African Mediterranean coast. A third was a beach along the southern end of Australia. All totaled, there were nearly a dozen framed “Janine paradises” all of which she knew were unattainable beyond a miracle.

On the other walls of her room hung an array of biblical renderings, artifacts and icons. Most referenced Moses and the exodus from Egypt. There was a swatch of Hebrew cloth, stone recreations of the Ten Commandments, a picture of Moses standing before the split Red Sea, the words “Let My People Go” scribbled on a tapestry that covered no window, an autographed picture of Charlton Heston, and many dime store novelty items that had some part of the scripture from Exodus inscribed on them.

Against the wall adjoining the paradise picture collage and opposite the narrow set of steps that led up to the storm shelter’s floor-framed door was a three-drawer wooden dresser that she had refinished back when things were good. Atop the dresser was a tall mirror framed in the same dark-stained oak as the dresser, a small lamp with a shade that was printed with a repeating pattern of angels, and three framed pictures: one of Michael, one of Lenny and one of the three of them together with their prize-winning, and most beloved Labrador, Betty.

Janine rose from her bed, a double-sized mattress that took up two-thirds of the space in the room, and stepped to the dresser. She grabbed the picture of her family, ran a finger across the outline of her husband, tickled the chin of Betty, rubbed the shoulder of her son. The Janine in the picture was not the Janine she now stared at in the mirror. Though it had been only five years since the picture had been taken, the changes in her face were three times in age. She would be forty-two in three months but the lines under her eyes, the crinkled forehead and a full head of gray hair made her look much, much older. Physically and mentally she was forty-two but her appearance was frail. Her aged look was one of the reasons why she had become reclusive. Albert was the other.

She gazed over at the miracle dagger lying on the mattress at the foot of the bed and thought about Albert, about escape, about paradise. It could be used to cure but could it also be used to kill? Better yet, would it recognize Albert for the scumbag alcoholic he was and somehow fling itself into the demon’s heart? She could not do it herself. She was a Christian lady.

*Thou shall not kill*, the picture of Moses seemed to say to her.

But was wishing for death the same as committing the act? Was it right to free oneself by killing others? Moses had, hadn’t he? He’d slain an Egyptian slavemaster who was beating a frail Hebrew worker. He’d killed all

of the Egyptian first born. He'd directed Pharaoh's army into the Red Sea and drowned them. Not to mention all of the people his Israelite army massacred on the way to the Promised Land. In his Exodus, Moses had killed many.

So it was right, then, to kill for freedom. With her Bible as rationale, she would not rot in Hell—instead she would be free to find Heaven. Still, she could not, by her own hand, thrust the dagger into any person. Even if Albert was asleep (which was the only time she felt that it might be possible to kill him) she could not. Even if she found out that it had been Albert who had killed her husband, she could not. Even if Albert threatened her once again, with wife-beating ramifications to her threats of leaving him, she could not.

She stared into the mirror, searching her own slate gray eyes for an answer. She looked at her hands, already spotted and wrinkled well beyond her age. Were these the hands of a killer? Were these the eyes that could forever withhold the truth about the murderer she would become? Further, how many times had she stood in this exact spot, gazing at her reflection and wondering *What If?* She'd never done it. She never could do it.

But then there was the dagger. And again there was that feeling of knowing without knowing how you knew. The dagger was the key to her salvation.

She stepped to the edge of the bed, grabbed the weapon, unwrapped the washcloth. She moved the haft from hand to hand, caressing its smooth surface, thumbing its fine craftsmanship, gazing at the golden star that was jeweled in red in only one of the five points.

A knock on the storm shelter's door above her, broke her from the trance.

"Yes?" she said.

"Mom." Lenny's voice was a whisper above the heavy wooden door. "I can't sleep. You mind if I come down?"

Janine wrapped the washcloth around the blade of the dagger and set it on her dresser. She, again, stared into her gray, sad eyes—searching. Perhaps Lenny could tell her more about this dagger, about the red stars. Perhaps with his help she would be able to do it.

"OK," she said. "Come down."

The first thing Janine did when her son reached the foot of the steps was pull him close to her. With a gentle hug she asked him about his shoulder. Lenny had changed shirts into one which pictured Grave Digger, the monster truck he'd raved over through his teen years. This jerked a tear from the corner of her eye. It was the same T-shirt he was wearing in the family picture on her dresser.

"My shoulder is still sore, but I'll live," Lenny said.

Janine pulled the collar of his shirt forward to reveal red inflammation underneath a large band-aid. She peeled back the band-aid, was satisfied that the bullet wound was not infected and replaced it. “How’s your friend?” she said.

“Well, I wouldn’t exactly call him my friend...” Lenny stepped back from his mother’s embrace. “He’s still sleeping. He was mumbling something before I came down. Probably just dreaming, I guess.”

“Come over and sit down. We haven’t talked in a good while. You don’t write or call much.” Janine stopped short of sounding confrontational as she and Lenny sat at the foot of the bed. “Anyway, it’s really good to see you.”

“I dropped out of school.” Lenny stared at his socked feet.

Janine was not surprised, but she felt his withholding of information up until now added another degree of detachment between them.

“Agricultural science just isn’t my thing,” he continued. “Besides, without Dad...” He looked up and into his mother’s eyes. “I mean it was him who wanted me to follow in his footsteps, to take over the farm some day.” Though he tried, Lenny could not fight back the welling tears.

“I know.” Janine caressed her son’s hand between both of hers. She was upset with her son’s decision to leave college but knew that he was right. After all, there was not much left of the farm for him to follow in the footsteps of the man who had built it. “If it is the will of the Lord then so be it. How long has it been?”

“Dropped out before the beginning of last spring semester. It was hard to study and work and stay interested in agriculture all at the same time.”

“What are you doing now?” Janine remained supportive.

“Doing now?” Lenny looked confused, tired.

“In San Antonio—you working?”

Lenny hunched forward and stared at his feet as if trying to think of something to say. Janine was beginning to feel that a change of subject was necessary.

“I, uh—well I was just laid off from this construction company.” His feet dangled an inch off the floor and he shuffled them back-and-forth as he spoke. “They were good people but the work just dried up.”

“What happened tonight?” Janine said, squeezing and pulling his hand as to nudge him into looking at her. He turned. A slight tremble emerged in the corner of his mouth.

“I had a really horrible dream,” he said.

“No. I mean with the professor and all.”

“That’s what *I* mean. Before I came down here I was dreaming about it. At least parts of it...the really bad parts. Stuff that didn’t even happen. At

least I don't think it happened—I mean—oh hell. I don't know what I mean.” He looked up at the walls where Moses' picture stared down at him. “Sorry. I didn't mean to say hell.”

Janine pulled him as close to her as his body language would allow. “Tell me. What did you dream?”

Lenny's eyebrows curled inward, helplessly. His lip trembled more briskly as he said, “I have to kill myself.”

Inwardly, Janine gasped but she didn't want to show such shocking emotion in her son's time of need. “You know this from your dream?” she said.

“From the professor.”

“The professor told you to kill yourself?”

“Yeah, I know. Why would he do that? Hell...” He looked up at Moses and the split water walls of the Red Sea behind him. “Heck, we saved his life. He saved my life. That thing was dead but it was alive. He killed it after that dead thing shot us. And the Cubit. I didn't touch it, I swear. But he said I did. And now I have to kill myself. I have to kill myself with that dagger.”

“Whoa. Hold on.” Janine double-clutched his hand. “Let's take this one step at a time.”

Lenny's eyes suddenly boiled with intensity, fear and shock. He stared straight through her. “I saw *Me*, mom. I saw *Me* in my dream and I was dead. I looked just like me but it wasn't me. It was a dead Lenny trying to kill me. An anti-Lenny. An evil Lenny.” He clutched his mother's elbow with his right arm while his left hand remained clasped within hers. “That was the dream part. The dead trooper was real. But they are connected. They are both a part of that—Cubit. Whatever you do, don't touch it.” He squeezed her arm tight enough to constrict the blood flow. “Stay as far away as you can. It's evil, mom. It wants to destroy the world.”

Lenny collapsed onto his mother's lap. She caressed his temple and forehead as his eyes fluttered in a fight between consciousness and sleep. The revelations he'd unleashed in the past couple of minutes were too much for her to even try and comprehend. All she knew was that her son needed her. Something traumatic had taken his mind and had ripped it apart and now his dreams were keeping him awake. And they had to be dreams. Dead people didn't shoot guns.

She eased Lenny onto the bed and snuck a pillow under his head. He'd finally fallen asleep. She stretched out beside him and draped one arm across his chest, felt his racing heartbeat that seemed to skip a beat or two. Her own eyes blinked with exhaustion. Her mind raced with scattered pieces of information. Dead people. Lenny committing suicide. A magic dagger.

Paradise. The Cubit.

Lying beside her son, Janine fell asleep thinking about the small wooden box in the back of the professor's station wagon, the red star on its top edge, and how it had drawn her to it—how it had wanted her to touch it.

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Albert Stine was pissed off. He could not believe that he'd been caught cheating. How dare they accuse him of doing something like that? How could they know he was counting cards? They couldn't read his mind. They were going purely on the word of the dealer. And how the hell could she know? The stupid whore was just tired of losing, that's all. If he ever saw her outside he'd teach her a lesson or two about treating men with respect. Damn bitch!

Albert swilled from a pint of Jim Beam then quickly chased it with a swallow of Diet Coke. His foot had mashed the accelerator with the thought of the casino blackjack dealer and he eased it up, looking into his rearview mirror for cops as he did so.

He'd get her, he thought again. No fucking woman was going to get the best of Albert Stine.

Kansas State Route 22 was nearly deserted of traffic. Occasionally, a sedan or van packed with Sunday-dressed families would buzz by in the opposite direction and Albert would giggle. Church was as useless to a man's soul as were women. Both wanted to save you. Both wanted to turn you into something you weren't. Both wanted to meddle in your life, ask too many questions, then leave you feeling guilty about being a man.

He thought of the casino dealer and his foot reacted against the gas peddle. How dare she meddle in his life? How could she have known? The technique was sound. Jimmy Jacks had guaranteed him that no casino in the country would ever know. Jacks had gotten away with counting cards at the blackjack table forever. There's no way *that* casino bitch could have known. And now he was banned for life from gambling at the Sandbox and it wouldn't be long before the word on Albert Stine spread.

"Shit!" he grumbled, swilled whiskey, chased it. He pounded his fist against the steering wheel of his blue Monte Carlo and half a shot of Beam spilled onto his lap. He ignored it.

He snapped on the radio, having pawned all of his CDs to get enough chips to play that one last hand of blackjack. Nothing but gospel and sermons. Angrily, he snapped it back off.

Being mad was not uncommon for Albert. And the more he drank the more pissed off he became. By the time he reached the Bender farm front

road, he'd finished the pint and had worked himself up into such a furious frenzy that a mere infraction on his patience by anyone would set him off. He was going to sell the farm; that much he'd already decided. With the cash he would buy his way back into Vegas. Tons of rich farm land meant tons of cash. Perhaps even six figures. He could live well on that kind of dough—more dough than that bitch dealer would make in a lifetime.

And Janine? He'd take her with him. She'd often talked about paradise. Vegas was the perfect paradise. She'd have much to do. If she wanted to continue fixing people's clothes she could do that. There were plenty of people in Vegas who'd lost some portion or all of the shirt off their backs. If she got tired of that, she could become a dealer. She'd be popular. Players would love a kind, naive country girl, one that didn't accuse them of cheating, one that would treat men with respect.

It was close to noon when Albert stopped his car along the Bender's front road short of the house. He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, anger welling, wishing for another bottle of booze. His breaths became an anxious imitation of an animal ready to fight.

Parked alongside Janine's truck was a station wagon that Albert had never seen before and he immediately jumped to the conclusion that Janine was seeing another man. Made sense too. Every time he left for Vegas, she never said one word to him. She never asked him why he spent so much time there, never asked him to stay home with his wife, and, quite frankly, seemed to urge him to leave by helping him pack and opening the front door as he left the house. She never called him in Vegas or tried to keep tabs on him in any way. Didn't all women do that? Didn't all women question where you were going and what you were doing and how long you'd be gone? Yeah, all women except those that were whoring around on you. The last thing those women wanted was you anywhere around them. Guy was probably from out of town. Probably someone wanting to romance the farm from under her. Probably that Markson character. He'd offered Albert a criminally low price for the farm the last time he'd thought of selling it. But Markson drove an Explorer not a station wagon. Still, covert actions required covert camouflage and this Markson was pretty sneaky.

Albert backed his Monte Carlo along the front road to a point behind the barn so it could not be seen from the house. He would not need a weapon. His courage came straight from the bottle. Besides, he'd already eclipsed the point of level-headed reasoning and this gave him the strength of ten Alberts. He felt he could chew bullets and spit nails even if those bullets were being shot at him.

Slowly, he moved to the barn, hunching a bit as to make his 240-pound

frame a bit less revealing. He slid his back across flaking red paint as he stealthily moved from beyond the south wall of the barn and out into the open. The sun blazed his forehead and sent bumper metal reflections from the station wagon and truck into his eyes. He wiped away sweat, shielded his face with the palm of a hand and shuffled, still hunched, to the station wagon where he squatted by the driver's door. He peered through the window for evidence of its occupant, certain that he would find something to finger Markson as the adulterer. What he found was more confusing.

Blood, shattered glass, and something that looked like dried puke smeared the front seat in a macabre mosaic that pulled a small squirt of Jim Beam from Albert's stomach into his throat. Suddenly, the front door of the house opened and Albert dropped immediately. Breaths intensified. Sweat rolled down his forehead and into his eyes. He heard a man's voice then the door closed.

This verified his assumption that his wife was an adulterer. His anger became immense. He gripped rock from the drive path so intensely that when he released his grip and rose to his feet, several pebbles remained stuck to the pads of his fingers.

He sidestepped to the back of the station wagon. His adrenaline pumped energy that he did not know he had. He rose, planted his feet, eyed the five porch steps that he would easily leap over and chose a spot next to the door handle where he would plant his shoulder. He would catch them by surprise.

Out of the corner of his eye Albert saw what he thought was a laser beam, the kind that centers a target in a scope. It painted the side of his face with a red dot that pulsed across his cheek.

*Markson had a rifle?*

Wondering if he'd be shot as he did so, Albert slowly rose and looked for the source of the light. In the back of the station wagon he saw a wooden box. At the top edge of the box a small, bright, red star glowed.

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Janine awoke to the sound of shattering glass. She quickly rolled from the bed and onto her feet. Lenny was up a few seconds later. Although his eyes appeared rested they remained shadowed by disquiet and bewilderment. He immediately went for the dagger lying on her dresser.

"He's coming," Lenny said, unwrapping the washcloth from the dagger's blade. "I knew he would. Just like the professor said."

"Who's coming?" Janine knew his answer before he said it.

"Me."

The boards in the roof of the storm shelter squeaked as heavy footfalls walked through the kitchen above them. Quickly, both climbed the stairs, Janine in the lead. She slid the floor door's latch and raised it only far enough to see into the kitchen. Broken glass scattered the vinyl floor in front of the refrigerator. She continued out of the storm shelter and laid the floor door back on its hinged legs. Lenny was quickly out behind her.

"Good morning!"

Janine and Lenny turned simultaneously to the voice behind them.

"Sorry about the glass. I can't find a broom anywhere." The professor sat on the couch with a glass of milk in his right hand and a chocolate chip cookie in the other. He'd wrapped the blanket around his shoulders and his bare chest revealed the red circular bullet wound which looked like it had nearly healed. "These are really very good." He waved the half-eaten cookie in front of him. "I was very hungry so I took the liberty. I hope you don't mind."

Lenny had unconsciously raised the dagger when he'd turned. He lowered it to his side, finding that his right arm functioned quite well.

"Ah, I see you found my dagger." The professor took another bite of cookie, laid the rest on one knee, shifted the glass of milk from his right hand to his left and took half the contents down in one drink.

"You gave it to me last night," Lenny said, shifting the point of the dagger downward in a less offensive position. "You don't remember?"

The professor returned the milk to his right hand. White froth remained on his gray-peppered mustache. "Lot's of things I don't remember and many I would love to forget."

"I heard that," Lenny said while moving toward the professor. "Your arm still not quite right?"

"Very sore. Can't move it for nothin'." He attempted a simple arm raise and lifted it two inches off his thigh before it collapsed. The half glass of milk splashed but did not spill. He looked from the milk to Janine. "But I'm alive," he said to her.

"It saved your life," Janine said. "Fixed Lenny's shoulder too."

"The dagger—Yes, I know."

"But how?"

"Lots of questions. And I have many answers. But first, the cookie and milk." The professor took another bite of cookie, dropped a large chip onto his bare chest, grabbed the stray piece and plopped it into his mouth. "I wanted to thank you for saving my life," he said, finishing off the cookie and milk in succession. "Janine is it?"

Janine moved closer to her son. "Who are you?"

“Cower. Christopher Cower.” The blanket had shifted from his shoulders; he pulled it up and back into position. “Do you have a shirt I can borrow?”

“Lenny,” Janine said. “Could you grab a shirt for Professor Cower?”

“Preferably a button-up,” Cower interjected. “Easier to get my arm in.” He grinned.

Lenny set the dagger on the small end table near the head of the couch. “I believe this is yours.”

“Keep it, Lenny...” *You’ll need it.* He didn’t say it but it was implied in the way his voice trailed off. The knowledge was exchanged in the two men’s stares. Lenny left the dagger on the table and went to fetch Cower a shirt.

Janine bent forward to inspect Cower’s bullet wound. “It’s healing nicely,” she said. “Lord works in mysterious ways.”

“Funny you should say that.” Cower stared sternly but kindly. Their eyes were a foot apart.

Janine looked away and toward the dagger, the red star. “What is it...I mean what does it mean?”

“The dagger?” Cower picked up the dagger and set his empty glass in its place. He twirled the dagger like a baton between the fingers of his left hand. The long blade sliced close to his wrist as he expertly maneuvered it.

“The red star,” Janine corrected.

Lenny returned with a plaid shirt that was a bit too heavy for June weather. Cower accepted it gratefully, dropped the blanket from his shoulders, then easily placed his left arm into the shirt. Lenny came around the back of the couch to help him with the other arm. Cower winced as Lenny manipulated the shirt onto his back. He left it unbuttoned.

“And I want to know why you wanted me to kill myself,” Lenny said.

“I think you know the answer to that,” he said to Lenny then added to both of them, “You know much about the Bible?” Lenny stared at the dagger on the table, the blade, how it shimmered in the light from a window behind the couch, a light that grew brighter as the rising midday sun erased barn shadows.

“Old Testament, mostly,” Janine said.

“Good.” Cower sat back into the couch. “Then you know what I mean when I talk about the five books at the beginning of it?”

“The Pentateuch,” Janine said. Lenny looked bewildered.

“Please, sit down. This might take a while.”

Lenny went to the kitchen for a couple of chairs and returned. Both mother and son sat. Cower cleared his throat and seemed quite calm for a man on the run. “Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy and...” he began.

“Numbers,” Janine finished. “So the star represents the Pentateuch. Each of the points of the star represents one of these books.” She said it as a matter of fact and not a question.

“Something like that,” Cower said. “The five books. The five ages of creation. The five signs of the Apocalypse.”

Lenny interrupted, “I thought there were seven signs of the Apocalypse.”

“In some Bibles,” Cower answered as if correcting one of his students.

“There’s only one Bible.” Janine said in a tone that was hinted with accusation of blasphemy.

“What makes you say that?” Cower leaned forward. “Because someone told you so?”

“Who are you?” Janine huffed. “A professor? A professor of what? Ancient history?”

“The Torah and Qur’an are bibles are they not? They just give a different account of what is considered to be right and what is considered to be wrong. Now if we’re talkin’ Christianity then...” Janine sat stiff. Lenny shuffled his feet. “Then I gotta say that there are more versions of that Bible than any Qur’an or Torah. Isn’t that what organized religion is all about in this country? Different interpretations of the Book?”

“So what Bible have you been reading?” Janine said, knowing that whatever he said would be dismissed by her own knowledge of the facts.

“One that would give another account of what really happened in those early days of man’s ascent into God’s own image.” Cower suddenly shot a left hand forward and grabbed Janine’s left, clammy wrist. “I know that faith is the strongest force on this Earth. I don’t mean to even attempt to persuade yours differently. What I give you is knowledge. You want to know about the star, the dagger and, no doubt, the Cubit. What I have to offer is an explanation that will not make sense to someone unable or unwilling to accept possibility.”

Janine said nothing.

Cower continued, “What would you say if I told you the world was created in five ages rather than seven days?”

“That’s not how I know it,” Janine said.

“Exactly!” Cower released her hand as gently as he’d grasped it. “Five ages to create life. Five ages to kill it. Depends on what you believe.”

“Is that the Bible you’re talkin’ about?” Lenny said while pointing at the front door. “That book I found in your glove box? It had a picture of *that* on the back cover.” Lenny moved his hand from pointing at the door to pointing at the dagger that was still clutched in Cower’s left hand.

Cower nodded. “A Bible perhaps few have ever even heard of,” he said.

“It explains all of this?” Janine asked.

“Only if you believe,” Cower said, again as a teacher talking to a pupil. He shifted slightly on the couch, revealing a small splotch of bloodstain on the couch’s middle cushion. “Genesis was about the creation of life but it was also about the creation of death. Exodus introduced us to a great savior but it also introduced the Antichrist. With every Good there exists an equal and opposite Evil.”

“The Cubit,” Lenny said. “How does that fit in?”

“Arc of the Covenant,” Cower quickly responded as if in anticipation. “For every Good there exists an equal and opposite Evil.”

“So there’s another Arc?” Lenny scratched his wounded shoulder.

“Perhaps I should fetch the book. It’ll explain everything.”

“I’ll get it,” Lenny offered.

“I need the fresh air,” Cower countered, pushing himself up gingerly from the couch. Lenny snatched the dagger from Cower’s left hand and helped him to his feet. “I’ll be right back.”

Professor Cower stretched then slowly shuffled to the front door. The sun’s rays, shining through the living room window, reached the couch, signaling that it was close to noon.



Janine had lost track of time in the interim between Cower’s departure and the scream that now brought both her and Lenny to their feet. She’d been thinking about the many sermons that Pastor Kindle had used to post his own interpretation of the Good Book. She’d been questioning all that she’d come to know as right, according to the Book, and Pastor Kindle. *For every good there is an equal and opposite bad*. Isn’t that what Cower had said? Did this mean that whatever Pastor Kindle had said was only half truth? She’d never seen anything in the pastor’s performance that equaled the magic in the dagger that Cower had introduced into their household. Janine knew a lot about the Bible, at least the one that was generally considered as the documented truth. But she wondered: Was there another story?

The initial reason why she bolted upward to snatch the loaded shotgun leaning near the front door was that she wanted some answers and she needed Cower to answer them. Ancillary to this was a concern for Cower.

“Holy shh...” Lenny looked at his mother. “What was that?”

Neither knew. Neither questioned. Both headed out of the house, Lenny

clutching the dagger in his left hand, Janine clutching the shotgun in both.

Outside, the sun blazed with a strength that immediately fostered sweat on Janine's forehead. She hunkered down not really knowing why she did so. The shotgun felt safe in her hands. Lenny crouched, similarly, behind her. He held the dagger by the haft, underhanded, blade curled upward, as if he were going to a rumble.

Janine peered across the drive, the front road, the acres of uncultivated, top-grade farmland. She did not see Cower anywhere. She did see that one of the barn doors was wide open. Footsteps littered the ground in a path from the back of the station wagon, through the rocky parking area, across a small stretch of access road, through an area that had been used a few years ago to feed chickens, and into the barn.

*The Cubit*, Janine thought. *The anti-Arc of the Covenant*. But why would the professor take the Cubit to the barn?

*To hide it, of course.*

And what about the scream?

Cautiously, mother and son stepped from the porch to the Ford and toward the back of the station wagon. The Cubit, as she expected, was gone.

Lenny continued along the footstep path while Janine stopped for a moment to inspect the car. She poked her head into the cargo bay, saw pebbles of shattered glass and a few drops of what looked like blood and she remembered how the Cubit had beckoned her.

A little of that memory flooded into her vision and she jerked backward, knocking the barrel of the shotgun against the tailgate with such force that she nearly pulled the trigger on a gun pointed at her chin.

The glowing red star. She could see it as plainly as if she'd been suddenly transported ten hours back in time. It had pulled her toward it with inescapable energy.

Janine shook her head but the image of the star did not rescind. And by coincidence or pure mystic luck, lying by her feet near the left rear car tire was a book turned face down; a magic dagger was etched in the center of its back cover.

She knelt, released her hand from the barrel of the shotgun and snatched at the book, stumbling forward as she did so. She dropped the shotgun as she lost her balance and fell onto all fours. Tiny rock edges dug into her palms and knees and she quickly rolled onto her butt.

"Mom. You all right?" Lenny said, standing a few dozen feet from the open barn door near a small blackened crater created by one of Janine's recent dynamite tree-stumping efforts.

She grabbed the book and shotgun and rose from the gravel in one

swift motion that was much too easy for a woman that looked her age. She shoved the book into her housecoat pocket and ran to catch up with her son not knowing that, when she'd fallen, she'd ripped her housecoat pocket. The book fell from the hole without her knowledge.

Sweat rolled a salty sting into her eyes and she absently looked down, her vision blurred, into the tree-stumped crater. An empty, pint bottle of Jim Beam was lying in the hole. Alerts sounded in her head. She'd dynamited this tree stump just a few days ago, which meant that someone had put the bottle in the crater since then. And she knew only one man that preferred his Beam in a small bottle that he could easily integrate into the take-a-shot-and-chase-it-with-Coke cocktails *he* preferred.

"Albert's here," she whispered, pointing at the empty bottle.

Lenny shook his head as if he did not believe what he'd just heard. "What?"

"Bottle of Beam. Has to be his."

"But I don't see his car."

Both walked toward the open barn door, a little added caution in each step. Forget that his car was nowhere in sight; what if Albert had come home early? What if he'd lost so much in this excursion to Vegas that he'd had to pawn his car and had gotten a bus ride back? What if by chance, he'd shown up right when Cower had gone out the door to fetch his Bible? What if Albert had been drinking, had believed this man was sweet on Janine and had decided to take matters into his own hands? What if *that* was the scream they'd heard?

Lenny led his mother through the open door and into the barn. His grip was death-tight on the dagger. Janine had raised the shotgun to her shoulder; her finger touched the trigger.

The barn was of average size. You could get a couple of tractors in and still have plenty of room to work and move around. Inside, stalls long empty sat unattended along the far wall. Old bales of sour hay were stacked ten feet high to the right. An old John Deere that was missing much of its engine occupied most of the left side of the floor. Beyond the tractor and at the back wall was an area where all of the hand tools were kept.

As Janine entered the barn's shadows she did not see the man lying in the rotten hay as quickly as did Lenny. Lenny ran toward the stall at the back of the barn. In that same instant, Janine saw motion in her periphery to the left. She also realized that the professor's footsteps swooped around the open barn door and disappeared behind the engine-gutted tractor also to her left. She tiptoed the path, looking ahead while keeping an eye on Lenny and the man lying in the back of the barn.

Behind the tractor was the Cubit. It rested among a scattering of tools. A shovel and hoe were propped against it. On the floor in front of the Cubit was Albert. He was quite dead. A pitchfork had been planted through his neck, its tines secured in the dirt floor under him. Into one eye socket a stick of dynamite had been jammed three inches deep. There was plenty of blood, both on the dead man and on the thing that kneeled over him, which now looked up with what looked like flesh in its mouth. Janine leveled the shotgun.

It was Albert. But it couldn't be. Albert was skewered and dead on the ground. The thing that looked like Albert dropped what it had been gnawing and Janine saw what looked like a pinky fall onto the still corpse of the real Albert.

"Janee," it said. "Whoring on me, Janee?" Its voice was much deeper than the real Albert's. Its red eyes possessed an intelligence greater than Albert's. It plucked the pitchfork easily out of the ground, shook it a few times to get real Albert's neck off of its tines then pointed it at Janine. "Whoring on me?" it repeated.

It lifted the pitchfork in the air as if it were about to throw it and Janine pulled the trigger.

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The light from the barn door illuminated only the first third of the barn's interior. Small slivers of sun sliced down through unsealed cracks in the barn's roofing boards, creating a dancing montage of thick shadow interspersed by sunshine spotlights. Lenny was under one of these spotlights as he knelt down to find Cower struggling with shallow breaths. He turned the professor gingerly onto his left side. Cower's face was a mess, looked like it was broken in many more places than just his nose. He was not conscious. He was pretty close to dead, Lenny thought. And that's when he saw Albert eating Albert.

It seemed like a very long time but the numbness that locked him into place lasted only seconds. In a fraction of that moment, his body had decided that it was no longer time to run from trouble. It was time to face up to his responsibilities. His mother was somewhere over there for crying out loud. He had to at least save her.

But he couldn't move. Even when the thing dropped its food and called his mother's name, his knees remained locked. Even when the limp head of the real Albert dropped from the pitchfork's tines to a dirt floor mired in blood, his body said No!

It took the blast from the shotgun to get Lenny moving. The Albert beast suddenly lifted and flew backward into the Cubit where it bounced off one sharp wooden edge. As it rose, Lenny rose. As it moved again toward his mother, Lenny stepped away from the professor. Lenny bolted forward with the intention of thrusting the dagger through Albert's face but was held back by a hand that darted from shadows.

"No," Cower groaned. "You can't win one-on-one. You don't have the skill. You gotta surprise it." He pulled Lenny's denim pant leg, urged him to calm down. He could barely move from his fetal position. "The dagger. Into the...into the neck. It is the only way." A bit of bloody spit oozed from his mouth.

His mother screamed then appeared from behind the tractor, her hand on the barrel of the shotgun as she ran out of the barn. Behind her rushed the thing that looked like Albert, moving but not quite running, with a smile large and cunning spread wide on its face. Lenny shook his leg to break free from Cower's grip.

"Please, Lenny—" Cower moaned then went silent. He released Lenny's pant leg.

Albert exited the barn and Lenny gripped the dagger tight, took two giant steps toward the barn door with as much courage as he'd ever known, then froze in his tracks. The Cubit glowed red from behind the tractor. It filled the barn with maroon shadows. It emitted a soft hum that became inaudible when a shotgun blast echoed outside the barn.

The star on the Cubit blazed in dark red before the wooden top started to rise.

Crimson, darker than the red in the star, escaped from the Cubit's top edge. The crimson grew wider and deeper as the top panel of the Cubit rose as if hinged. It radiated an energy that drew Lenny to it.

What had Cower told him? This thing was the anti-Arc of the Covenant?

From within the Cubit rose—something. It used its hands to hoist itself through the open top. It then crawled out as a shadowy crimson outline before the Cubit slammed shut. The blaze from the Cubit's red star blinded Lenny and he lost sight of whatever had crawled out and into the shadows. Lenny shuffled back several steps, swiped the dagger out in front and around himself, sliced haphazardly at nothing he could see. The light from the red star on the Cubit died out. The barn returned to a mixture of dark shadow and sunshine spotlights.

Lenny continued fumbling backward, hoping like hell there was nothing behind him. And then movement through a few sunlight strokes

that disappeared, reappeared, and disappeared too quickly for Lenny to understand. The barn grew brighter, at least in Lenny's vicinity, as he neared the rectangular patch of light that fell onto the dirt floor from the open barn door. Suddenly, something smelled very bad. And then a voice.

"Ya haf to keel ya'self," it said.

Lenny was fully immersed in the sunshine that fell through the door and his irises contracted. The barn's interior turned black. But instead of running, he waited. He knew what he would see. He was brave but afraid. He wanted to run but he stood right there.

And then the face of the beast from the box poked itself into sunshine. Something that looked like Lenny was within arm's reach and Lenny yelped like a little girl.

"S'prise," Lenny said to himself, then two hands shot into the sunshine and yanked the real Lenny into darkness.



Janine was in panic as she raced from the barn, tripped over the tree-stumped hole, dropped the shotgun which fired on impact with the ground, ran to the house without it, closed and locked the door behind her, and headed for the storm shelter bedroom. Instead of entering the shelter, she closed the floor door and hid in the kitchen.

Right behind her came Albert. He easily kicked in the front door and headed straight for the storm shelter.

"Ya down dere?" Albert grumbled, lifting the door back onto its hinged legs. He cackled two brash belts of laughter then started down the steps.

A second or two elapsed.

"Where you? We talk. We move on to Vegas. Me, Cubit, you, dead."

Janine slammed the floor door closed then raced to the couch and began sliding it the twenty feet it would take to reach the door. The couch was sturdy and heavy. She only hoped she'd have enough time.

Four steps from the storm shelter, the floor door cracked open. Janine saw Albert's bloody eyes within; when Albert saw her he grinned in recognition. She dropped the couch and leapt as far up and as far forward as she could, landing squarely on the floor door. She heard his body tumble down the steps and she rushed back to the couch, sliding two legs across the door just as his fists beat from underneath. The couch jumped from the pounding; Janine doubted it would be enough. The only other heavy piece of furniture in the room was a cherry wood china cupboard her mother had given her years ago. Without concern for the plates and cups that toppled and broke against each

other, she pushed the cupboard across the wooden floor, scratching wax as she went, to a place on the floor door next to the couch. The added weight appeared to silence his efforts.

“You die, bitch,” the beast Albert hissed and punched the door. A board in the floor door rattled, loosened. “You and pain, guarantee.”

Janine ran from the house. She knew what she had to do and she had to do it quickly.

She retrieved her shotgun from the yard where she’d dropped it, expelled the empty cartridges and loaded two more from her housecoat pocket. She slid, SWAT-like around the open barn door, shotgun held ready for anything.

“Lenny?” She questioned the darkness.

No answer.

“Lenny. Are you okay?”

She couldn’t see much but she heard something that sounded kind of—squishy.

“Lenny—that you?”

At the far edge of the rectangular patch of sunlight that fell from the barn door onto the dirt floor was the dagger. Its haft lay in shadow but its blade glistened blue steel in the sunlight. Without hesitation, she rushed to it, retrieved it, then slipped into the darkness. It took her eyes a moment to adjust. She blinked then squinted. Lenny was at the back of the barn near one of the center stalls. Cower’s body was lying in a fetal ball two stalls to the right.

“Come on Lenny!” she yelled. “You gotta help me. We gotta blow that damned Cubit back to hell, while we have a chance. I don’t know how long that thing in the storm shelter’s gonna stay there.”

She lowered the shotgun and walked briskly toward her son. Lenny was bent down, his back to her. “Lenny?” she said, stepping more cautiously the closer she came to him. Lenny turned.

But it wasn’t Lenny. As much as that thing in her room was not Albert, the thing that now faced her was not her son. It wiped something from its face with the sleeve of its Grave Digger T-shirt. Beyond it and inside the stall was what looked like a slaughtered animal.

“Mommy,” the not real Lenny said.

Janine took a half step toward her son, almost hypnotically, then changed direction and ran quickly behind the tractor where the Cubit and the dynamite she used for tree-stumping were located.

“No Mommy,” the Lenny-thing said. “Come here!”

Janine hunkered behind the front end of the tractor. She saw Lenny moving through shadow, walking briskly and confident toward her vantage.

Her one hand gripped the dagger tighter; the finger of the other tickled the shotgun trigger.

To her left and just ten feet ahead was the Cubit. Behind the Cubit was the tool shed. In the tool shed was the dynamite.

From the right, Lenny sauntered into full view, apparently not knowing or not caring that she was there. She unloaded both shotgun shells into it.

At first, she felt the joy that is often accompanied by victory. When she saw her son's arm blow off of the right shoulder she could not believe she had just murdered her son. The second shotgun blast hit Lenny in the same location, serving only to decimate the flesh that used to be its arm. The combined blast sent Lenny to the ground and Janine bolted forward, dagger held haft up and blade down.

*But it was her son. How could she drive this dagger into her son? She hesitated.*

The Lenny thing turned to look up at her. It had crazy looking red eyes that were flecked with silver, as if the mind behind them belonged solely to someone or something else. Some of the shotgun pellets dotted its cheek and only part of the ear remained. Then its face turned down into barn hay.

*This was not her son. Lenny was that slaughtered animal she'd seen it eating. This was everything that Lenny wasn't, all packaged in something that looked just like him. This horrific resemblance needed killing...*

Janine thrust the dagger through the back of its neck. The star in the haft blazed as she thrust again and again, not realizing that with each strike, the thing that was once Lenny was aging rapidly, turning to old flesh and bone in concert with her efforts. Then, as if all the moisture had been removed from its body, the Lenny thing's chest imploded, turning to dust. She stepped back. The star in the dagger blazed so bright that most of the interior of the barn turned some shade of red. Within seconds, her son turned completely into a misshapen pile of bones.

She quickly raced to the tool shed, snatched up ten sticks of dynamite, a bag of caps and a plunger. She moved in front of the Cubit, did not look at it but only the ground beneath it, then began jamming sticks of dynamite in every soft place she could jam them. She jimmied the final stick into a spot behind the Cubit, being careful as she'd done with all the other sticks not to touch its wood surface with her hand. That's when Albert stepped through the barn door. She quickly hid behind the tractor.

"Real slow," the Albert thing said. No weapon was visible. "Gonna kill 'ya real, real slow."

She took one step forward, revealing herself from the safety of the tractor. Albert was next to the professor's body, toeing it for life signs. It saw

her and immediately reacted.

“JANINE!”

It was the creepiest and most insane sound she'd ever heard. It was yelled and screeched and slurred in rage all at the same time. Albert was three times as large as Lenny. Even if she could retrieve the dagger before the Albert thing caught up to her, she knew that there was little chance in easily dashing the anti-Albert aside with a few quick dagger thrusts as she'd done with anti-Lenny. She stepped back behind the tractor and began wiring up the dynamite sticks. There was only one way out of the barn and she planned to take everything and everyone with her.

“Mind me,” anti-Albert said. “Get ready. We got good lovin' ta do.”

Anti-Albert was a few feet from the tractor when Janine finished wiring what would be one mighty explosion. She closed her eyes and plunged the dynamite. But nothing happened. She'd been squinting so hard, thinking that her body was about to be blown into small fragments, that opening them was painful. She looked from anti-Albert, who now turned and started after her, to the one wire she'd forgotten to attach.

She was out of luck. Out of distance. Out of hope. The entire evening had flown by so fast. There was no time for wondering about life. It was a time for dying. She attached the last wire.

And then, just as quickly as it had taken her to write her life away, the professor suddenly leapt from the shadows to her right. Cower wailed, “RUN!” as he and the anti-Albert thing fell together into the bone pile that had once been an evil incarnation of her son.

Janine ran, the shotgun forgotten behind her, her son now convincingly dead in her mind, her new husband hopefully dying between the hands of Cower. Once in the house, she stood before the decimation of the couch and china cupboard, and a storm shelter door that was ripped into pieces.

Why she jumped into the shelter, she didn't know. If she hadn't, she would have surely been ripped apart by the blast that swept from the barn and through the house. From Janine's vantage on her back at the bottom of the staircase, her head throbbing from the impact with one or more of the steps, she saw what she believed would be the last thing this reality had for her.

A vision of everything that had been hers and Michael's and Lenny's blew past her in a destructive wave of fire and rubble.

