

## Chapter 4

Awake now in a cloud of smoke and I hear yelling, I can't breathe. I scramble to my feet in search of a savior. Tears stream from my tightly shut eyes leaving on my face trails of salt baking in the heat of fire. Running, anywhere...away, choking. A few steps and I fall over. Fading now. Fear.

"He's waking up!" I don't know the voice. I smell the wet smoke of an extinguished fire. "Shhhh. Drink this." I'm outside, facing the sun. Gone is the park, my distant relatives, and the road I was on. A cup is forced to my mouth so I drink and the liquid burns my cracked lips. I climb to my feet as my surroundings come in to view. It appears I'm in the center of a clearing in the middle of a forest. A uniform ring of white tents surrounds the clearing, inside of which is constructed a stage. At the center of the stage, a wide tree stump forms a makeshift pulpit. A circle of people hundreds strong surrounds me while I push and shove my way through; Emerging molested but otherwise unharmed, I guess this is church.

As a boy I would get the most sinful erections while sitting in church. Half asleep and hard I would hide the offending member with a bible as the preacher worked himself into a fervor about earthly delights. One Sunday, when I was around fourteen I was hungover sick to my stomach in the parking lot before service. The next Sunday my mother let me stay home. It would be 25 years before I'd walk through the doors of a church again, this time to attend an "All Saints" mass, that week I was Catholic, shortly after the birth of my third child.

Back in the woods I watch the goings on at the camp meeting for some time. From the stage, a man ululates about sin and damnation while the people gathered around writhe and sway, some wailing in unintelligible tongues, others on the ground rolling in the dust. Minutes

pass and the fervor builds to a Dionysian climax. The crowd embraces amidst the moans and howls of their salvation while the man on the stage waves his arms madly about attempting to conjure the spirit of their ancient God. The sound coming from the inner circle has melody and I begin to pick out harmonic relationships between the man on the stage and the orchestra of flesh writing around him. At once the pulsating throng turns to the sky and screams in passionate release before falling to the ground. The sky darkens and rain begins to fall on the collapsed mass. The man on the stage stares out over his crowd and they transform back into mortals. The rain cleanses the earth beneath them as they whimper in raptured exhaustion.

The parishioners disperse into smaller groups, ducking into the tents surrounding the clearing and I find the path out. I walk toward the setting sun as it begins to descend through the sky and the camp disappears behind me. Before long I am out on a road and can see the dim light of a small village through the trees in the distance. I feel as the wind must, about the landscape; This land is my land. My steps are light as my spirit forms the crown of a king and the staff of a sage. Pulling my hood over my head, I approach the outskirts of town.

On either side of the street sit the Greek Revival townhomes of a comfortable middle class. A blacksmith shop doing most of its business shoeing horses sits next to the corner grocery store on a leaf strewn sidewalk. The sky is yellow and red as the shops fade out of existence revealing an empty lot. I continue down the street past tailor shops and law offices before finally finding a back alley bar to hide in. It's smaller than I thought and I feel immediately self conscious as I worry all eyes are on me. None seems to notice. There are eight or nine men seated in the darkness. Begged-for nickels fill the cash box. Asking questions here is asking a prisoner to confess his crime.

*Hello John.* The bartender knows me so I worry I'm dead. I wonder how I missed the painful part. Once, I had a toothache that made me wish for death and after cancer surgery, when they cut through my abdomen, breathing made me want to die and coughing could have killed me. I stifled every sneeze for fear I'd explode. Being in extreme pain - having a toothache or your guts cut open, can give you a glimpse of the divine if you know where to look. I ask the bartender:

*Am I dead Mac?* He looks at me plainly before managing a smile that I can believe and doesn't say a word. He finds something to wipe down. In front of me is a cup of coffee. I spill a few drops lifting it toward my mouth and take inventory of how I feel. I don't feel dead. Hearing a commotion coming from a room in the back I turn to see three dark haired young women emerge through a door in the hall.

*The Fox sisters are here tonight, John.* the bartender addresses me. *Your name came up,* he continues.

*My name?* I respond, feeling a cold sweat, *They don't know me. I've never seen them before. It's a ruse!* I was panicking. I knew who they were and whatever it was they knew about me was bad. I was bad. Calm down John. Just don't hang around town too long. Get out before you get involved.

An elderly woman sits down next to me at the bar.

*Write me a letter, John?* Everybody knows my name. I write her letter in stone on a tablet using the point of a stick from a broken chair and the ball of my fist.

*In the realm I wander,*

*Where you reign without rival,*

*Where time has no domain,*

*And I absorbed,*

*By the Sea,*

*And you,*

*The shore*

I hand it to her and she turns to dust. The sun finishes setting on a stool in the corner and toss the bartender a dime.

*Thanks for the sunset, Mac.*

Back in the street it's dark, the only light shining faintly from inside the shops on either side of me. A young boy covered in soot emerges from the shadows with a torch and leads me to a hotel. The doorman greets me familiarly while the boy extinguishes his torch on a large black snuffer hanging from the bricks by the door to the hotel. It suddenly dawns on me that I don't have a change of clothes. "There is a bath waiting for you sir." We walk through the door to the hotel and the boy leads me to my room. I toss him a nickel and he leaves me alone. I undress, leave my clothes by the door, and find the bath. The water is hot. I lay down and turn on the shower with my foot, and let the water rain down on my head. My ship is sinking.

Not so much does it "dawn" on me as does it "slink" back to me like an ill-treated dog, that I may not be well. Like when I was seventeen and I took that job at the steakhouse where one of the servers sold hits of LSD out of a vial. She would use a dropper to dose a sugar cube and my friends and I would stay out all night tripping on acid while the larger group of kids of which we were a part, drank themselves sick with peppermint schnapps and stolen rum. One icy night I took way too much acid and was sure the car we were driving in was sliding into an eternal darkness. Later that night, at a party, I could see everybody's skeleton beneath their skin. I ran from the house and wandered the streets the rest of the night hiding from cars until I found

the high school baseball field and slept in the dugout. I stayed that way, paranoid, for two years. My friend called it a bad trip. His father, a Catholic priest, called it a possession. The school counselor suggested it was a panic attack and my mother called me a liar. My father didn't know where I went to school. Save my father, they were all right. Sitting there in the bath, back in my hotel, I look hard at my surroundings. Nothing seems out of the ordinary. Me, in a clawfoot tub, at a hotel shown me by a nineteenth century English torch-boy. Feeling better, I notice a set of clothes sitting on the bed in adjacent room. I climb out of the bath and towel off. Walking into the other room and sitting on the bed I begin to put on the clothes left for me. Its a set of men's pajamas with "Hotel James" sewn on the lapel. I think back to this morning and feel like it was snowing, and that the sun was acting strange all day. I climb into the large four poster bed and lay my head on the overstuffed pillow that feels like it was made for a giraffe and fall asleep. Waking to a knock on the door, I climb out of bed and open it to find my clothes folded on the floor of the hall with a note attached that reads:

~*Thank You - MNGMT*~

I check out of the Hotel James and exit the lobby. I'm at the bottom of the Gand Canyon at a place called *Phantom Ranch*. There's a mule with my name on it that I ride to the rim. It's an all day ride in desert conditions and I didn't bring enough water. Just before I get to the top it begins to snow. Out of the canyon now I dismount and leave the mule with a local cowboy in front of an old lodge of sorts. An old green sedan that died twenty years ago sits waiting for me in the parking lot of a nearby campground. I'm headed out to Los Angelos to make it in Hollywood but don't make it as far the Hoover Dam before the brake lights go out. I take a marker and write *No Brake Lights* on a piece of cardboard and stick it in the rear window and use the hazard lights every time I need to stop. I drive this way all the way back to Alabama. All the way back to

Dogwood Ln. When I get home the wife is in the kitchen. I can tell from the look on her face that I was right to worry, back there in the tub at the Hotel James.

*Hi Honey.* We hug absent-mindedly and I'm thinking about that torch boy and the trip home from the Hoover Dam, which I had made before, several other times actually, once with the wife, when she was still in the band. The first time I was hauling ass with Natalie to San Diego and we drove over it unplanned as it just happened to be between us and her hometown. The love we were in was archetypal. We came together like Chokmah and Binah. Months earlier, when we met, she was dressing a table for a wedding and I was the new guy in the kitchen. We were housed in the same quarters the entirety of the week of preparations as we were brought in from out of town to cater the wedding. She and one of the other server girls helped themselves to the wedding wine and invited me to their room, after the guests had left and the house was cleaned. I showed up empty handed. There were three of us and we all got tipsy and retired to the same bed. The two of us fell in love while the other fell asleep. As it is with archetypes, our love slipped into the realm of forms and I was left chained to the wall staring at its shadow.

I sit down on the couch in the living room and look around. There's a pinch in my neck from the giant pillow at the Hotel James and I promise myself I'm going to start carrying my own pillow as waking up with a crick in your neck is a bad way to wake up. I think back to when I was drinking and genuinely afraid of waking up in a hospital or jail, with no memory, only to find I had hurt somebody, or worse. When the mind wakes up after drinking to the point of black-out, there is a terrifying residual ringing of ones actions that sounds in the black void of the amnesia. Like the overtones of a chord played while you were out in the lobby clanging upon your return, the conscious, being of the spirit, renders verdict even in the absence of a witness. The Devil's Interval, the diminished fifth, was the soundtrack for the darkest of my days.

The first time I blacked out I was thirteen years old. I had been sent to my father's house for the summer, as punishment for bad grades during the school year, and was allowed home only on the weekends. One Friday night after she had gone to bed, I started out with my mother's rum and ended up with my stomach pumped. The next morning I woke up at my father's with a hospital band on my arm, the devil's interval ringing in my ears, and a bladder so full it took a warm bath to empty. Sitting there, thirteen years old, in a tub full of piss, with every hangover I was yet to have suddenly howling throughout that big empty house, I first experienced the horror of not knowing what I'd done the night before. Crawling to the phone a couple hours after my bath, I fell asleep on the carpet of the basement I was staying in only to be woken by my father returning from work.

*How are you?* he asked.

*Fine.* I responded.

*You live here now.* he stated matter of factly. I went home the next week.

*Where are you?* It's the wife. I look around.

*Huh? Nowhere* I respond. *Where's the boy?*

*They're all at my mom's.* she replies.

*Can I call over there?* I ask, trying to hide my melancholy.

I don't think about that he's probably outside running around or making chocolate chip cookies with his grandmother; I picture myself at his age, waiting for something I didn't know I was missing.

*He's fine baby. He knows.* She is looking at me warmly.

*You're fine John,* I say to myself, *She knows.*

Or does she? Walking now, through the woods behind the house, alone, or rather, the only one around. The trees are there and they know everything; I'm ashamed. They must hate me for yelling at the wife or losing my temper with the children. They know how I feel about the cashier. They know I jack off too much and what's worse, they know it's her and not the wife. Next to me there is an oak tree, which I embrace as best I can. I resolve to do something radical. I think of Natalie, my first love. After a few months she became celibate and sleeping next to her was torture. I yelled a lot. I cheated. I moved out. I went out with a can of spray paint and wrote on the side of an overpass, "Natalie, I'll always love you." Back in the woods off of Dogwood Ln, I take out my pocket knife and make a motion to carve something into my oak tree before having a change of heart.

*See, I can be a good person.* I fold my pocketknife and put it back in my pocket. I should get back in the house.