



Zarreiech

a novel by
Michael D. Smith

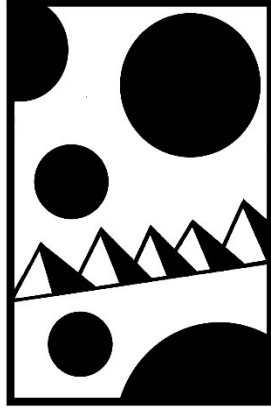
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For my wife Nancy
Who has steadfastly supported my writing over the years

CHAPTER ONE

Jim Donne's Arrival

Monday

Most of the land was gray dirt. Except for the prickly pear cactus and mesquite trees, the low hills by the bus terminal were like the surface of the moon. The slanting afternoon sun came down like a blowtorch.

Jim sat on a bench outside the bus terminal. Yellow grass clung to the cracked sidewalks. A terminal attendant sprayed a hose at a few bushes. Stone fountains churned. Silver-gray mountains shimmered far to the west.

Jim looked through his suitcase. Sketchpads, technical pens and pencils, some clothing and a paperback novel about some kid from Georgia joining a mercenary band in Africa. He flipped through the book; he didn't remember packing it. He couldn't imagine having bought it.

In fact he didn't recognize a single item in the suitcase. These were not his sketchpads and technical pens; he'd never seen these button-down shirts. He'd gotten the wrong suitcase. He went back into the bus terminal.

The bus driver sat with a cup of coffee listening to the woman behind the ticket counter.

"Marjorie got that towel set. But I don't know if I'd want to be spending two hundred dollars on that towel set. Now my towels may be a couple years old, but I like 'em, I figure they'll last awhile, and who has two hundred dollars anyway? On the other hand, Marjorie's towels were nice, you could tell that."

"Yeah, I would think so," said the bus driver, then turned and said: "How you doing, young man? What can I do for you now?"

"Well," Jim said, looking from the bus driver to the woman behind the counter, "I think I got the wrong suitcase or something." The woman, nametag Sandra, and the bus driver, nametag Earl, were the only people in the terminal.

"No, that can't be," Earl said. "You were the only passenger into Eicsine from Cuxlacjs. There was only one piece of luggage on board her. And that was the one."

"What makes you think you got the wrong suitcase, hon?" the woman said. "That's the one I checked in for you. You were the only one off the bus."

Jim pointed to the suitcase. "Well, I don't remember that scratch in the side there." But now he recalled joking earlier with Sandra about the scratch, how it had been there for years, and Sandra's little return joke about how Jim didn't need to worry about getting his suitcase mixed up with anyone else's because it was the only one in from Cuxlacjs today.

Jim was horrified. How could he have forgotten his conversation with this woman?

"Maybe the scratch came from being bumped around in the bus," Earl offered.

"No, the scratch has been there for years," Jim said. "I was just thinking that maybe it got mixed up in Cuxlacjs."

"Hell no, boy, that bus was *empty* in Cuxlacjs. I've gone five hundred miles today and stopped at four cities, and didn't have a single passenger until I picked you up in Cuxlacjs."

Jim remembered the last half hour on the bus journey when he'd finally gotten the nerve up to come up from the rear to sit behind Earl and chat about the heat. "Well, maybe this *is* my suitcase?"

Sandra stepped from around the counter. Jim had liked her from the first. She might be fifty years old but was still pretty. Her orange blouse wrapped tightly around her large breasts and her

thick bra was clearly outlined. Earl, a handsome man in his sixties with bulging muscles, looked on from behind his styrofoam cup. "Now hold on," Sandra said. "If you've got some reason to believe that isn't your suitcase, we'll just have to look into it, won't we, Earl?"

"Sure," Earl said. "What I can't figure out is why he thinks it isn't his suitcase. I mean, it's the same one he gave me to load. Or isn't it?"

"Well, of course it's the same one, then," Jim said.

"Hold on, Earl," Sandra said. "Maybe it's possible you had another suitcase in there. Maybe it just got stuck way back in the luggage compartment, and it happened to look like your suitcase here. Then maybe on the drive the wrong suitcase got knocked forward, and you picked that one out."

"Well, that would explain the scratch it got," Earl said, standing. "Guess I'll check the luggage compartment again. I could've *sworn* it was empty, though."

"No, I guess I'll just take this suitcase," Jim said. "Please don't go to any trouble." He remembered how dark and stifling that luggage compartment had been when Earl had opened it. It shouldn't be revisited for a stupid suitcase. "This one has the scratch, after all."

"I suppose it's possible both suitcases had scratches on them," Sandra said. "Though it'd be a long shot, you can bet."

"Maybe that kind of suitcase was especially prone to being scratched right there," Earl offered. "Beats me, though." He walked to the bus and opened the luggage compartment.

Jim drew back. "No, this is mine. I guess I'll just be leaving."

"You're sure it's yours?" Sandra said.

"It's empty, all right," Earl announced, then slammed the compartment shut.

"Did you check way far back?" Sandra said. "Maybe it got lost way in the back."

"Naw, there's no kinda place to lose a whole suitcase back there, Sandra. This here's the right suitcase, all right."

"Yeah, I guess," Jim said, staring blearily at the insect-blasted bus windshield.

"Are you sure?" Sandra said. "Because we don't want you to be unhappy. We'll be glad to look around a little more for your suitcase."

"But it's right here."

"Oh--I suppose so."

Jim edged backward. "Guess I'd better be going?"

Earl drained his coffee and threw the cup into a black can. "That's right. Your grandmother's gonna wonder why you're late."

"My ... grandmother?"

"Grandmother?" Sandra said. "How nice. Who is she?"

"Well ..."

"Why, Sandra, didn't Jim introduce himself?" Earl said. "He's Emily Donne's grandson. He's coming to live with her."

Jim stared at Earl. "How do you know that?"

"Why, you told me on the bus. Fine woman. She and I were in high school together. You seem a little old to be her grandkid, though."

"Oh, no, *that* could easily work," Sandra grinned. "Emily and her daughter both married real young, you know. But I didn't know she had a grandson. Please to meet you then, Jim."

"You are?" Jim said. Earl had talked about this town. Eicsine, what a silly name. Why was he here? Who was this grandmother? What was this Cuxlacs they'd driven from? All Jim could remember was endless desert highway and bumping his head against the window. Earl and

Sandra and the bus terminal seemed real, but they were messing with his mind. Maybe he had no suitcase at all. Maybe he had come here without possessions. Maybe he needed to come here *because* he had no possessions.

“Well, Jim says he’s gonna get some of his cartoon work done here in Eicsine,” Earl said.

“What?” Jim said.

Earl and Sandra exchanged a puzzled glance. “Well, maybe he doesn’t want me to discuss it.”

“Discuss what?” Sandra said.

“His cartooning. Jim was working for this graphic art company.”

“I told you *that*?” Jim gasped. He considered the instruments and paper in the suitcase. Earl and Sandra could be dangerous.

“Sure did,” Earl said, his voice slightly clipped. Sandra was leaning toward Jim with a concerned look. Jim stared at those tight orange polyester tits. Earl frowned.

“Uh, that’s right.” Jim tried to smile the whole thing off but only succeeded in making an awkward grimace.

“You’re a cartoonist, isn’t that what you said?” Earl said.

“Yeah, it’s all in this suitcase here. This is my suitcase, really. Uh, do you know where my grandmother’s house is?”

Earl strode to Jim, grabbed his arm, and walked him out of the bus terminal garage. “About four miles beyond the field here. You can’t see her house until you get across that first series of hills. Then you’ll see it. It’s a split-level and white, kinda off by itself, and there’s a stream behind it.”

“Four miles? In this heat?”

Earl shrugged. “Well, it *is* hot.”

Sandra moved up. “Is that it, hon? You having trouble with the heat?”

Jim looked back at her, only now realizing his back was soaked. “I’ll ... be all right.” He hefted his suitcase. “How the hell did I *get* this?”

“I don’t know,” Sandra said. “But just take it easy, Jim.”

“Say hi to your grandmother for me,” Earl said, turning away.

The next time Jim wiped the sweat from his eyes, Sandra and Earl had disappeared into the building. There were hills on all sides, plus the mountains to the south. Surely his grandmother lived on this side of those mountains, which looked to be a good thirty miles away. Maybe he could make four miles without collapsing. He couldn’t understand why he was sweating; this area looked so arid. The sun was pitiless.

Jim sat on the bench again, opened his suitcase, and pulled out a sketchbook. JIM DONNE. IDEAS FOR SCIENCE FICTION GRAPHIC NOVEL. There were colored-pencil sketches of dark urban streets and vivid monsters, with scribbled notes on perspective and color, along with an array of expensive art pens and color markers. And an open envelope. Jim took out a folded letter.

JOINT DECLARATION OF INABILITY TO CARE FOR SELF
Cuxlacjs Regional Council of Public Services
Zarreich Provincial Assistance Authority

1. It is hereby declared that James Postyn Donne, age 23, graduate of the University of Cuxlacjs, is assigned Status Unable to Care for Self after death of

mother Lois Carter Donne two months ago, and after being discharged as employee of Demomars Graphic Arts, LLC, of Cuxlacjs, two weeks ago.

2. It is therefore determined that, in the interests of his own safety and well-being, James Postyn Donne shall be sent to live with his only surviving next of kin, grandmother Emily Markham Donne of Eicsine, Zarreich Province, effective immediately.

3. The Cuxlacjs Regional Council of Public Services hereby grants the sum of \$250 to James Postyn Donne for bus fare and initial living expenses in Zarreich Province, in the expectation that the Zarreich Provincial Assistance Authority will provide additional assistance contingent on James Postyn Donne's satisfactory performance as a citizen of Zarreich Province.

Jim shut the suitcase in shock. He checked his pockets. There was no wallet. But he pulled out \$35 in folded bills.

A bus ride was that expensive?

So he had a mother who died? Lois? Who was that?

Somebody fired him?

Assholes were saying he was too incompetent to live?

The sun seared his neck. He felt violently drunk. He looked at himself in the chrome curve of the suitcase handle. There was a hard square face, jutting chin, and knotted light brown hair, all curved through the handle, distorted but oddly recognizable. He remembered "Jim," but not "Donne." Or this letter, or this graphic art business. He couldn't remember anything before the ride from Cuxlacjs. He couldn't even remember Cuxlacjs. He could only recall feeling awkward in the back of the bus and going up to talk with Earl, the only other person onboard. Even the conversation with Earl was becoming vague and mythological; yet he must have told Earl about the letter and this grandmother. Stepping off the bus, getting the suitcase, and seeing Sandra were a bit clearer, but not much more so.

Jim met his own eyes in the mirrored handle; twin black pools strained to pierce the veil. Massive blinding clouds built high above his hair, sharp and puffy, dominating this hilly lunar surface and its cruel artificial life.

CHAPTER TWO

Emily

What was especially disturbing was the idea that all life was artificial; that the earth had emerged from primordial chaos, but that these cacti and stunted trees had craftily stolen some of the earth's elements and molded structures--roots and stalks, chlorophyll and water storage systems--with which to survive. These plants were artifice. Their survival simply meant continuing to grow and create more of these artificial structures. Jim was appalled that thousands of plants persisted on these scorched hills. The plants knew the earth well, knew the exact structures that would work in this environment, then had proceeded to build them. Jim had also been created from the elements of the earth. He too was a structure, an artifice, one that walked and surveyed. He panicked. He'd also stolen from the chaos.

The plants changed as he crossed a grassy hill. Below lay a ditch of sluggish gray water, and the plants got greener and richer. There was taller grass, higher trees, and bright blue flowers. Jim saw more artifice: a few houses on the other side of the stream, and one, split-level and white, just as Earl had predicted. Latticework covered the wall facing the stream, and morning glories twined through the thin boards.

Jim moved down the slope. It was far longer to the stream than he would have guessed, maybe a thousand yards. He marveled at the precision of his eyesight over these distances. The shapes of leaves, the peeling paint on the houses on the other bank, the roads and buildings in the sunlit distance, were all painfully sharp. The vegetation got lusher as he sloshed through pools of water and soggy grass. The stream must have overflowed here a while ago, he thought, noting the line of dried mud three feet up on the sides of this grandmother's house.

There were fishermen up and down the stream. At places the stream had tall steep banks affording shade. Maybe these were the best places to fish in the early evening. An old guy listened to a radio, several poles radiating from his legs.

Jim crossed a wooden bridge behind the split-level house and went to the front. He climbed three concrete steps and knocked on the door.

"Come on in," came the immediate response. The woman's voice carried easily through the glass door. Jim had expected some ancient rasp or complaint. It seemed as if her voice *was* the glass door with its green and blue curtain.

Jim swung the door open and was greeted with a wave of lifesaving cool air. He quickly stepped inside with his suitcase and shut the door, conscious of how his wet face and hair.

The room's cool gray walls were dominated by paintings of all sizes and colors. There were hundreds of paintings through this room and others beyond. Some were two feet wide, some five feet, all vibrating with bright red and orange shapes. Some were giant faces and bodies climbing around objects, some were black landscapes with pools of blue fire or pine-green buildings glowing in a burning city.

To Jim's left a woman stood from a table covered by a tarp, cluttered with paintbrushes, colored pencils, and tubes of oil paint. Disoriented by all the canvases stacked against the rear wall, Jim puzzled out that this room was probably originally a dining room. The one beyond was a living room, divided in half by a russet couch facing him. But aside from the couch and a couple wooden chairs, both spaces were dominated by workbenches crammed with paintbrushes in coffee cans and paint jars of all sizes and colors.

The woman was tall, wearing a thin dress of red stripes buttoned to her neck. An old lady dress except for a generous oval below the neck exposing a bewildering glimpse of full tights

cleavage. Jim looked away, flustered. Her hair was short, shorter than Jim's, fluffy brown with gray streaks. Her face was tight, with a few wrinkles, and her eyes were clear and alert. Jim darted another glance at the oval. Certainly impressive for an old lady.

"Well, you must be my grandson, then," the woman said, producing a strained smile. "I've been expecting you." He'd been counting on this old woman recognizing him, but it was obvious she'd never seen him before, just as she conjured up absolutely no memory in him. "They gave me 4:30 for your arrival time. You're a bit late, but better late than never, I suppose. Well, it's good to finally meet you. But God, you're completely drenched!"

"I'm sorry, I had to walk from the bus terminal. It took *hours*."

"Well, I'm glad you got here before dark at any rate. You can just take a shower and cool off. It's certainly hot this time of year. I thought you'd call from the station, and I was going to borrow my neighbor's car to get you. I mean, I do have my own car which you'll be welcome to use, but it's in the shop right now."

"Uh, right. I--I'm Jim, by the way. Jim, uh, Donne. Your, uh, grandson and all."

She nodded warily. "Emily Donne here. So you're my grandson, then."

"Y-yes, I suppose so."

Emily picked up an envelope off the table and slid out a letter. "Yes, I got the letter. I suppose you got one too."

"Y-yes," Jim said, letting his suitcase swing against his leg. "It--it's here somewhere."

Emily pulled a pair of reading glasses off the table. Jim was rather taken by the way the light golden frame flattered her cheeks. "I just got this two days ago. Here. Read it. I mean, so there's no misunderstanding, I guess."

"Well ... sure." Jim took the letter.

ZARREICH PROVINCIAL ASSISTANCE AUTHORITY
CERTIFIED ASSIGNMENT OF FAMILIAL RESPONSIBILITY

1. In conjunction with the Joint Declaration of Inability to Care For Self mandated this date by the Cuxlacjs Regional Council of Public Services and the Zarreich Provincial Assistance Authority, the Zarreich Council of Familial Relationships is hereby assigned the task of enforcing the insertion of James Postyn Donne, unemployed graphic artist, certified as Status Unable to Care for Self, into the household of Emily Markham Donne of Eicsine, Zarreich Province, grandmother and only surviving next of kin, for as long as Council shall determine that James Postyn Donne remains in Status Unable to Care for Self.

2. In recognizing the special needs of James Postyn Donne, age 23, formerly of Cuxlacjs, following the death of mother Louise Cartier Donne, with whom James Postyn Donne needed to live for his entire life due to his feckless, dreamy nature, an obsessive preoccupation with artistic pursuits, and a marked inability to subsist on his own, the Zarreich Council of Familial Relationships mandates that Emily Markham Donne shall house, feed, and clothe James Postyn Donne, and in general maintain his physical and emotional well-being, until Council shall determine that James Postyn Donne

can attain Status Self-Care Enabled.

3. The Zarreich Provincial Assistance Authority, in consultation with the Zarreich Council of Familial Relationships, further conjectures, in the interests of cultural harmony and social cohesion, that, based on the past artistic interests of each principal, a bond of art is assumed to exist between the principals, with the expectation that the culture of Zarreich Province will be effectively augmented by anticipated future collaboration between Emily Markham Donne and James Postyn Donne.

4. In addition, in order to recover the costs of transportation from Cuxlacjs and initial expenses for James Postyn Donne to Zarreich Province, Emily Markham Donne will immediately reimburse the Zarreich Provincial Assistance Authority the sum of \$250. An addressed envelope is herewith supplied for said payment.

“Wow ...” Jim muttered. “So you got a letter too. But I think my letter said *Lois* Donne.”

Emily shook her head grimly. “The hell with it. I’m sure it’s just a typo. This whole thing is such bureaucratic *bullshit*.”

Jim stared. Could good-looking grandmother types really say that sort of thing?

“Can you believe it?” Emily fumed. “It’s my daughter Louise coming back to haunt me, I guess. Dammit, I never knew she had a son!”

“Well, I mean ... I’m sorry.”

“Oh, I don’t hold it against you. If you’ve been declared Unable to Care for Self, I have to take you. I don’t have any legal options. But who knows? I guess we’ll just have to make the best of it.”

“Well, your letter went into a lot more detail than mine. Mine just said I was being sent here.” He tapped the paragraph on the sheet he still held. “And what’s all this about art?” He took another look around the house, which had obviously been transformed into a giant art studio. “You’re an artist, right? I guess I am too. My letter says something about graphic art.”

Emily shrugged. But that just emphasized the taut oval cleavage. “Hell, that’s just one of the provincial authority’s cultural obsessions. Even your gas bill comes with that hype. They’re always trying to ramp up the art scene in Zarreich. But it’s pitiful to begin with and they know it.”

“Huh. But maybe there’d be some opportunities for me.”

“Well, I suppose we do have that in common. Maybe this will work out. But dammit, I do think I’m paying for all that crap with Louise.”

“Well, I’m sorry ...”

“Not your fault. The truth is, we’d been estranged for twenty-five years now. My own daughter. My *only* child. No contact whatsoever. It probably started with that jerk Fenton. I told her he’d be the end of her. Should’ve kept my mouth shut about that, I suppose. It’s all too damn complicated. But hell, she could’ve had fifteen kids and I’d never have known! And dammit, now I find she’s *dead*. I still haven’t wrapped my head around that. What it *means*. Just found out two days ago. Oh my God ...”

“Well ... I’m sorry, I guess.”

She took a ragged breath and eyed his drenched body. “Don’t be. What’s done is done. But now you’re here. We have to deal with that. You’re welcome here until you get back on your feet. Maybe this can work out. If we work together on it.”

Jim considered that neither letter had mentioned a father or other siblings. Who was this Fenton guy? Possibly his dad? But all he felt was a dismaying certainty that he was completely alone except for this perturbing older woman in front of him. “Well, uh, whatever you say. I guess I’m eager to ... get started or something.”

She let slip a dubious smile. “Well, I have to admit I was pissed about having an unknown kid saddled on me. But you’re here, you seem like an honest type, and, well, if you’re an artist, maybe this will somehow be okay.”

“Yeah, maybe we’ll have some things to talk about.” Jim realized he was paying that oval too much attention. Had she noticed? Didn’t women have a way of catching that?

She smiled again, but was she just politely covering up disgust at his leering? “Well, believe it or not, I’ve got your room ready. It’s the guest room on the lower level. There’s an old architect’s table there you might want to use.”

“Uh, thanks,” Jim said, finally setting his suitcase down. It was hitting him that he’d come here to live with this sexy old woman. He felt drained and depressed. “Uh, maybe I’ll go ahead and take that shower.”

“Sure, it’s right upstairs to your left. There are towels up there in the closet.”

“Uh, thanks.” Jim focused on the workbench. Amid rags and bottles of cleaning agent were springs, rods, screws, and other oddly shaped pieces of metal. Plus brass-colored bullets. A disassembled revolver. “Uh, what’s ...”

“Oh, that’s just my .38. We’ve had some trouble here the past couple weeks with prowlers in the neighborhood, so I thought I’d take it out of mothballs.”

“Uh, are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Of course I’m sure. I’ve taken that thing apart and cleaned it a hundred times.”

“I meant, do you know how to, uh ... handle it, I mean, safely and all?”

She grinned and picked up the ivory-handled pistol. “Jim, I’ve had this gun for twenty years. It’s a police .38. I was with the cops over in Zarreich. Took early retirement ten years ago.”

Jim blinked at what the delicious oval was doing for her ample chest. “Oh, right. Uh, so what’s this Zarreich place? I’ve never heard of it.”

“Are you kidding? You really don’t know? It’s the city across the mountains further south. That’s where all the work is these days. If you’re looking for work, you ought to try there, because there’s nothing much doing in Eicsine. You might have gathered from the letter that you’re not going to owe me anything for room and board here, so you might not want a job. You might just want to work on your graphic art, or whatever you want. But if you want to make some extra money, it’ll have to be in Zarreich.”

This oppressed Jim, her bringing up the matter of employment. Was he supposed to go to some damn city and put on some act for some interviewer for some job he didn’t want just to make some bucks? But if he wanted to buy a car and have some money to take out some girls, he’d need income. He couldn’t be borrowing it from this woman.

“Thanks ... uh, grandmother,” Jim said, hefting his suitcase. “Maybe I’ll take that shower now.”

“Sure, make yourself at home.” She turned back to the workbench. “And just call me Emily. We’ll get along fine.” She waved at the paintings on the walls. “Maybe we can even do some collaborating. Some murals or something.”

The paintings pulsed with wild energies and colors. "And these are really all yours?"

Emily stretched her arms behind her. Surely she wasn't *advertising* those boobs, was she? "Had to take up something after I quit the cops. Last year I even taught painting at the University of Zarreich. They've only got twelve teachers for a student body of two thousand, so they're always eager for teaching help, even if you don't have a degree. I may do it again soon, I don't know. Say, now there's a job for you. They'd take you in a second."

"Well, I don't know if I'd like teaching all that much."

"The pay's bad, I'll admit. And the Zarreich students are pretty much zombies. In fact, they say most of this looting of homes here is being done by a bunch of UZ students, out to impress each other. But it's gotten worse than student pranks. They even raped a woman up the block. As far as I'm concerned, if one of 'em sets foot on my property I'll just blow him away. The law will back me up on it, too."

"Uh ... yeah," Jim said, poised on the green-carpeted steps leading upstairs. He was intrigued by the setup of this split-level house. There were only five steps leading to the upper level, and five steps leading downstairs into a dark room, where more paintings loomed from the shadows.

"Your room's down there and to the back. Most of the space down there is my studio. It's a total mess, but if you want to paint and need some extra room, feel free to use it."

"Well, thanks." Jim climbed upstairs with his suitcase. He locked himself in the bathroom, took off his clothes, and considered himself in the full-length mirror. He was already uneasy about accepting this woman's hospitality. His naked body in the mirror made him feel even more awkward. He thought that if the bathroom was upstairs, and he lived on the lower level, then he'd always need to come upstairs to use the bathroom, which would mean dragging his suitcase up here and wearing a robe and changing clothes in the bathroom. He'd never be able to be himself while living here. He'd always have to hide from her. He could never be himself and just lounge around. He'd be locked in either his guest room or else this bathroom and he'd have to be careful when he moved from one room to the other.

He turned the shower on and climbed in. It was also disconcerting that Emily was under no such constraints, with her lacy bras and underwear draped all over all the racks. Rumpled towels hung everywhere. All this emphasized how solid and real she was and how foreign and awkward Jim was. Why had he been sent here? Because of this Louise or Lois person he had no memory of? And now he was responsible for a suitcase full of alien pencils and sketches.

Emily scared him. Her having been a cop, and having that gun, and acting so assured, and above all having such a perfect body with the perfect thighs that thin dress clung to, and so generously exposing her cleavage, those were hard to take. Just who did she think she was? But the cool water finally made him smile. Maybe guns and cops were less scary than typical grandmother behavior--baking pies, sewing, treating grandchildren like dolls, complaining about arthritis, that sort of thing. And then there were the paintings, which were the most beautiful things he'd ever seen.

CHAPTER THREE

Attraction or Friendship?

Jim was beginning to like his suitcase. It had given him a fresh new shirt. He'd come a long way; he'd achieved something by making it to this house. The water had massaged away his fears. Earl and Sandra, the fuss over the suitcase, his confusion at meeting the beautiful Emily, all seemed distant and hazy.

The upstairs hall was lined with scores of smaller paintings. He loved them already: the colors and the landscapes, the beings twisting their bodies. Emily was damn good, especially for someone just starting just a few years ago. Her sensitivity and technical expertise seemed far beyond anything Jim felt capable of. She was probably already famous. Surely many people in that Zarreich place knew about her work, came to this house and admired it. But not everyone would be granted the right to see these works upstairs.

Jim stood before one painting showing a giant planet rising above a lunar surface. Ribbons of multicolored clouds above the moon cut through the planet. There was a giddy sense of space sliced apart, flowing into different dimensions, reconnecting. The glowing blue and green shades knocked him out. He gazed at this painting for several minutes, lost in the ribbons, hardly able to figure out what was in front of him. It seemed more like mitotic division of cells than a work of art. He explored another painting of sunset light on a tar road in a forest, with little bears metamorphosing into little brown jars reflecting the light of dusk.

Another painting showed what appeared to be an abandoned railroad car sitting in a field at dawn, or else on the rocky surface of an asteroid. The boxcar was unstable, with glaring neon lines slashing through it. Another painting showed a tornado of giant black blocks rising above dots of light over a muddy field. He went further down the hall, noting four large rooms up here. He stood before a five-by-five-foot painting of a little yellow man sitting at a desk in a castle room. The man looked like the pilot of a UFO as he busied himself writing on dark gray pages. The floor and walls broke apart into glowing dots of all colors, a radiation of pure insight streaming all around the little man.

Jim peeked into Emily's bedroom; after all, as her grandson he should know how she lived. It was a large room, bright blue, with only three paintings on the wall, but these were so brown and black that he really couldn't get anything more than a sensation of sinister shapes.

Jim was stunned by the huge canopy bed in the center of the room. Emily having such a luxurious bed was really rather shocking. Jim was further startled to see the red-striped dress she'd worn earlier slung across the bed. So what on earth did she have on now?

He hurried downstairs, banging his suitcase against the walls. Emily sat at the workbench in the dining room. The gun had been cleared off as well as the paintbrushes and cups of pencils. A bright blue tablecloth had replaced the blue tarp and now held dinner plates. In the corner stood a dazzling blond acoustic guitar.

"There you are," Emily said. "I thought you'd gotten lost up there."

"Uh ..." Jim muttered. His earlier nervousness came back in full force. His hair was wet and tangled and he was dripping on the carpet. He stared at the sleek beige robe Emily wore. It was unzipped nearly halfway down her chest and showed Jim most of a breast. "Uh, I was looking at some of your paintings up there. They're really nice."

"Well, come around and have some dinner, Jim. It's eight now and I thought you might be hungry."

Jim came around and sat down, shocked. The view wasn't so good from here, sitting right

across her, but he could still see a lot. He was struck by how full and shapely those tits rode on such a slender body. Her face, framed by short fluffy graying hair, was beautiful as well. It was old, but with grace and dignity. You didn't see that in too many older people's faces. Most people just themselves go to hell after forty and that was that. But Emily had decided to remain beautiful.

How could this be anyone's damn grandmother? He knew he shouldn't be appraising her like that. But why the hell was she wearing that robe? As the low late evening sun streamed through the front window Jim saw the robe was transparent as well.

No, by definition this could not be a grandmother. Yes, Earl has said her name was Emily Donne, but that didn't have to mean anything. He'd been sent here for some reason. Was it to pursue this older woman? Why would he do that? What was fate offering? Because he sure didn't recognize her. Did that mean he was free to pursue her? Wasn't she dangling herself before him? As an old maid and certainly sex-starved, wouldn't she undoubtedly be grateful for some vigorous young copulation?

Emily lazily scratched her taut stomach, gathering the folds of the nightgown below her breasts. Jim stared at every rasp of her fingernails. "So, Jim, which painting did you like best?"

"Uh, probably the one of the planet with all the ribbons of light. It was really fine."

"Oh, you mean the blue and green one. Well, that's just a sphere and some lines. It's one of the few completely abstract ones I've done."

"Well, I thought it looked like a planet, the way you'd see it from one of its moons. I was really getting lost in it."

Emily smiled. "The only other purely abstract ones I've done are the dark brown ones in my bedroom. Did you happen to see those?"

"They ... did catch my eye."

"I did them right after I quit my job with the police. I was in a dark period for a while. I'd gotten it into my head that I'd just never do much of anything again. So I was pretty depressed. Then, I just decided to start painting. I dropped abstract pretty soon and got into doing the alien landscapes and the beings."

"Like the one of the little man writing in the room?" Jim said.

"Well, it's supposed to just be a little *being*. Could be male or female." Emily fingered her chest between her tits, and Jim's eyes nearly betrayed him. He sucked himself together and told him to just observe for now. He wouldn't freak out. "That one was a kind of breakthrough," she went on. "At first I was really attached to the idea of this being an eighty-three-year-old person sitting up in his castle composing the story of her life. And for a long time after I'd done the painting, I always thought of it as a painting of old age. But then one day it just hit me that the person in the painting could be young or old. It's just a timeless being pausing for a moment to write something down. And it really helps me break out of feeling in that old age mood. I can be sixty-three, or I can be five, or I can be seventeen. I can be any age I want."

Sixty-three. That wasn't bad. Of course she'd announce her age to get his reaction. At once Emily looked as lithe and unlined as a seventeen-year-old girl.

"How old are you, Jim?" Emily asked.

"Uh ... twenty-three," Jim muttered, ashamed. He wished he weren't such a child, then maybe this would seem all right.

"Well, I can be twenty-three too, whenever I want. See, Jim, we can talk like equals. We can talk about the world over a pitcher of beer."

Jim was having enough trouble trying to mask his astonishment when she grabbed a full

pitcher of beer off the table and filled a mug by Jim's plate. She raised her own glass: "To a promising friendship, Jim." As she raised her right arm the waning sunset light lit up her transparent robe to show the clear lines of her breasts and both nipples.

Jim held his own glass up. "Uh ... y-yes." He grinned like an idiot, then struggled to contain it. God, he had to grab that damn suitcase and get out of here. This was supposed to be his own grandmother? The beer tasted wonderful; it summed up the journey, the shower, the paintings, Emily's beauty and her personality and her gauzy robe. Jim took two more gulps. He could feel the beer getting into his mind. It took the strain off everything. Emily drank her beer across the workbench from him. They had a whole pitcher to go through.

Jim set his empty mug down and refilled it. "Damn, this is exactly what I need."

"You need some food, too, Jim. You haven't even looked at it."

Jim saw the pot roast and the peas and the bowl of rice in front of him. He had no idea he was so ravenous and began scraping big portions of everything onto his plate.

"Normally I don't make big dinners. But I wanted to welcome you properly. I had some of it going already when you came. But I didn't think you'd stay under the shower for almost an hour."

"I stayed there that long?"

"I had no idea what you were doing up there. You must've been hot!"

"Well, I guess I just sorta blanked out for a while. I mean, the whole journey was incredible. It really wasted me. I didn't mean to take so long. I mean, use up your water and all."

"Oh, no problem at all, Jim," Emily laughed, leaning over to grab the bowl of rice, twisting this time to reveal even more boob. Jim fought not to groan. Why the hell was she doing this? Maybe she was just naturally like this. Naturally liked transparent robes and was simply unselfconscious about it. Was naturally a friendly and sexy person but didn't have any designs on him. Sure, that had to be it. He resolved to be a friend. Just be polite, talk things over with her.

"I ... I guess I've had some problems with this whole journey."

"Oh? Really?" Emily sat straight back in her chair.

"I mean, I guess I've been having some trouble with my memory. I can't really remember much about why I came here."

"Really? How do you mean?"

"Well, maybe I shouldn't say this." Like a fool, he was getting drunk and saying things he shouldn't. There was no point in falling for this old lady's charms and then spilling his soul to her. But he couldn't bring his mind to bear on safe subjects like the heat or the bus ride. "I just don't think you'd understand."

"Sure I would. Are you having some trouble these days, Jim? I've known a lot of students at Zarreich, young men like yourself, who sometimes have trouble with their moods."

Jim was silenced by Emily's double putdown; first implying he was fucked in the head; second, assigning Jim to that age group. Putting him years below her, turning him into a child. "Listen, the age trip can work both ways. Well, I can be sixty-three, too. You probably think you can figure me out so easily."

Emily sat back at this outburst. "I didn't say anything about figuring you out. And if you want to be sixty-three, fine. Only I'm concentrating on being twenty-three tonight."

"God ..."

"What?"

"No--nothing ... you wouldn't understand. I can't explain this."

“It doesn’t sound too bad, Jim. Sometimes I wonder why I spent twenty years being a policewoman. Sometimes we can’t remember why we wanted to do things.”

“No, it’s that I can’t remember any of my life before today!”

“Really?”

“See, I said you wouldn’t understand!”

“No, hold on, Jim. Do you think you have amnesia? Is that it?”

“Well, I remember my name, and that letter says I’m supposed to come live with you, so I came. But I never remembered what you looked like.”

“Well, of course, Jim. We’ve never met. I never even knew Louise had a son. So you really don’t remember anything before today?”

“No! I don’t remember where I came from, I don’t remember coming here. I’ve got this suitcase full of art supplies and I don’t remember a thing about it. It’s like it belongs to another person. It’s not mine.”

“Is all this true?”

“Yes, I just told you!”

“I’m having trouble believing it, that’s true. But I’m willing to talk about it. All of a sudden I get this letter from the court saying my daughter is dead, and for me to take you in. I mean, I really couldn’t refuse, could I? I’m still sort of in shock for both reasons.”

“Well ... I’m sorry, and ... I’ll just go ...”

“But when they said you were a graphic artist, I thought, well, maybe we could, you know, collaborate ... and maybe there’d be something left of Louise in you, I don’t know.”

“I ... really don’t remember anything.”

“Maybe it’s all just fatigue and the heat today? Maybe it’ll all come back.”

“I don’t know ...”

“It must be scary.”

“I mean, I don’t know why I’m here, why I’m occupying space here. Some person opened up this ... this *path*. It doesn’t explain why I took it. I don’t know what sorts of things are in those sketchbooks and why I took them along.”

“Well, for some reason you did decide to come here. You did decide to come live with me. Hang on to that, and maybe the rest will come back.”

“Yeah ...” Jim finished his second beer, poured himself a third, then emptied the remainder into Emily’s mug. He was involved in a sensuous mystery, floating upside down in fog, but it was beautiful fog and the floating was a joy. There would be some unraveling to do, all right. He’d have to do some work to get to the bottom of it all. But he had Emily as a helper. She knew exactly what to say.

“Yeah, that’s good advice,” he said. “I can hold onto that--that I’ve come to live with you.” He hadn’t expected his voice to slip an octave on the last few words. But his tone was somehow automatically on target, because Emily nodded gravely. Jim allowed his eyes to rest on Emily’s half-opened robe. But she caught his glance and frowned.

Well, Jim was pleasantly buzzed. If she wanted to play it cold for a while, he could be patient. “Where’d you get this pitcher of beer? Have your own tap here?” Shit, that was a stupid remark.

“No, idiot. I just poured eight cans of beer down there. I thought it would be more fun than just drinking from the cans. But there’s more in the refrigerator.”

“Well, I don’t know if you should trust me to have any more beer. You don’t know what I might do.”

Of course that was an even stupider remark. Yeah, he was drunk. He'd come right out and suggested sex, in code, but quite decipherable. Had he really done that? Was this really his own grandmother? There was no way. Someone had mixed up Lois Donne and Louise Donne, and this was one sexy eligible female.

Emily stood abruptly to gather the empty plates and silverware. "You through?" she said icily. Jim stared. God, what had he just screwed up? Everything had been going along so well, she'd been making so many little innuendoes of her own, but dammit, as soon as he made one, the whole thing collapsed. And he was the guilty one. He was a total asshole. Emily scraped beef off Jim's plate and gathered the napkins. The last evening sunlight filtered through the bright lacy curtains behind her, lighting up the silhouette of her body through the transparent robe. She wasn't even wearing any underwear. Surely a woman didn't dress like that in front of a guy and pretend there was no sex in the air? She'd wanted Jim from the first, right? Jim caught her eye. Neutral. She moved into the kitchen. Jim pushed his chair back and followed.

Emily stood at the sink, staring grimly out the window at the morning glory fence and the detached garage. Jim moved behind her. Her ass was fully revealed, small and round, her back and spine clearly outlined. The message was clearly that Jim should cease to exist. He put his hands on her shoulders and she stiffened.

"Hey ..." Jim murmured, caressing her shoulders. "C'mon."

"What the hell are you doing?"

Jim managed to pull his hands back before he lost all control of them. This old woman had just baited him to make this move so she could humiliate and crush him. Jim had done the unspeakable. He'd made a pass at his own grandmother. He'd suggested fucking his own kin. He stood motionless behind her, waiting for her to turn and aim like a firing squad. She had to have some sharp knives in one of these drawers. If she didn't kill him, he'd have to do it himself. He thought of the .38. He closed his eyes. He'd stumbled into an awful trap and had wrecked himself through sheer stupidity. He'd made the trap himself. His whole life was a time-bomb set to go off at age twenty-three. This woman was the fuse. Jim had just killed himself.

She faced the window, breathing steadily. Jim looked down to the halves of her perfect ass. He knew she was trying to get a handle on how to deal with a totally perverted criminal. Jim checked a wall clock to Emily's right. Twenty agonizing seconds went by. Emily was rigid. Jim stared entranced at her ass.

A new idea emerged. If he was so awful, if he'd committed the most horrible crime, he certainly had nothing to lose. He felt the welling of an even worse crime. Maybe Emily was waiting for it too. Hadn't he soiled both of them forever by his lust? His lips parted in a sneer. Yeah. He was a twenty-three-year-old shithead, all right. He was going to have his pleasure any which way. Again he looked for the gun, but this time his only thought was to keep Emily from using it on him. He crudely pulled down the zipper of his jeans.

The sound surprised him, a loud, well-oiled clicking in this dead chamber.

Emily whirled to face him. "Goddamn you! You stupid shit! How dare you!"

Jim hastily rezippered. The twenty-three-year-old criminal was instantly a five-year-old kid. "God, oh God ..." Her voice and her face were more dangerous to him now than the .38, which Jim now saw sitting on the kitchen counter at her elbow.

"What the hell are trying you to pull? Gonna rape your own grandmother? Is that it?"

Jim's feet got tangled and he collapsed on the brown tile. "No no no, please!"

Emily stood over him. Jim could again see the perfect silhouette of her body against the long fluorescent lights on the ceiling. But the body combined cruelly with the enraged face. He fully

expected her to grab the .38 and kill him right here on the floor. Jim closed his eyes. "I'm so sorry! My head is so fucked! I'm such a little turd!" And then he was crying.

Emily watched him for a few minutes until finally he was spent. His eyes were puffy, his throat and nose clogged, his face and neck wet. "My God," she muttered, "you really are a mess."

"I know, I know, but I just don't care. Just leave me alone and I'll die." Jim tried to crawl towards the door, but his muscles wouldn't obey. He lay on the floor, moaning.

"What the *fuck* is the matter with you? You're dumped on me by the goddamn bureaucrats, then the next thing I know you're trying to rape me! Dammit, I was expecting something like a seven-year-old. Instead I get this overgrown teenager! And now you're trying to pass it off like you were temporarily insane. God! Just get up and get out of here!"

Jim turned onto his back. "Not ... rape you. Just ..."

"I know what you wanted."

"No ... just ... have sex with you ..."

"Great! What's the goddamn difference?"

"Good sex ... both of us want it."

Emily took a step back and eyed the black wall phone. "Listen, mister, you're totally crazy. I don't know where you got that impression. Now I want you out of here. Right now."

Jim scraped himself into a sitting position. "You could kill me. Use your gun. It's all right."

"No! Now get out of here! I'm a normal person! I'm not crazy like you! I'm not going to carry out all your stupid whims! I'm a sixty-three-year-old woman! If you want to get laid go into Zarreich and find yourself some little girl your own age!"

"You pretend, but you wanted it too!"

"Just get out! I won't hear this in my house!"

"I don't know who you are, but you're not my grandmother! So I can fuck you if I want! Admit it! You want me too! You're hanging out all over the place, you make all sorts of suggestive comments, you wear a transparent robe, you let me see everything!"

Emily looked down at her robe and gathered it tightly to her neck. "I'd forgotten how nasty young men can be. Excuse me for having lured such a little boy on. For your information I dress as I please in this house. I certainly don't need to lure anyone on, especially my own grandson. My own grandson who's depraved!"

"I told you I have head problems! Just like all your young men in Zarreich! You crazy old bitch!" Jim didn't care that he was a pervert. Maybe he should take off into the city and find some whores. Anything to get this old shrew off his back.

"*What did you call me, young man?*"

"All right, fuck you, I'll just die." He couldn't remember where the gun was anymore, or the door. He lay on the floor, rolled over, sprawled on his stomach with an arm over his face. "I'm so sorry ..."

Emily found a wooden chair by the phone and threw herself on it, drained. Her face, so youthful and charming a half hour ago, so violently furious a second ago, now seemed that of a ninety-six-year-old zombie in a nursing home. "All right, Jim, you just sit there and try to get it together and then you leave. We won't discuss this anymore."

"Why not?" Jim muttered to the tile floor.

"There's nothing to discuss. This is all insanity."

"Sure there's something. What happened. Why it happened. I can't be *this* crazy."

Emily closed her eyes and fought to catch her breath. "Of course I could call the police and

have them drag you away, but those jerks don't patrol Eicsine much anymore. It'd take 'em three hours to get over. But if you aren't out of here in ten minutes, young man ..."

"Okay, okay. I'll just kill myself."

"You're just bullshitting. You won't kill yourself."

"I don't mind being dead, after what I've done."

"Goddammit, I'm calling the goddamn cops!" Emily stood and lunged for the wall phone, but froze. "Oh God, I can't do that. They'll just back up the fucking bureaucracy. They'll *make* you stay here." She paced. "They sent you to *live* with me. Oh, God, what am I going to do with you now? God, there's no one. She never married that Fenton son of a bitch. Last thing I heard was he left her. Nobody ever mentioned a grandson. Great father, huh? Maybe you take after him."

"Well, none of that matters. I'm leaving." Jim sat up. Outside it was almost dark, but he knew the heat would still be oppressive. He could wander into that blackness, fall into the stream out back and drown.

"No, you can't leave. Goddammit, I've been charged to *take care* of you."

"I can take care of myself. Your .38 would really do the trick."

"God, here you are twenty-three and apparently you've been living with mommy all your life. And you're so immature for even twenty-three. Taking my actions as ... shit, that's something a teenage boy would do."

"No, no woman dresses like that, even in front of her grandson."

Emily frowned but seemed too tired to launch into another tirade. "We won't discuss any of that. It's disgusting. Just sit there until I figure out what I'm going to do with you."

"I know I'm evil. I know what I've done is horrible. You won't need to do anything with me. I'll just move on to that Zarreich place, then. Or kill myself. Or both."

"Oh, cut it out. You're just immature. I suppose I should have expected this."

"Okay, so I was an asshole. But I guess that's the way I am. I'm immature. And I'm sorry. But I still think there was something going on from your end, too. I can't be that crazy."

"Think what you like. There wasn't."

"C'mon."

"I will not! I will not hear all your filthy thoughts!"

"You make all sorts of suggestive comments, you talk about being twenty-three tonight, which is the same age as I am."

"I only meant it in the spirit of us being artist friends!"

"And you sit through dinner leaning over so I can see *everything*."

"Well, I am sorry!"

"And you're looking so *beautiful* all this time!"

Emily just stared back. "Well, that's your problem, not mine."

"C'mon, is this you do your paintings? Don't you need to be honest with yourself when you do them?"

"That's none of your business!"

"You said you wanted us to be friends. How can you be dishonest with a friend?"

"We can't be friends. Not after this."

"How can you be dishonest with both yourself and me? Look at all those paintings in there." He pointed to the dining room at the rectangles with all their bright colors.

"That's all *mine*."

"So you'll tell the truth there but not to me? Shit, you're right, we could never be friends."

Emily took her chair again, then bent to study the tiles. “Well, sonny, you’re right about one thing. That *is* how I do my paintings. I pride myself on being an honest person. But, goddammit, what the hell am I going to do with you now?”

“I really don’t know, I guess.”

Emily sighed, wrapping her arms tightly around her transparent robe. In the waning light things weren’t so revealing anyway. “Okay, I see you’re having all these problems. I guess I can understand that. Life can be merciless sometimes. Dammit, I’m a liberated woman, but I’m not *that* liberated.”

“I guess ...” Jim was whipsawed by her mood change. “I mean, I know I’m an asshole.”

She frowned. “Just cut it, Jim. Your mother just died. My daughter I never made amends with. Oh my God. And maybe the strain of all that made you lose your memory or something. And you just flipped out. But here we are. What the hell *am* I supposed to do with you now?”

“Maybe we just forget any of this happened?”

She pointed to the dark sky outside. “Look, I’ve really had it. I’m exhausted. Maybe we can figure out some solution in the morning. Maybe not. But I’m going upstairs now.” She abruptly headed for the short flight of stairs to the second floor. Jim saw her as ancient, frail, hardly able to mount the stairs.

“Uh, okay ...” Jim muttered to her retreating back. “I’ll, like, head down to the guest room in a bit, if that’s okay.”

“Right, right, do whatever,” she called from behind her back as she disappeared at the top of the stairs. “Maybe your memory will come back. Let’s hope so at any rate.” A hall light came on briefly, then shut off. A door opened and shut. A lock clicked.

CHAPTER FOUR

Regarding Emily's Art and His Own

Emily was obsessed with light; her paintings pulsed with colors that barely managed to coexist; yet their tense balance was the driving force behind all her work. Any darkness set off a blinding explosion of color. The same was true of her house. She had clamp lights and extending lamps coming off every table, shelf, and wall; she'd turned every one of them on earlier, and after she'd gone to bed Jim left them all on. There were scores of blinding galaxies and constellations in here.

Jim studied Emily's sketchbooks spread over a wide table in her lower-level studio. Sketches were tacked to the walls, a stretched canvas sat on an easel, brushes sat in jars of water, and crumpled paper towels stiff with blotches of dried acrylic colors littered the floor. Jim loved this huge space. For two hours he'd roamed throughout the main and lower levels of the house, checking out all her paintings, the closets full of old books, the bathrooms, the laundry room, his own room behind the studio with the giant architect's drafting table. He'd been through dozens of Emily's sketchbooks and had even perused a diary she'd kept five years ago.

Yes, they were both artists. They both knew about artistic honesty. He and Emily might be able to live here together as artist friends after all. Sure she'd been upset when she'd fled upstairs, but she had to be thinking about friendship too, right? Hadn't they got all that flirtation crap out in the open so they could move past it to real friendship? Hadn't hours of perusing her sketchbooks defined a new relationship? Didn't Jim really appreciate his artist friend more fully now? So what that she was beautiful and sexy and even flirty, even if she didn't understand the power over men she commanded? That wouldn't get in the way of anything, would it?

And wouldn't she laugh at her new artist friend realizing she'd left him all the dishes? Wouldn't she be happy that he'd washed them, dried them, and figured out where to put them away? Wasn't the kitchen spotless now? Didn't that define respect and friendship?

Emily's diary was fascinating. Much of what concerned her was "retaining the magic." Evidently she'd feared losing her creative perceptions. She feared things were getting flat and boring. Jim eagerly absorbed page after page of her elegant handwriting, admiring a person who cared about magic and who struggled to retain it. Jim had no idea if he had any magic himself. But the way he responded to her diary implied that he probably did have some, and that he should try to keep it the way Emily did.

He looked through a couple photograph albums. There was a stunning picture of her in her late thirties. There were photos of a large blond teen Jim figured might be his mother. Jim also recognized photos of some of the paintings in this house, some in earlier versions.

Emily wouldn't mind him looking at this stuff. The sketchbooks, albums, and diary had obviously been placed on the table for his perusal. As his special artist friend she'd wanted him to know her work and her life. Jim felt keenly that he had little to offer in return, no photographs, no diaries, not even memories. But didn't he have sketchbooks in his suitcase?

Energy rose just to think about them. He went back upstairs, got a glass of iced tea from the kitchen, and returned downstairs, passing through the studio, gratefully noting a tiny bathroom down here for his personal use; he wouldn't feel constrained down here, after all.

The guest room in the rear was ten by twelve feet, lit by three bright floodlamps. A yellow bed and the architect's table took up most of the space. One wall was empty shelves, which Jim envisioned populating with scores of art books he'd buy in Zarreich tomorrow, along with art supplies and sketchbooks. And as he sat down on a black stool at the drafting table he felt the

seeds of new creation.

He opened the suitcase and took out the mechanical pencils, technical pens, and color markers. To his disappointment there was only one sketchbook in the suitcase; he'd been sure there were four of five. He opened it and saw again: JIM DONNE. IDEAS FOR SCIENCE FICTION GRAPHIC NOVEL.

Jim flipped through the book. There were sketches of a small foreign car, a motorcycle, and a crowded street, all in some deep confused night, with streetlamps hanging above the broken shapes of the city like frozen supernovae.

Jim shook his head. What was this? He looked at rough sketches of a giant cat eating a city bus. Jim couldn't believe that could be his own work. It seemed so silly. Maybe he wasn't this Donne guy after all, maybe he really had just gotten hold of the wrong suitcase. But that was doubtful. Emily knew Jim was a graphic artist. Even Earl had known that.

Jim could also see that the drawings were in his own hand. It was as unavoidable as his own handwriting. Jim took up a pen on a blank sheet of paper and signed his name to see how it would look. The firm and slashing, slender and leaning letters were pure Jim. He drew a quick picture of a cat smashing into a house; it was exactly the same style as the other drawings. It had flowed automatically.

Maybe the cartoon wasn't kid stuff, after all. A figure popped into his mind: 600. He realized that he'd estimated six hundred pages for this cartoon; this was just the first of many sketchbooks devoted to this idea. A scene popped into his mind: in someone's office, arguing with some son-of-a-bitch supervisor. Jim yelling something about "needing to sit down and shit out those six hundred pages." And some conflict. Did that asshole really fire him? What about all those government shitheads who thought he was some stupid baby who couldn't make it in the real world? They were all so deluded. Jim had gotten fired because he'd courageously created astonishing new art that bureaucrats could never understand. It was obvious that instead of being exiled from Cuxlacjs by mediocre fools, he'd made the decision to abandon that sterile environment to make new art.

Jim didn't remember doing the drawing, but he now realized that it was a practice run of what a completed page would look like. He grasped the subtle details in the drawing: the movement of the cat, the trees, everything. He realized the scene called for wind, that all the hairs of the cat were ruffled by the wind, and what an undertaking this must have involved, to get all those hairs and the tree leaves right.

He flipped through some other sketches. Many depicted a dark building in the urban night; a warehouse full of huge dusty volumes, multi-volume catalogs that detailed every aspect of every person's life since the beginning of time, including cave people.

Jim was astonished. First came sketches and the ideas which seemed like those of a twelve-year-old boy. But he could see the conception of the final product; only a very mature person would be capable of it, someone sixty-three, at least, if not eighty.

That final product would demand rigid discipline, diligence, hours and hours with pens and brushes, patience, neatness, and exact adherence to what the technology of the graphic art business would require for a final, marketable product. He had another flash of memory: that he had always taken the hardest paths when working at the company. He'd always made ten practice drawings and two or three final drafts of each panel, whereas many of his fellow artists simply reworked their drafts into final versions.

He was beginning to recall how he had worked, how each panel was a painstaking work of art. How each that passed his test of judgment required anywhere from four to twenty hours to

complete. Jim looked at the drawing in front of him and sighed. The ideas of a boy combined with the execution of an old man unnerved him. He didn't want to be looking at this stuff anymore. And then he laughed, realizing he wanted to forget what a few seconds ago had seemed so important to remember. But then maybe that was why he'd forgotten it all in the first place.

He moved back to Emily's studio and strode the white tile in a fever. The whole conception of that book, the boy's ideas and the old man's polished result, mixed together with what had happened tonight with Emily. She was going to be his best friend, someone he could share himself with, cry in front of, discuss anything. She'd be the only person who could understand his new ideas. He already loved the older woman who lay upstairs resting, gathering new visions to paint and to share with Jim. He loved her deeply as a friend.

Like Emily, Jim would refuse to forsake the magic. He was overwhelmed with the possibilities of this coming graphic novel. He paced the tile, lost to new possibilities. The twelve-year-old and the sixty-three-year-old would flow together; the work would progress organically, drawn as twenty-three-year-old Jim would draw it.

He couldn't sleep. It was time for more iced tea and more glorious creation. Emily wouldn't mind; he wasn't disturbing her with his delight, in fact, he was adding to her dreams as she slept securely above him. Jim loved the perfect night the universe had bestowed upon him. As he mounted the stairs to the kitchen he heard the clear notes of an expensive guitar.

About the Author

Michael D. Smith was raised in the Northeast and the Chicago area, then moved to Texas to attend Rice University, where he began developing as a writer and visual artist. His Jack Commer, Supreme Commander science fiction series is published by Sortmind Press. In addition, Sortmind Press has published Smith's literary novels *Sortmind*, *The Soul Institute*, *CommWealth*, *Akard Drearstone*, *Jump Grenade*, *Asylum and Mirage*, and *The University of Mars*, as well as a new science fiction series, *Supreme Commander Laurie*. All titles are available from Amazon.

Smith's website, <https://sortmind.com>, contains further examples of his novels and visual art, and he muses about writing and art processes at <https://blog.sortmind.com>.

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