

His Loneliness, the Winner

Ken McCullough

"And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hands are they delivered."

Genesis 9:2

NEW YORK: Babylon East, but Babylon nonetheless, and I guess their scene was no farther out than any of the other sundry wonders of life in Babylon. He, of bleeding gums, plantar warts, sauna baths, and tai-chi boxing in his air-cooled, semi-automatic latent executive yellow bombazine jockstrap. Name: John Cholz Daylee, alias 221-28-8599 (no numerological significance, no resemblance living or dead). Rank: fair to muddling. Call him "Jack". She, tall, gangling, silent, and of freckled complexion. Fond of salads and of padding about their pad and the smoggish greenery of their garden in the altogether. Her name: Zarafa, meaning, in the Arabic, "one who runs swiftly". Of African extraction, descended from a long line of entertainers who first came into prominence in the court of Julius Caesar in 46 B.C., and of Greek extraction aussi, surname being Kamlo-pardis. Call her "Prince". They met at a Mets game and became fast and furious bedmates from that day forward. But it still amazed him, made him feel a smidgen leary of the miracle which found him sitting next to her, the love of his life, a giraffe, right there in Seat 16, Row 2, Aisle B, Reserved Section, on the third base side of Shea Stadium.

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At the time Prince was doing a gig as a fashion model for *Gentleman Farmer*, and was hard on the heels of becoming an independent gurley-about-town, and like all the other movers and groovers scoped the Mets as a must. Below the surface, though, she was nothing but a mimosa-fed, sloe-eyed beauty from the boonies. She really tried to lay it on thick, but Jack, a professional rookie himself, recognized, diagnosed, and cut through all her bullshit with his endearing sincerity and it was love at the first site. They floated out during the seventh inning stretch, and that evening he wine-d her, dine-d her, and talked her long loping ears off. Overwhelmed, she was, indeed. He took her home and

they made love tenderly to the strains of the *Fat City Jug Band* and *Vitamin C and the Inguinal Ringstand*.

He awoke the next morning with the scent of her still on him and the spicey smells of scrapple, hash browns, eggs easy-over and coffee wafting in from the kitchen. They ate in silence, totally at ease, eye-sharing the goodies of their night together. Another tumble and a shower together later they dressed and made their way downtown, destination Tall Lady Ltd. on 5th Ave. She picked out five of the zonkiest outfits he had ever seen. While she was in the fitting room trying on the last outfit he could resist no longer, so in he barges and gives her the word: come live with me forever or instant hari-kari.

A whirlwind week later we see them in a town house at the end of a cul-de-sac just off Central Park West. And goodgreatcryingoutkrishna what a place! It is furnished entirely in the most tasteful of antiques, and has a garden in which, as you sit under the dwarf willows, you become at one with that great nebulous fable called New York. It seemed that there was no time no night no day no seasons—all phased into one strange continuum of nostalgia. The sounds of twilight traffic on Columbus Circle and the racket of kids playing in the Park filtered into this hushed womb and became transformed into the sounds of knickered patriarchs bowling on the green, the high vibrato of people singing hymns around bonfires set against the pre-Industrial sunset, the click of skates on the frozen canal, and the ghosts of tickertape V-Day Lindberg Jimmy Walker Babe Ruth parades honkytonk rinkytink ragtime big band Broadway East Side-West Side all around the town oompahpah carnival voices of paisano vegetable vendors, chaindrive trucks hacking wheezing ackatacking, and the mournful hoots of steamships passing off Sandy Hook. Stickball, hopscotch, and monkey in the matzos. And all was right with the gods and the world.

Or so it would seem. At first glance. At first myopic glance. Prince came down with a case of the pregs. Now, this was cool as they, our twosome, could think of nothing they wanted more—they were the happiest of the happy (I wanted to say “gay” but the word has been o’erta’en by its connotations, and what’s more, with a name like Prince . . . well, you know . . .). Now, as I said, this was cool, but one day Jack returns to find her doubled up on the floor in a pool of a brown viscous substance which has the distinct pungence of something very much like giraffe diarrhea. Jack nimbly went for the Kaopectate and his methkit and managed to bring her around. But the Kaopectate was to no avail. The repulsive convulsions continued despite the efforts of Dr. Fern McWheel-base, specialist, the best in the business. And on the fourteenth day she miscarried. A dark day for Jack.

To compound the misery of losing their firstborn, and the aspersion cast upon Jack as to whether or not he really had it in him, there seemed to be no let-up in Prince’s condition. She had to be bedded down in the rumpus room with its cement floor and drain so that the room could be hosed out regularly. Jack, meanwhile slept only fitfully. His sleep was populated by strange scatological dreams in which his shoulders would turn into steaming compost heaps that huge horses kept eating and another recurring dream in which his face kept sliding off. He would awake with a start on the brink of a scream, but would

catch himself and remember poor Prince, alas, who so needed him to be brave. Jack would drift off again and then the strange voices would start whispering weird fragmented imperatives like “can this act, Jackson . . . take the chick to Saperstein . . . we’ll arrange the appointment”. But Jack maintained, and decided finally to issue an ultimatum to McWheelbase: something must be done and done immediately. McWheelbase said he knew of only one man who could stave off this deluge, a man whom he had interned with at Bellevue, the famous Masai gynecologist, Hillary Quivery-Quinn (hyphenated) of Lake Victoria, Kenya. Jack packed Prince’s things that night and put her on the plane the next morning for Lake Victoria.

Over the next few months Jack received wires from Quivery-Quinn (hyphenated) about once a week; glowing reports of Prince’s remarkable recovery, and then, after four months and six days, a wire which said she would be returning—returning by ship to enjoy a leisurely cruise. Jack thought this strange because Prince had, as he recalled an almost hysterical phobia of water. The same day he received a wire which said simply TUNE OUT FOR OUR SAGE—it was unsigned.

On the evening of June 22nd the ship docked at Pier 28 of the American Vice-President Lines. It was a crisp day for June and Jack had pulled on a tennis sweater which accented the tan he had acquired these past two weekends out at East Hampton. He had brought two dozen long-stemmed beauties with him—roses, that is. The behemoth eased into the slip, the gangplank was lowered, and the radiant passengers started to file down to be embraced by families and lovers, but nowhere did he see his Prince. Just as he was about to board the ship to check the passenger list he spotted her. Very much darker than he had remembered her, the stiff hair around the nubs that were her horns had grown out and almost obscured them. She was dressed in along brilliantly-colored robe of some filmy material through which as she stood there, silhouetted against the sunset, he could see the outline of her lithe body. His thoughts at that moment and their outward manifestations could hardly be concealed from even the most casual passerby. “Red sky at night, sailor’s delight”, he thought to himself mischievously. As he vaulted up the gangplank to greet her, as he approached her, he saw her eyes. They were not the soft gentle eyes he knew so well and cherished. There was something malevolent something vacant something gone from them that had been replaced with a thing that he could brand only as alien.

He embraced her but there was no response. This hurt him, but he shook it off and pointed to the new Winnebago camper he had recently acquired and redone to accomodate her particular needs, so they hop in and are off. First, the shops—Tall Gems, Tall Apparel, Tall Lady Ltd., Tall Styles by Kay, and finally Tall Modes, but nothing seems to suit her—shaking her head “no” sulkily. Well, what the shit, he figures: no skin off my tushie. Bound to get her with the *Morgan* revival, right down in the old fallopes. She’d seen that one slow motion scene of the giraffes at least seventeen times. Now as he was about to whip this number on her she ups and says “Listen, Jack . . . what’s this jive routine, I mean, this ain’t Queen For a Day. As for your next number I don’t

think I can go it tonight, or any other night, for that matter. And as for the Corpse, Spilling, Gnash and Mung and Simple Simon and Garfungus sides you've no doubt copped for the fireside chat later, well, just fuck off, bro' . . . I mean it". Knocked on his figurative and literal ass, his tailbone negotiating a merge with his cervical vertebrae—neck, that is. Necking was just what he had in mind, but with such an icy wench, well, sheeeit. And the thing that most confused him was that this was the first time that he had ever heard Prince utter a word. Before there had been no need for words; he had done all the talking, and for the first time in his life he had tasted that dry coppery taste of self-confidence. Those eyes of hers, those subtle gestures of her upper lip . . . Christ, what a female, all the way through. But now this: he was crushed.

There was no love made that night in Dudville. The next morning Jack stepped into the subway car and speculated on what had transpired, what had expired. As the mornings went by, it became obvious that "they" were past tense. Prince, decked out in Hollywood shades, beret, and flowing daishiki had taken up strange incensed chantings and meditations which were driving Jack out of his gaping gourd. She'd flail in every morning around four ayem smelling like she'd immersed herself in essence of meat loaf fart strained through tweed, roll back her eyes, and start rapping such an incredible line of crazy occult bullshit that he just knew it had to be some hype that somebody was laying on her. This fucking Quivery-Quinn (hyphenated) . . . what had he done . . . given her LSD, or something? He didn't have the foggiest, but he was sureasshit going to find out. Just then she disappeared—three days and three nights. Then a note that she was going to be away for awhile.

Jack took to the streets, sought refuge in the bottle, and one night about two weeks after she'd blown Dodge as he was meandering through the foothills of the East Side, the Badlands, he saw a shape spacing along that had to be her. He had to talk to her. But first, where was she going? Was it some other guy? Yes, that must be it; some other guy from her past who'd bobbed to the surface again. He followed her down to Stevedore Skid out along the docks where she stopped, took off the cloth coat she was wearing, and leaped from the dock! He was one foot off the dock himself before he saw her down there below him, naked in the neon rainbow colors of an oil slick writhing about in the most passionate orgasm he'd ever seen her experience. What the shit! She was down there in the water, and who with . . . for Chrissake . . . the EAST RIVER! She was down there making it with the East River! He'd been birddogged by a stinking useless sonofabitching cesspool of a *river*! And the most despicable one of all, to boot.

Now Jack, feeling like a perpetual lizard at what he'd seen, vowed that he would forget her. But how? Well, he quit his job with Fleece, Graziola, Fagan and Frisbee and moved into a loft in the old King Hotel on Bowery. He had been cut loose in a sealess sea—How. Low. Can. You. Go. As low as that, then the devious climb back out of it, finding his sealegs in the graveyard of the psyche known as *abstract art*. He started to hack and gouge out a name for himself, painting horrors that made Francis Bacon's stuff, by comparison, look like Beardsley's kid sister had done them. The Huntington-Hartford bought a

piece of his sculpture titled THE CHICKEN KILLER. It was a bizarre subterranean electric light-organ about ten feet high with myriad atrocities whirring and slurping in its innards. Attached to the main corpus was an incubator from which an occasional chick would make its way through the *entrance terrible*. Lights and smoke and noise à la the Wrigley Field scoreboard. And then the chick would begin its ordeal by black light—from one mode of slow torture to another. Needless to say, the piece was quite a hit, especially with the Third Sexers. Just enough for Jack to be *de rigueur* with the “innies”. Picture Jack laughing bitterly up the sleeve of his \$500 Abercrombie rhinoskin fringe coat.

So there he is in his loft, painting? His is into many other weird baggies, also. Like tropical fish. Like he has maybe six regulation-size Ted Wilyums-approved tanks, but he keeps ordering dark market goodies and finds that him done run outta space. So he calls for Big Derwood, his plump switchhitting interiordecorating pal to bail him out. Minces in. Studied pause. Shrug from Jackson. Contrapposto from Big D. Sez coquettishly “Wall to wall ceiling to floor tanks, darling.” Sold American! Jack hugs Derwood at arms length and the plan is implemented.

Within two months he’s got the whole shebang rigged up with strobes blapatatting on his neons, his spiny barfish, cowfish, sea dragons, four-eyes, long-snouted mormyrs, lantern fish, lizard fish, stripped burrs, and then the others, so unreal that nobody could sock a monicker to them—amorphous nightmares like the *gigantura chudi* and the *lynophyrne bicornis*: reject lepers from mid-Fifties horror lagoons.

Jack is sopping up the suds one afternoon with The Mother and The Roach down at *Max’s Kansas City* (once a beerhead, always a beerhead, though Jack has been taking new and different chemicals into his lilywhite hulk of late) and all is très tranquil. Out of nowhere Jack blurts out “My ge’ts is as good as yours.” Meaning what, these gentlefolk hain’t the faintest. But, dear hearts, what has happened right before their wandering eyes and ears is that Jack has had a brainstorm; he has decided that the time has come for him to make his day byew his coo day taa his day new ma and bris all in one foul swoon.

You got it; a shindig—and the invites are curried out to the following: Baby Jane, Rudolf the Red, Anna, Lennybee, Harlow, Ballanchain, Mayor John, Mario, S. Klein, Orson Been, Big Al Hitchcock, Pixanne, Mag Mead, Estel Mandel, Bob Peak, David Foreskind, Frost, Hovering, Milty Glacier, Tenn Williams, Pete Max and the Swami, Sabrina, John Void, Joe Nameless, Judith Christ, Phil Silverfish, Dear Blabby, Andy Warthog, Truman Compost, Pall Anchor, Jerry Lee Loose, Melba Tolliver, Dustin Hoffman, Lee J. Cobb, Jas. Leo Herlihy, Dung Reckless, Ultra Vile, Kenny Coke, Lou Rawls, Candyass Bergen and Daddy, Ankledirt Humptydump, Pet Clerk, Jimminy Rodgers, The Dupe, The Roach and The Mother, Movie Graffiti, Norman Maalox, Bent Serf, Monty Rauc, Tiny Tim, and Doc Leary to name a few, and all the retinue they can drag foist scrape abduct seduce or pilfer up the sodden escarpments of garbage to the old King Hotel.

The scene is set, so blatantly catered that you’d think it was a return engagement of Jessel’s *bar mitzvah*. It seems that everyone invited has showed

up. This promises to be one of the really high points of the heretofore sagging soshul season. You see, everybody is here because Jack has been writ up in *EVO*, the *Voice*, and *Time* and everybody is out to pick up vicarious vibes. Jack, in fluorescent minikilt, is as vivacious a host as you'd ever want to meet, greeting each guest with a kiss to the hand and jugular, and escorting he she or it to the STPPunch.

Things rock on late into the wee hours with two bands really outdoing each other, all silhouetted by the wild strobelit wall-around fishtanks. At one point an overlybudding starlet stripped down and entered through the hatch with her two South American bodygarts and performed what we would have to call euphemistically an erotic water ballet. All in attendance seemed to be most entertained by this burst of spontaneity. All but Mr. Compost, who left early with his entourage. But the beat went on.

Long about three of the ayem Jack announces over the multireverb that he has a treat for the troops. Politely frantic applause. The maestro steps up to the sets of cages the unlit cages which even to us, fond readers, have remained a mystery to this point. Throws a switch. The doors to the cages slam open. And out they come. First, his pride and primitive joy—a miniature mako shark, eyes like ball-bearings, enraged by spending so long in solitary, then the pair of barracuda, then the two dozen lamprey. The crowd is getting *THAT LOOK* in their beady eyes. That *AMERICAN SPECTATOR* look. Mr. Warthog smirks and turns his head. And just as the carnivorous wave is about to make its bloody hit, out of the last cage come the heavies, those Argentinian minions of the family *Chacidae*, the genus *Serrasalmus*, known to us groundlings as . . . piranhas! The orgy is on fans, the boys in the band really get into it. The music of the spears. Involved in an eating scene quote—unquote. Wow! Truman, hon', you really blew it this time. And just then the door swings open. No it ain't the gang from the cop shop—it is someone we know and love—the one who made this party possible. It is our beloved Prince. Man, what a knockout! The cat she has with her is no Valentino, but you'd have to say he was imposing, at least. Flash! Jack recognized him—it's that goddamn East River! The duo with all their downandoutandunder cronies saunter and slop into the crowd which hangs suspended for a microsec, and then on with the show. Woe that one piddling piranha had not been distracted from his delectation by the lanky limbs of Prince. He prods his neighbor who is halfway through a dorsal of a burrfish and says "What the hell are we doing tomming around for these clowns, man. Why beat up on these brothers when there is eating like *THAT* around" nodding in the direction of unsuspecting Prince. "Come on bro'. let's blow this joint!" Like Jimmy Brown up the middle, the whole battalion column-lefts against the side of the tank smashing the glass and boiling out in a wave of carnage into the crowd with Prince as their object of mastication. East River, however, is one mystical psychopathic cat, schooled in the ways of the streets and the gutters as no one else, and he meets the wave headon.

Meanwhile some Jap barber across the street has blown the whistle on this ruckus, unbeknownst to all in attendance (the audience now being captive), and the Boys in Blue arrive just at the point where those feisty little

fuggers have almost offed the East River. Crash!Crackle!Pop! the door is down, and before you can say Jackie Onassis the piranhas have pellmelled it out the door. So. The East River gets busted on a D&D and a P&P and has to pay damages and the dry cleaning bills.

The East River gets sent up on a five to ten for first degree salamanderslaughter. The Secy of the Interior and the Prexy of the SPCA decided to use the East River as a frame-up scapegoat, blaming him for the carnage which spilled forth from the wall-around tanks. Jack tried to shift the blame to himself, as well he should, but it was no use. Up the river to Sing Sing goes the East River. Despondent Prince gets hooked on smack and takes a job as tolltaker on the Triborough Bridge to support her habit (this takes some doing, as the TB ain't a tollbridge), spending all her waking hours peering down at the imprint in the slime and silt left by her beloved East River. Nothing but rusty Sterno cans, schools of the almost-extinct white gutter trout, several skeletons in hombergs with soggy cigars clamped between their jaws and their feet sunk into concrete pedestals, and one mouldering hull of a sunken tugboat still spouting water like some punctured placoderm in its death throes.

One day up shows a wimpy straight-looking cat named Mitch Mitchell. Mitch is a P.O.D. teacher and the J.V. Basketball coach at Great Neck H.S. out in Lung Guyland and spends his summers driving tourbuses for Greyhound. One muggy July afternoon, affable easygoing bowtied Mitch is taking an empty bus across the Triborough to pick up a tour. He is almost past her but happens to catch a glimpse of her, pale and forlorn, out of the corner of his bespectacled eye, jams on the airbrakes and backs up. He informs her that he is *supposed* to be on his way out to pick up some local Elks or Lions or Aardvarks or somesuch, but whattheshit, they can just wait. Hop on this rig, milady, we are going to the shore. So how can she say no. And into her life Mitch Mitchell comes like a burst of bathroom air freshener. They get into a really lightheaded giddy childish rap, and Prince is really tripped out that this guy can be so completely un-up-tight under his own steam. And then they are at Coney Island. He pulls the bus up into a dead end and helps her out. Salt air. Popcorn. Calliopes and laughter. Christ, she'd forgotten what this could be like. She hoped this day would never end, but already the shadows were starting to put on their giocometti clothes. As they stood there leaning up against each other, with the water lapping about their six legs, she said to him softly "Mitch, what's it all about?" A pained look spread over his face almost as if she had jabbed him in the nads. Finally, he looked deep into her eyes, and with his left birdfinger, he pointed out there. Out at the rumbling Atlantic Ocean.

PART II

What's up with our man about Manhattan? We pick him up as he is getting off the Staten Island Ferry on the NYC side with his pudgy little fish-faced niece Putrice. They are headed toward the subway. It is mid-September. Jack is duded up in pretty cosmo threads today. Looks like he's getting his act

together again. May be a front, though. If you look closely at Jack you can see that those crows' claws at the corners of his eyes are cut a little deeper than when we saw him last. His gait has lost a little of its rollick and there are a few more strands of white midst the mop. Deep in thought. Nostalgic thought. About Prince? How could he help it. Jack saw neither hide nor hair of her after the unfortunate fiasco at his digs. Then The Roach hipped him to the fact that she was doing the vigil thing out on the Triborough. Jack would go at noon every day and station himself in an abandoned warehouse. From there, making sure he had concealed his odious visage from her he would watch her through his binocs for an hour or so. He'd read in the *National Inquirer* about the East River's attempted jailbreaks every time she'd stop up to visit him. They had revoked visiting privileges and confined him to solitary. The paper always showed the same unflattering pix of Prince—made her look like a goddamn stork! Christ, those fucking journalists have no respect for anyone's privacy. Well, anyway, some time in July Prince had disappeared. No trace. He alerted Missing Persons but they just humored him, saying they'd had it up to here with the whole caper. So that's where Jackieboy is at, group: trying to live with it.

Now the Bronx Zoo. First, the Bird House. Always seemed to soothe his brain. Vision of some lush's tropical garden with a sweat-ringed Peter Lorre bringing you a tall cool one on a tray. They do the birds for some ten-odd minutes, and then Putrice wants to dig on the tigers, so they split for that house. Wow! Goodgollybengali! What regal eyes you have, grandpa. Well, now she's gotta piss so *exeunt omnes*. As they come out the assend of the Cat House he spots her right off. Her, there in a cage, divested of daishiki, eating funky cabbage leaves. She, intuitive as usual, senses his presence and looks over at him with a childishly vacuous look. He, as if entranced, glides over to her cage. Before he can blurt out anything she says "Don't ask, Jack, all I can tell you is that I have what I want. I think that should be good enough for you. This scene is the scene that's best for me—three squares a day, lots of attention, peaceful surroundings, good vibes, and a little sex now and then . . ." What he is thinking, no, shouting to himself is SECURITY, that's what she's got, and that's *all*. Security thy name is lobotomy!

She says "You'll probably think this is a heavy hype-job, but all I can tell you is that I thought I had it all down—I thought *we* had it all down, until I met Hillary Quivery-Quinn (hyphenated) and he tuned me in to the Power of the Waters. Quiv was a pretty strange dude—went to Oxford and all that shit—and nobody knew until last year that he, Hillary Quivery-Quinn (hyphenated), O.B.E., was the half-breed pass-for-white grandson of the famous Masai *laibon* named M'Batian. *Laibon* is Masai for medicine man. Seems that from hanging around Lake Vic for so many thousands of years, the Masai had picked up a lot of really weird vibes—the Power of the Waters being one of them. What it is cannot be expressed in words so I can't tell you much more about that. Quiv can also rap with and understand all the animals—that's how I picked *that* up. Since I have African blood, we were sort've soulmates, but the cat cut me off for my own good. We were on two completely different trips and it would always be that way. So he sent me home. I hope that explains why

I was acting so uppity when I got back. I was really hassled . . . until I got into a long long loverap with the East River, and I knew he was my man. But (sigh) you know how *that* went. I don't blame you, Jack. Look, all I can tell you about getting your head straight is to check out the Hudson River. He's a lot straighter dude than the East, but he may have the kind of take on things that's more your speed. Drop around when you get the time, man, but please get your head straight first, hear? See you, babycakes."

Putrice returns from tinkling, and off they walk through the pewter air of early Manhattan autumn. The leaves are just beginning to fall. There is a smell like the musk of old violets. Jack feels a certain elevation, a certain lonely elation; the pure emptiness of starting over again with nothing.

So Jack became very hermetic, very ascetic, lean and soulful—a kind of walking winter calm. His days were spent in damp deep thought. Whenever he leaves the confines of his small West Side attic pad, his walks take him to one place and one place only, relentlessly. *Anyplace*, yes, any arbitrary place as long as it followed the banks of the Hudson River. Three winters came and went and the odds had it that canonization was imminent. And he kept on growing in favor with the gods and the mods. But something was amiss. He couldn't put his spiny fingers on it. That terrible anguish lingering in his adenoids, the ache in the bones of his skull. And then one warm Saturday Hud said to him "Jack, I can't make the session today, baby. I'm a little under the weather."

"Yeah, you been lookin' like shit lately," sez our fairhaired boy figuratively. And then it registered like a hundred volt jolt—Jack knew that Hud knew that he knew—that Hud's water level had gone down some ten feet in the last month.

In another month everybody was onto it. Legislators were campaigning on issues like the new tri-level interborough groundlevel expressway. In fact, Sen. Berra from the Bronx was insisting that the bridges were all going to be obsolete and demolition contracts should be bid on *right now*, so no time would be wasted. The *NY Times* carried a feature article by Buggy Fooler, showing his plans to convert the ferries to steam-driven air cushion amphibuses—buses five days a week, and cruise ships around Lung Guyland, whose assets were apparently going to remain liquid. Jacques Yves Cousteau had started diving in the vanishing Hudson with a team of internationally-renowned ichthyologists, and they had discovered at least fifteen new species of scavenger fish—as well as the wreckage of the *Half Moon* and the body of one Henry Hudson—and conclusive evidence that the English under the aegis of Sir Dudley Digges had sabotaged the ship and sailed a stand-in back to Dartmouth Harbour where it was conveniently detained. Cousteau's discovery aroused much speculation among historians as to the identity of the *other* Henry Hudson who was set adrift with Hudson's young son and seven other men by the mutinous crew of the *Discovery* on June 22, 1611. Novelist Truman Compost had already begun work on what was sure to be a best-seller based on the events surrounding this tragedy.

Jack is present throughout all this hubbub, unnoticed, inconspicuous, nursing old Hud along, old Hud who is sousterely brave in his death bed.

One night Jack is o.d.'d in his attic when he hears strange voices in

his sleep, voices so strange that they terrify him right out of his nethergarments, right out of bed. Can't get back to sleep. Check on Hud. And a good thing he did because when he got there, the dude was almost completely wasted. He was gasping Jack's name. "Here I am, Hud" Jack said, sobbing.

"Jack . . . Jack . . . I can only initiate you . . . I can do that . . . but it is *you* who must go on with it. If you decide against it, there is no blame. Jack . . . the Rite of the Waters . . ."

And now the nebula was spinning; Quivery-Quinn . . . Lake Victoria . . . the East River . . . the connections . . . "Jack . . . listen to me; there is so little time. To do this thing is to answer the question that they have all been answering without knowing the question. To do this thing is to undertake the most meaningful voyage quest nightmare death vision that a mortal is capable of experiencing. To do this is to condemn oneself to eternal perdition in the realm of human relationships. To do this is to know the meaning, to have the key to everything . . . what is your desire, my boy?"

Jack, knowing there was really no choice at all, bleated out "Yes!"

"West!" blurted the Hudson River, and he gave up the ghost.

And now here he was again, knowing nothing more than he had before that fateful day in Shea Stadium. Accordingly, he said farewell to his landlord, sold his lease to the loft on Bowery, cancelled his subscriptions to *Rolling Stone* and *Zap Comics*, packed his one suitcase, and started out walking—across the G.W.Bridge, and the tomb of the blessed Hudson River.

PART III

Jack had a hunch, shit, it was not a hunch, it was raw intuition—it was vision—that he should not fuck around with the lightweights. He picked his rides accordingly. After two days he arrived in Wheeling, West Virginia: the stomping grounds of the Ohio River. The meeting was amicable—the communion commenced. But, alas, it was all too short-lived. After a measly two months the Ohio River was reduced to a squidgey track of silt. Jack at this point knew that this and probably all that had come before was his doing; he was a curse, or cursed? What to do about it? Off himself? Didn't even enter his marooned mind.

St. Louis:Ole Man River:The Mississippi. Jack hips the patriarch to what the scene is and Mississippi just lays low and says "Thou hast said it, bro' —it's outta your hands, outta mine. Play it by ear. It's like, when a cat is able to can all his big and little egotrips, and turns on the hidden forces of the spiritual life so that his vibes are drawn from not only his own scene or from what he remembers about his own life and the lives of his tights—when he just flat cuts off all material and personal considerations . . . then this cat grows right out past his own personality and tunes in to the presence of higher forces within. And it's just a matter of going through the right routine to let it all hang out. When these deeper forces *do* come up to the surface, what goes on in the life of the cat will also reveal the hidden causes, and a soul like this cat has got by

now, will pick up the truth that whatever has come down in the past has a mighty potent effect on what will go down in the future."

Jack sat down and threw the baboon off his back, relaxed and opened the collar of his thirty-cent Goodwill gabardine suitcoat. He sat and he sat and he sat. Seemed to travel as he sat to other planets, seemed to travel back in time, seemed to be, himself, the history of himself; the human race. He, the cave man, he, the Christchild, he, the kamikaze's coloratura as he pushed the stick all the way forward. Time present passed, and he sat. The Mississippi gave all that can be exchanged between myth and mortal.

But *it* happened again. This time The Mississippi. The putrescence of huge catfish roiling in the muck of a millenium of human garbage unveiled beneath the dwindling surface of the viscous waters. The last words stonefaced stoic Jack heard from the Grand Ole Man were "O Curse Not E'er The Truth". Kind of anti-climactic as far as he was concerned. But, he stowed it away with the rest, and gathered his gear for the next round.

He moved on. The papers were crying for blood. Whose or what's they knew not. In that traditional way the human race has of reacting violently with no tangible enemy or opposition, they were reacting now. *The Watchtower's* circulation had quadrupled in the last few months. Evangelist Billy Bob Greyhound was booked up solid, including gigs subbing for the cancelled Army-Navy and Rose Bowl games. The Pentagon tried to make the former cop-out look like a pennypinching maneuver, but rumors leaked out via Sen. Bullfright that the reasons for cancellation were top secret.

Jack tacked to the right and headed north up the smouldering banks of the former Mississippi, now one of the withered tits of civilization. The tidy little towns lining its banks of dust had all been snuffed out, and were as dust themselves. It was a kind of reflex, almost, the way a snail recoils from salt. And the people had all relinquished their birthrights and vanished somewhere, anywhere, into the interior, as if in the face of a plague. There were houses he came to right out of hackneyed tales of terror with the places still set at table, wash still on the line, water tepid in the tub.

Just a little bit south of Moline he decided to cut inland, and as he walked it seemed as if the landscape turned to dust right before his eyes. Des Moines: deserted. Except for what he called mockingly to himself the "skeleton crews." As he entered these towns seeking sustenance he noticed that the leftovers were starting to look at him in a very suspicious way, bordering, hell yes, almost ready to burst into maniacal terror.

He entered the Men's John of an abandoned DX station to harass his hemorrhoids, and wading through the fine dust of what had been good black earth, he caught a glimpse of his reflection in a fragment of mirror. His stomach hit the floor like a sack of diarrhetic shit. This face—with the wild red delirious eyes and the lips stretched tight over the jagged teeth—this face—he had never seen it before. He did not recognize anything about it as being John Cholz Daylee—he had become this *other* without the former even suspecting that a change was going on.

Council Bluffs; The Missouri River. Nine Days. Bone. Dry. On through

Nebraska. The Platte. Dry. To Colorado. To Utah. And Salt Lake City. They spot him and know. The Great Salt Lake. Before his their eyes. Dry. And he is running. Across the deserts. Sneaking food like a rat in the dead of night. Raiding abandoned truck stops on abandoned highways. Drinking at mirages. Where were the people?

Frayed jangled wires nerveends rusty salt oasis of clap trap fallen down Babylonian desecration of what had been, the sign said, LAS VEGAS. Stumbled to celibate silent Hertz agency took keys to red VW microbus and headed. West again.

The Mojave and on. And now there are people. People, calm, as if they didn't know, as if they had been tranquilized into obliviousness. Sign says SAN BERNARDINO. Sign says LOS ANGELES—65 MILES. Driving up the Freeway, the first thing that he noticed was that the sky had a peculiar brownish cast, and in the pit of his stomach he just knew that it had long been this way, even before he, JCD, the human monkey wrench, had arrived on the scene. Children grow up never having seen the blue of the sky or the full brunt of the sun or the stars at night. He pictured mutant children born with horny flaps over their eyes to protect them from the ultraviolet rays.

Along the shoulders of the road every now and then a disgustingly filthy bird would plummet to the gravel, thrash about and be no more, possibly, he thought, the last extant member of its species. Well, big fucking deal. Old Alexander Wilson had once spotted a flock of passenger pigeons he estimated to be 240 miles long. It used to be that there were so many of the buggers that whole towns would mobilize to go out and shotgun as many as they could. With some justification too, as they, the birds, had usually devoured all the grain for miles around, collapsed all the trees where they roosted and left a six-inch layer of pigeon shit on the ground. The last one to ever be seen on this planet croaked in the Cincy Botanical Garden in 1914. So it goes, quote-unquote.

He had never been to L.A. As he entered the maze of endless boulevards it looked like the entire place was in the midst of some sort of carnival. He ditched the short. He ambled (more like shambled) over to a newsstand. Picks up a copy of the *LA Freep*. Headlines: RACE TO THE FINISH: NEW GOVERNOR ANNOUNCED TODAY. Pictures of the two leering candidates; Matthew of Glendale. The Gay Lib offering, and Hon. Charles Munson of the Cosmic Christian Party. He looked around. Somehow felt at home. No pressure. No one looking at him.

Later, at Barney's, he is slouching over a bowl of chili and a cup of hot java, reading on through the paper. He comes to a column called OCCULT DOINGS ABOUT TOWN, by the famous seer Gene Jinxon. The column proclaimed that even here they could not be safe from what had befallen the Heartland. And then in boldface, *this drought is obviously being caused by unnatural forces. Do not be alarmed. Look to yourselves. It is not a widespread plot. One among you is the perpetrator. He must be found and cast out, before it is too late.*

Went up the coast to San Luis Obispo and camped on the beach. Read the signs in the sand. Kept out of sight. Losing a lot of weight. Kids run

when they see him. Up the road. Esalen empty. Big Sur. *Nepenthe*. People all panicked, packing up. Orders a cream cheese and nut sandwich. Picks up the *SF Chronicle*; LA,UPI: *Several devotees of the local Krishna Consciousness Temple have positively identified the individual causing the drought which has spread across the country and now seems to be affecting the water level in our bays and harbors. President Reagan has declared a state of national emergency, calling up all 4-F's and 1-Y's. He suspects that there is some definite evidence that biological warfare is being employed by our Asian foes. A summit conference is planned. The water level in the harbor here has dropped twenty feet in the last two weeks, and for no apparent scientific reason. Hare LamaLamaDong of the temple told the reporter that an agent of Kali has been sent to bring this plague as a warning. He drew the following detailed sketch of the man he called THE DROUGHT-MAKER . . . a detailed sketch, right down to the mole on his left nostril, of John Cholz Daylee.*

He headed north. Fled, I should say. Through Carmel. Monterey. Where a mass hysterical exodus blazed by him like some hideously comical gold-rush in reverse, like he was on 33rpm and the rest of the world was on 78. As he stood by the side of Highway 1 in disbelief, a car carrying Mom, Dad, and four kids, veered precariously to a halt on the shoulder, just missing him. Dad, the driver, was having some sort of convulsion. Only the whites of his eyes showed and his lips were snarled back exposing bloody toothless gums. His body shuddered without let-up completely out of control. Suddenly, Mom, who was sitting next to him got out came around and opened his door yanked him out by the arm got in and peeled out with the remainder of her family. Jack stood transfixed as he witnessed five more such incidents in the next ten minutes.

On to San Francisco. San Francisco Bay an incredible morass of slime and refuse. And *he* was responsible. He. Anathema. He. Ishmael. He. Outcaste. He. Most Untouchable.

And on north. Leaving the wailing city in the distance. Running from, running to, running out of himself. Eureka. Eugene. And here the land was turning grey. The buildings had all taken on that color of unpainted barn siding after it has been weathered by fifty winters. And there were huge cobwebs tenting the orchards, the fields, the houses, webs like the ones that were draped over heavy artillery in comic books he'd read as a kid. And then he knew that they were after him. That they could tell he was there. Somewhere. He spent his days huddled in the attics of deserted grey farmhouses breathing barely breathing the grey dust that strained through the webs that gauzed out the sunlight. And he could hear them, his brother humans. In packs, towed along by a smorgasbord of hounds and spaniels. Hunting. Him. They knew it must be a HIM; it could be nothing else; one of THEM who must be stopped.

At night he travelled. At night he ran along low to the ground like some sort of grizzled saurian cancer, aging a century a day. On he loped and limped casting a lean shadow, casting fear wherever he went. He was passing, and they all knew it. But the night was what they feared; the night, his protector.

Salem. Portland. Weeping, but no tears came. Falling. The town of Minnehaha. And it all. Disappeared.

Clear brilliantly clear cold water running down his face. A wizened old man squatting over him palming water from a wooden bucket onto his face. Jack tried to weep. The old man went on to explain that he had been a Haida medicine man. His name was Gitchigitchigoo, which means “the one whose mother rose with laughter”. He had been banished from the tribe for playing doctor with the four subteen daughters of the chief. He had found our Jack in a heap on the banks of the now-extinct Columbia River, and brought him to his geodesic teepee made from the hoods of ’51 Fords, and nursed our hero back to health with herb teas and rancid gunky broth. Gitch said that only because he personally had the secret of “making water” were they able to survive here. But, he knew Jack was the “Dry One”, and must be on his way. He was well now, and the Great Ones had decreed that it must be so. “Where!?” yelped gulped Jack, panicky as a bat in a hailstorm. Gitch frowned and said that the Great Ones were silent. He *did* have a clue, though; five moons ago a Nez Perce medicine man from up-what-used-to-be-the-river had told him of a vision in which he saw the Dry One running atop a great wheel of iron. He was heading toward an island of fire which floated in the sea beneath the rising sun.

Now he knew that the sun rose in the East. But he knew there would be no chance of his getting transportation by ship to the Orient. Shit, who ever thought the ocean would be coming down with a case of receding shoreline? and he would be recognized at airports. He had no currency. He was locked on this continent. So be it; he would head East. How? Atop an iron wheel? Iron wheel . . . iron . . . horse: the train . . . YES! The TC Flyer—the transcontinental-remotecontrolsolarpoweredrapidtransit train.

He sneaked into the terminal at Portland (which turned out to be unnecessary, as it was deserted), last stop on the Flyer’s western run, and waited. As it was run by remote control and ran on solar power, there were no engineers, or conductors, there were no delays for refueling, and she arrived at and departed from each stop at set times. She zoomed in right on schedule at 11:15 P.M. Why control central in Denver hadn’t shut her down was a mystery to him—there were no passengers. But, then again, everything seemed to be hay-wire. He had no complaints—what the hell—a free hitch coast-to-coast with nobody to hassle him. At 11:38 she made the circuit and hurtled East with this solitary passenger.

So his journey was under way. Across the desolate desert that had once been the richest nation this planet had ever known. The train stopped periodically at bleached-out unpainted terminals that looked as if no one had been near them in a hundred years. Ghost towns. With a ghost train carrying, to all intents and purposes, a ghost passenger. Chicago. Nothing. Wind etching his arm with sand as it hangs limply from the window during the TC Flyer’s token stop.

As the train crossed the bed of the obsolete Ohio, the landscape took on a peculiar greenish cast. Thought it must be the tinted glass, but, no, it was the same countryside he knew so well—nothing had changed, except that there were no rivers; they had all been paved. As the train pulled up in Pittsburgh, a few passengers clambered aboard, paunchy and business-suited, and plopped

down in the smoking car. They saw him, snickered, and went back to their rather loud conversations. He noticed one man's attaché case. In gold letters it said DUPONT SYNTHETIC LANDSCAPES, INC. One guy's brief case read ARTIFICIAL WATER PRODUCTS, CONSOLIDATED, and another yet with OWENS PRAIRIE SCHOONERS. He looked away, out the window.

And before you could say Jack Palance, they had crossed over the vast parking lot surrounding the Statue of Liberty and were in New York. Jack had a hunch. When he'd left New York Lung Guyland was still surrounded by water, and water was what he must get to. The Power of the Waters must be revealed to him if it was the last . . . So he catches the Lung Guyland R.R. out to the boonies. Takes a cab. And then a ferry. And then there he is. Having travelled atop those iron wheels all the way to an island of fire. Where else—Fire Island, indeed. It was Christmas Day on Fire Island—here he would find the answer. And who should he run into at the dock but Big Derwood, the high-stepping interior decorator. Party time. Outtasight. Good Old Jack had his interior decorated with just about every kind of fire water you can name—within two hours after his arrival he was bloused schnockered wiped out stoned and just plain old-fashioned drunk. But what was the story on this place? This place he had heard about in song and fable. And noticed on the navigation charts. It seemed that black was white. Something was happening but he didn't know what it was, did he Miser and Mrs. Jones at home in your rockingcoffins. Games were played, but Jack, although much in demand, hung back from all this Dionysian folderol. He felt the creepies come over him. And he thought of beautiful Prince, and how simple it had all been back then in the dawning light of their love. And he knew, God he just knew, that the beauty of things can only be ephemeral, and if one takes any joy in it at all, he sets himself up for the blackest of regrets. There would be no answers here. The only answer was that no one was home, anywhere. Looking around him he saw grotesque proof that to consummate pleasure is to beat it dead with a stick. And when you do this you must find something new. And then only the impossible, the bizarre, can bring you any satisfaction at all. When you have gotten this far there are no objects of your jaded affection, just spasms of uncontrollable passion. In this state, confused by what he was seeing and thinking, deranged by alcohol and other delicacies, he made a decision. He found himself in a stolen dune buggy heading out to Montauk Point. Thank God for the Atlantic and his own ineptness! He stopped the buggy. Looked down at the water below. And jumped. BLAP he hit the water and was out like a light, released at last. You see, Jack had never swum a stroke in his life.

Our Jack came to some time after that at the bottom of about thirty feet of water feeling really hungover, hungry as hell, and with the worst case of pinkbelly the Waters of the World have yet to bestow on the mid-section of a mortal. He sat there, rocked by the current, in stark catatonic madness. Was he dead? And if not, why not? What brought him out of it was the sensation that somewhere it was becoming much lighter all of a sudden. He looked up and there was the surface, the sky above him, not more than five feet above his hunkered puckered body. He was drying up the Atlantic Ocean!

He arose and started walking, as best he could. Out. Just out. Across the vast wastes of sand and scubadivers. Destination unknown. Unwanted. Using the sun by day and the stars by night to guide him to where he knew not. After weeks of delirium he saw the strangest mountain range there ahead of him that he'd ever seen. As the tortured ropes that were his legs strained him upwards through the tiers of stinking carcasses of sea beasts basting in their own juices he felt absolutely no hope that this phenomenon was anything at all. He thought of the absurd figure of Sisyphus and cackled to himself that that son of a bitch at least knew where he was going; he could look forward to the routine, at least. And indeed, this range of sludgy mountains should not have given him hope. As he reached the crest and looked further East he saw nothing but more of the same barren wilderness he had just crossed stretching out before him. He did not know it, but he had just crossed the Mid-Atlantic Ridge.

Now as he wandered, his brains gurgling in his head, he felt as if he were definitely going somewhere, someplace where he might find relief, where he might put an end to his suffering. As we see him now struggling along there in the distance, he is about one-hundred fifty miles southwest of Tenerife. His brain has long lost its ability to sort out what is registered on his retinas from what is activated in his subconscious. We see that he approaches one of those geological phenomena called basins—now a landlocked lake because of the prevailing conditions our hero has unwittingly brought about. If we swoop down over the surface of the basin we notice that it is populated by small dark elongated shapes. These shapes look familiar. We have seen them before, you and I. One in particular. His face . . . yes! They are the piranhas who caused such a hassle the night of Jack's abortive debut into New York society. Jack, though he does not know it (thinks it is just another fuckup with his phosphenes) is making a bee-line for this body of water. Many pointed-toothed grins await. He ankles in. The mud sucks at his baconrind feet, soothing ah! When he is in about up to his knees, the leader rolls his eyes at the rest of the band and they streak in for the hit. Nothing will stop them this time! Ugh! They knock him to a sitting position. The second wave. The water is now crimson. He is catapulted backward by the force of their attack—now they can get at his whole body. He fights, but, friends, if you have ever tried to get off a good punch with the odds 10-1, you'll empathize with his puny retaliation here, where the odds are more like 300-1. His arms flail out of the water, backpedalling, dark thrashing bodies crimped to his flesh. His forearm is now bare bone with arterial blood spewing into the sweltering atmosphere wreathing this orgy of gore. His head, mouth open as if to scream, bobs up lipless, one eye an empty socket. It continues. Slowly, subsides. All we hear are tiny ferocious meat noises. On the horizon the sun is setting, a brilliant blood red. He is at peace. "Red sky at night, Sailor's delight."

He awoke with a start. Jack Daylee, apprentice zookeeper, zoophile, or what have you, pimples on his chest, celibate at the age of 32, dandruff in the ruff of his pubic beard, had been having this one ding-dong of a dream about, of all things, the female giraffe they had just gotten in from Uganda. Jack has always been prone to fantasies in plain brown wrappers, and this one was touched off when he had begun to think about the possibilities of this here

giraffe's sensuous prehensile upper lip and that grasping tongue of hers as it snaked through the mimosa leaves there in the Bronx Zoo afternoon. Nasty, nasty, Jackieboy! Must have been that cold pizza he had for lunch, he thought to himself prismatically.

He awoke with a start, lying there in the bed of the Atlantic. Something rotten in the state of dementia. The sun was up and he was shivering in salted-stiff rags. Thought of pre-season high school football. His reeking practice jersey hanging in the boiler room. Didn't wash it the whole season. Fell apart in his hands. And now, with the sweat of so many nights and days, the clothes were rotting and falling away from him as he walked like sacred feathery lazarus rags. Felt incredibly light in the head.

There, at last, was the shoreline. Did not believe the vision until he was dragging himself up it. Africa. Livingstone, I presume. Everywhere in the inland distance he could see pillars of dust swirling against the white sky. Followed the shoreline. North. He had learned Arabic just well enough from Prince to pick out the names of the towns—most had Roman script beneath the Arabic, anyway. Marakech. Casablanca. Oran. Algiers. The journey continued. He no longer felt anything. His body was a mere subsistence receptor skating over the surface of the sands, passing the wildmen with blazing eyes and arms like clutches of wilting moray eels. Were they really there, or just in his mind, whatever that was?

Tunis, Tripoli. Alexandria. Cut inland. The Nile disappearing before him as he walks, as he approaches. Disappearing the way a mirage disappears. Before him. Cairo: the high-pitched wail he does not comprehend as anything possibly remotely human. Stoops. Picks up the yellowed newspaper as it skitters in front of him. LAND DEVELOPERS RUSH FOR PRIME RESORT AREAS. Then the story of how American businessman when faced with the disappearance of their beach resorts had merely picked up their operations and set up elsewhere selling lots to the fat cats at quite a mark-up. The "elsewheres" were improbable: The Mariana Trench, The Puerto Rico Trench, The Java Trench, and the Eurasian Basin. As the waters receded even further, other operations were flown in over these shoestring spas and dropped in more strategic spots. Leaving behind ghost resorts in barren sands that had died before taking their first breaths. No matter to the entrepreneurs who had sold the idea; they were selling others.

Crosses the cement banks of the Suez. And up through the Wilderness of Shur. Up through the Wilderness of Zin. To the Dead Sea. The salt burning his eyes lungs lips lungs. Stumbling up the Jordan. Walks on the Sea of the Galilee; a comedian. Walking. The Road to Damascus. Out to the coast of the extinct Mediterranean again.

Stumbling along the deadwhite pit of the world. Adrift in this sealess sea with no moorings no bearings all landmarks vanished. All life vanished. He, alone. And this burning prevailed upon the sands wherever he walked. All in whose nostrils had been the breath of life, had felt this breath flicker in them, all flesh that moved upon the earth, fowl, cattle, beast and man, had felt this delicate breath flicker and die. Except this solitary flyspeck scurrying along the deadwhite pit of the world.

Haifa. Fires. Wailing. Beirut. The other Tripoli. As he came to the town of Latakia he turned inland again, no longer questioning what he was doing. He headed in a northeasterly direction.

The Euphrates disappeared as he bent to drink from it. As he lay there like a scabby ostrich with his face gagging in the sand strange words swam back to him. The Father of the Waters. The Mississippi. O CURSE NOT E'ER THE TRUTH. Absurd! Absurd! Lord, Lord, O Great Straw Turkey in the Sky, what kind of fucking joke is this?

On into Turkey, or so the scaling road signs indicated. The wild emptiness of the sands around him. Shut in by the grey curtains of pitiless heat day after day nothing changing. Everything familiar had come to an end.

There before him a ludicrous sight: a stupid painted post card puddle in which he saw reflected a very tall mountain, its peak capped with purewhite snow, shimmering like some Disney Fujiyama. A broken sign at the last junction had said LAKE VAN—he'd gotten a real kick out of that. The sign to his left as he stood there read AGHURI. He did not understand. He looked at the reflection again, fell to the ground—the mountain had disappeared. The Good Green Earth. He personally, John Cholz Daylee, had blown it. He had come in with the bases loaded and grooved that fat one, that grapefruit, that had gone sailing into the tenements. Fuck me and the horse I rode in on. His eyes became blurred and great swatches of color began to spin and jounce and crash in the sky before him. The wind picked up for the first time in as long as he could remember and scoured the skin from his bony frame with its needles. The lightning snaked slowly down from the sky and silhouetted what he knew was a mountain. Yes, a mountain, really. He did not know how he moved toward it under what power it was certainly not his own. But he moved toward it. Just as he moved into the shadow of this mountain he felt something wet on the crusty carapace, his face—he still had enough juice in his body to cry. Yes, he was crying, John Cholz Daylee, the hero of this story was crying. Looking up at this mountain his legs gave way and he hurtled backwards, bouncing in the dust. A wind passed over his body, a cool wind. These were not tears on his face—they were drops of water. As he lay there on his back, fountains in the deep windows of the heavens opened and wept warm drops of that fluid jewelry—rain. And he wept the most bitter tears that any man has ever wept. A small geyser gurgled at what was left of his feet. He sat up on his elbows and looked around. The little pocks of warm rain had washed away the scabrous film that coated the remnants of a broken board lying there face-up to the sky. He could only read the letters; kay-oh-aitch-dash-eye-dash-en-oh-aitch*—he did not know their meaning, nor did he especially care. Praying that this was not a dream. And the letters of the words that Father Mississippi had said to him at the end spun in his mind and rearranged themselves into: RETURN TO THE SOURCE. What was happening what it was all about he was not yet sure. All he knew was that you could bet your parched bony ass that this thing was going to go into extra innings.

*Koh-i-Noh; Persian for "Noah's Mountain"