

AN  
ODD KNIGHT'S  
DAZE

**A Novel of the War for Haven**

by

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**Semi-Divine Revelations II**

The Set Up  
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Out of the Mire

## **Semi-Divine Revelations II**

God was our creation, and we are all God's children.

Yes, indeed. And Hosanna.

The snake bites it's own tale here.

We created God, who, in good faith, came back to create us. Her motives were not completely altruistic. The only philosophical singularity we have discovered thus far is relativity.

(And, of course, this is an absolute inconsistency.)

Suffice it to say that God rather enjoys being God, and She doesn't want anything to screw it up.

As humans possess a rather primitive process of cognition evolved directly from the sense of smell, it's no wonder that most have difficulty comprehending the Big Picture. To most of them life smells sweet or it stinks. This has much to do with the molecular receptor cells that trigger smell and taste. You either smell something or you don't.

Something "is" or it "is not."

"Logical thinking" is just another way of being nosy. The process of thought generally divides the world into either/or. Logically, there are no Inbetweens. However, without these middle paths you can only get as far as your stomach takes you. Fortunately for you and all of us, some minds are not completely controlled through the unjust hunger of reason.

You can use your vision for this other understanding.

Two individuals stand back to back. One walks east, the other walks west.

Logic tells you they are walking away from each other.

Vision and Imagination see the big picture. The world is circular, a sphere in shape. So, these entities are also walking towards each other.

Well, -they are walking away and concurrently walking towards each other. The "toward" part is the long way home. But home, none the less.

Eventually they meet face to face. Even with Herself.

I should know. Most of us come the long way home to Haven. That's where God lives. Really. God is a personal friend of yours truly.

Call me Mike.

I play poker with God Thursday nights.

(Along with a whole bunch of regulars that drop in when they're not in the field.)

God's an excellent bluffer, but she can't win every hand.

There are rules to every game, even if you make them up, and designed them yourself, you've got to follow them if the game is to be anything other than total chaos. However, a bit of entropy goes a long way.

She does play dice with the universe, although dice have to have their own free will, too.

The foundation of both life and choice is chaos. Any fourth level entity learns that in their approximate kindergarten. Life can exist in chaos, but evolution requires order and patterns capable of replication and reproduction. But I digress.

I'm not really allowed to tell you about how we all made God.

At least, not the technical stuff. (As if you'd be able to understand it, being stuck on the third level and all.)

At the premature end of the universe, things tended to come together on their own accord.

We get by with a little help from our friends.

God is One and Many.

Human, alien, plant, mineral, animal, fire, earth, water and air.

Anything you can think of, and most things you can't.

God made us through a creative use of order, with a dash of chaos. (Sugar and spice were added for the feminine, but that puppy dog and snail stuff for the masculine is pure hokum.)

Most of us are Her shadows on the space-time wall. A dim projection of majestic form that lacks the Light She imparts.

Does a shadow know that it isn't a fluttering bird conjured by some deft hand? You got me there.

## The Set Up

It seemed as if we'd been stumbling about the mist forever.

I didn't feel the push of resistance as I did the first time, probably because I was hanging on to Merl's coat tails.

What I felt though, were the blisters on both feet.

My shoes pinched me on and off, crabby at the exercise.

What was going through my head as I blindly tagged along?

Not much. -Fear and second thoughts.

That crack I made earlier about selling my soul?

That's not really me.

In the past, whenever I acted like an asshole I ended up feeling like shit.

I didn't think I was the violent vengeful type. Never been to war. Never took a life. I grew up with five brothers and one sister.

So, -of course we were always squabbling and roughhousing.

I had a few fights in high school and college, -none of them much to write home about. Sure, I use to work with so-called criminals. -Even been jumped a few times at work. I usually wasn't afraid to get hit or get hurt.

I was more afraid that I'd hurt somebody else.

When I was in the third grade there was this kid, -I'll call him Mickey, -who was the schoolyard bully. One day, I'd finally had enough of his pushing me around.

So, I yelled at him from across the yard, really pissing him off.

He charged me. I stood my ground, waiting.

Just when he was about to tackle me, I dropped down and he flew over my back.

His face ploughed into the asphalt where he broke his nose and left several teeth.

The nuns were not too pleased.

I hadn't run from trouble but I usually didn't go looking for it either.

Maybe it's me (and anybody else) in a desperate situation. I wasn't exactly into selling my soul to get what I wanted here.

I was just seriously considering leasing it out

Maybe that's why the statue of justice is blindfolded.

When you take the law into your own hands there are some things you just don't want to see...

\* \* \*

The fog began to gradually withdraw. Gauze unwrapped the forms and shapes of a more substantial view. The distinctness and intensity increasing as one layer peeled off after another.

My body began to feel a light wind, and I could smell a fresh, rich earthiness.

The light was much stronger now, and I began to see that we were hiking in a tremendous forest.

"How do you see where you're going," I asked.

"How does a sculptor see the statue in a block of marble? –Now, do shut up, - I need to focus."

Shafts of light beams held up the roof of sky. Crystal dewdrops laced through colors of emerald and jade. The sky that peeked through was the blue of an ocean's wave. Fingers of white clouds raised a lazy greeting.

The scent became an incense of green pine.

The wind kept up the light breeze that sang through the tree's crowns, a bittersweet sighing.

I've learned since then trees can communicate very clearly.

You see, both trees and humans use the air to talk.

Humans make their own wind, and trees have to wait for the next breeze.

Some trees will always be better at listening.

Some people will always be walking windbags too preoccupied to hear another voice. Merl was definitely not a windbag.

He remained silent as we trudged through a symphony of forest sounds.

"Okay, can you talk now?"

"Not yet," was all I got.

Birds sang and scolded, animals barked and howled.

My belly rumbled in a bass tenor.

Merl finally signaled us for a rest stop.

The trail we had been following merged into a glade with a huge sturdy oak providing the shade.

Both of us sat against the tree.

The wizard reached into his robe and pulled out a small packet, which he tossed my way. I inspected the package. Ha.

"Come on, -Trail Mix?"

"Your world does have more than it's supply of conveniences and. it would be a shame to ignore them. Besides, I've had to listen to your stomach grumble for the last hour."

I tore the top off with my teeth, and spat the piece of wrapper on the ground.

Merl lifted one eyebrow at the offending litter.

"Sorry." I picked up the trash and stashed it in my jacket.

Branches rustled. I looked nervously around, chewing a mouthful of nuts and dried fruit.

"It's quite beautiful here is it not, Joseph?" Merl asked.

"Yeah. Kinda peaceful and wild all at the same time."

"That it is. That it is," said Merl assuredly, "And you know, there are still places very much like this in your own world."

I fingered the bit of trash in my pocket.

"Not many. Not thanks to us. "

"No, not many ", said the wizard, "I know a world where the forest is a God."

He looked dreamy for a second then turned his penetrating gaze back on me.

Merl could give me the willies.

Part of his technique, I think.

"But all life renews itself, given half a chance. Even your life."

I turned awkwardly away. "I don't know... " I softly said, wandering to a more remote place in my head.

"Aye, -that you don't. And that's why I'm here."

Merl continued in a business-like manner, "Now let us get down to the matters at hand."

The wizard stood up and raised his wand into the air.

He looked down over his shoulder towards me. "Excuse me Joseph, but I do so need a ritual here. -Early Druidic training in these matters. More a matter of habit than anything else."

The old fart was lying in part, but I couldn't tell that then. His superiors must have provided an image consultant. Turns out he was a Druid prior to his "recruitment" by the so-called forces of good.

Every walker of worlds is a mystic. And a bullshitter, besides.

"It's your party."

The forest grew still.

The sky darkened as clouds above the wizard began to swirl and pulsate in a somber dance.

Merl's eyes fluttered until the whites showed and he appeared to go into a trance of some sort.

Then he began chanting in a sonorous voice that, honest to God, creeped me out even more.

*"For him to regain the life once lost, a Quest is here at hand.*

*Four Directions must he now take. The Four that mark this land.*

*To the South rests courage, trapped in Ancient fire.*

*To the East lives dreams anew, sealed beneath a mire.*

*To the West dwell senses, common called and royal bound.*

*To the North lays wisdom, costing vision to be found."*

A lightning bolt crackled through the air.

I jumped.

"Jesus!"

Merl's eyes came back to normal.

“Quite a popular deity, isn’t he, -this Jesus fellow? I take it most of you pray when you’re in some kind of torment and ignore the Deity most other times.”

“That’s one way to look at it.”

I didn’t add the *fuck you*, you condescending pompous twit. Felt like it, though. But, all in all, the show was very impressive to an ignorant person such as myself.

I’m a little less ignorant now, but not by all that damn much in the grand scheme of things. “And what does that shit you said have to do with anything?”

Merl raised both bushy eyebrows. "I'm not exactly sure what the devil it all means myself, - when I do that particular foreseeing incantation I never have a memory of anything I've said.

“There is always a bit of mystery in magic, even for wizards.”

“Sure. “ -Sure.

“You might say that those of us who are the best in our craft are merely vessels for a Power much greater than ourselves.”

I’d already heard that stuff at AA meetings.

Merl shrugged, "The answers will be revealed along the way."

“I want some answers NOW. You promised.”

He seemed torn on this one. Like he really did want to tell me and...

“Oh, very well. Sit down. This will take a bit.”

I sat.

“I’m what you would call a field agent for a consortium of beings, -including humans, of course... that works at policing various parallel worlds.”

Okay, look. -That’s what he said. I’m sorry if the story’s getting complicated

I wasn’t any more fucking pleased about it than you are, but that’s the way this story goes.

We work with what we got.

“Field agent? Parallel worlds?”

“Indeed. Ten thousand years down from your time stream this consortium

discovered that the universe was collapsing-for no apparent reason they could discern.”

My universe collapsed five years ago. Been there, done that.

At least I could relate.

“You mean the world was ending?”

“Not just the world, -the universe, -ALL universes. -So, a number of races, artificial intelligences and allies pooled our knowledge and began to research the problem.”

“And you found...?”

“First, -they *created* an Entity, an integration of the best of all of us in the process.”

“She discovered that what was happening was impossible, unless we took into account the possibility of interference from other dimensions of time and space. So HerSelf created certain pathways in time, and consequently, parallel worlds.”

I was confused here. “I don’t get the connection.”

“No one can really travel back through their own time stream Joseph. -All that nonsense about going back and killing your grandfather so you were never born is rubbish.”

He cocked his head.

“-BUT through the Borderlands some can go back to a dimension very close to their own and find similarities to their own history. We can change the past and consequently that future for that world.”

I saw the flaw right away. “But Merl, what good is that going to do anyone? *Your* particular universe -the one that’s going to crash and burn, you already said, -you can’t change it.”

He shook his head.

“Not directly. However, -if enough parallel planes are shifted to contain the same world line, the same events, it creates a resonance that can alter ALL the dimensions.”

“Sort of like throwing rocks in a pond and creating waves?”

“Exactly.”

“You guys sure about this?”

Merl scowled, “It’s already happened. Some THING has caused the Universe to collapse, and the bastard that killed your family is in league with this evil force.”

He was telling me the truth here. My gut was sure of it.

I stuck out my hand.

“Then we’re allies, as long as I get a shot at this Mordred guy.”

Merl flashed all of his teeth in a quick grin with a nod of appreciation. "Thank-you lad. One can never have too many allies, can one?"

I bit my tongue.

I was starting to like this wizard guy, but that didn’t mean I trusted him.

Yet, he was all I had at the moment.

"Guess not."

Merl clapped his hands and rubbed them together in a brisk motion.

His voice then shifted gears to take on the difficult road ahead.

"Now, I'm afraid it's time to be off. -To the south, we’ve another friend to collect."

I hesitated. -had that touch of my, isn’t this fucking surreally insane catching up with me.

“You said you’d do what I asked.”

“Sorry. –it’s a lot to digest.”

"Don't worry lad. If you're already dead, brain damaged, and trapped in an unknown Universe, what more have you got to lose?"

“Nothing,” I said dryly.

The fear had absorbed all the moisture in my mouth.

Like I said, sometimes Merl was a real comfort.

We hit the trail again.

\* \* \*

The sun was up and very bright.

Spring had crept into my step like a kindhearted thief giving stolen riches to the poor. The forest began to thin out. I began to see meadows filled with wild flowers. The flowers danced with the music of the breeze, rippling colors as the brush of wind lightly touched the canvas of the earth.

The meadows gradually transformed into rolling hills and dales.

I wondered what a Dale was.

Made me think of chipmunks.

Then I thought of a rodent monastery.

Then I thought that I had better keep my thoughts to myself, cause I was starting to sound loopy even to me.

The land started to ascend in its slope. Large wedges of gray and black stone breaching the green. Topaz ponds and azure lakes adorned the countryside like sparkling blue pendants.

As we reached the crest of a small hill, Merl signaled for a stop.

About a quarter mile ahead was a small castle.

“She was supposed to meet us here”, he muttered.

“Who?”

“A native, -daughter of the king. She knows nothing of the Borderlands, or parallel worlds Joseph, -so keep our confidence.”

I nodded.

I was sure if I told anybody anywhere any of this I'd be locked in a straight jacket.

If they had any.

Merl looked toward the castle and sniffed. “Blast IT!”

“What's up?”

“She's been captured and now, we'll have to free her.”

He sighed and pointed to the west.

Uh-oh, I thought, - he had mentioned something *bad* in that weird trance.

"Our destination."

I saw plumes of smoke and fire streaming from inside the castle walls.

"Hey, - is that...?"

"Indeed it is, if you are thinking of dragons."

Actually, I wasn't. I was just thinking the place was on fire.

"*DRAGON?* Come on, -you never said anything about *DRAGONS!*"

Merl grimaced, "I was supposed to be watching out for her and I, ah..."

"You messed up," I said with a smug grin.

"Don't look so happy about it. "

"Sorry. Nice to know you're human after all."

"Don't be so certain."

Like I said, he had a way about him.

"The courage you must gain resides there as well. You'll find it requires a bit more effort than simple ridicule."

Ouch. Then I remembered...

"Hey, I thought you didn't remember anything when you did that foretelling crap."

"Some knowledge trickles through, and some things are obvious."

"Sorry man, I ...I just don't have much experience fighting Dragons..."

I made a move to turn around and the wizard snaked an arm out to catch me.

"Practice makes perfect."

"Sure."

"Ah, lad," Merl said encouragingly, "you have the one prerequisite for courage, and that is all you need."

"Yeah, -what's that?"

"Overwhelming fear," the wizard cheerily replied.

I heard faint screams coming from the distance.

A woman's screams of terror.

Merl dug his fingers deep into my bicep.

"HEY!"

Merl seized my shoulders in both hands, and gazed steadily into my eyes.

He had a strong grip for an old geezer.

"Listen up." His voice was firm with resolve.

"Joseph, nobody, but nobody, 'has' courage. Bravery isn't something you own or possess. All the myths and legends that talk about the heroes in that way are exaggerations, distortions of the truth."

"Trying to make me feel better?"

"No lad, I'd rather have you do well than merely feel well." None of what I'm saying is going to change your feelings one whit. Courage is merely the ability to act with your fears, and despite your fears. You, my lad, are going to remain afraid until...."

"Until I'm toast?"

"Until your fear manifests into action."

Oh, well, I thought to myself, what's the worst that could happen?

How about getting broiled alive and being torn into itsy bitsy pieces by razor sharp teeth and claws while screaming in agony?

The woman's screams of fear continued to drift towards us, along with the smell of sulfur.

"Someone needs your help."

"You help her, then," I said with a defiant shrug, "*you're the wizard*, right?"

"Unfortunately, there just happens to be magical wards that prevent me from entering the castle grounds."

"How *convenient*."

Merl stood silently, his face an expressionless mask.

“You said you’d cooperate.”

The woman's pleas for help pulled at me like puppet strings. I use to give a damn if you can recall. If I could recall□

I felt my head jerk to the direction of the wailing.

The smell of sulfur grew stronger. The screams intensified.

I heard a voice come out of my mouth, "All right damn it! I'll do it."

"Excellent choice. Excellent."

"Fine. Love a good barbecue. Let's get this over with.”

We headed towards the castle.

\* \* \*

The castle was by no means the impenetrable fortress we had seen in the distance. The closer I got, the more decay and ruin I saw.

The towers were crumbling, and the walls were breached in several places. Slimy moss covered portions of the battlements.

The gates were cracked and rotten, and the moat empty. It was an old place.

But the screams that filled the air, -they were very fresh.

There were flashes of a large figure that offered glimpses of gleaming reptilian scales. The creature was pacing.

Pacing in wait for its next victim. Waiting for me.

We stopped a hundred yards from the entrance.

"This is as far as I can go", Merl said apologetically.

I took another deep breath and patted him on the shoulder.

"Been nice knowing you."

I started to go in and abruptly stopped myself.

"Wait a damn minute. I can't go in there barehanded.”

“Well...look about you," offered Merl.

Near the front of the gate were a bunch of blackened mounds.

I knelt to examine one. As I moved some of the charred material aside, a skull leered up at me.

A huge cockroach skittered out of the eye socket.

Nice.

"Less successful heroes, we can presume," the wizard commented.

Feeling disgusted, I pulled myself together and began to rummage around in the piles.

After several unsuccessful attempts, I found a dagger.

"This is it?" I asked "I get this little thing to fight that monster with? You must be joking."

"I fail to see much humor," Merl gestured around, " ... in any of this."

"Well what am I supposed to do?"

"Trust yourself."

"How can I help that girl in there with this little toad sticker?"

"I can't tell you that, lad."

"*You can't tell me?*"

"Part of the creatures power is that it's mildly telepathic. It will sense your knowledge of its capabilities. If I tell you, It will detect your awareness and you'll be attacked instantly."

A light bulb went off.

"You mean it *KNOWS* I'm coming...?"

"You or some other noble hero. The trap is baited..."

"I'll be killed the minute I set foot in there."

"No. She likes to play with her food first."

"*GREAT.*"

"Shh. I would suggest that you at least maintain the advantage of being unannounced."

Merl chided in a low and deadly tone. "You'll know what to do if you size the situation up correctly."

"That *situation*" is forty feet tall!" I protested.

The wizard responded with grim confidence. "It may seem so, but things aren't always what they appear to be."

"Tell that to these guys. They appear to be dead."

"None of them listened either."

"WHAT!" I grabbed the wizard by the front of his robe.

"You *mean* to tell me that *you* brought these other guys here to do *your* dirty work for you, -and they're all wasted now?" I asked with growing horror.

The wizard started to reply, but silenced himself.

Later on he told me he did no such thing, but I still wonder...

The screams from inside the castle wall dwindled into helpless sobbing.

"Just who... *what* the *hell* are you, really?"

The wizard looked away, subdued. He spoke to the ground.

"All will be revealed in good time. I implore you with the truth, -the girls life will be forfeit if you do not act."

The whimpering continued in the background.

I paced back and forth, and every once in a while opened my mouth to sputter...but nothing came out.

"Oh hell," I said, "If I'm gonna do this, I better do it now."

I began to walk into the castle and heard Merl whisper a final warning...

"I can tell you that the toad sticker, as you call it, will be quite useless."

No kidding.

Maybe cause the other fellows didn't stick it into the right little toad of a wizard.

\* \* \*

I went through the gates frightened and assured of my doom.

The castle courtyard looked like an arena.

All that was missing were the bleachers and the fans.

The ground was bare earth. Mud and dirt.

Piles of ash clotted the yard at various intervals. Ashes to ashes, dunes to dust. The stench of brimstone, and musky snake overwhelmed my nostrils.

My eyes were already popping as I took in a view of the Dragon.

The reptile was four times my height.

It sat up on its haunches with a three-foot forked flicking tongue.

Its scales were iridescent greens and blues that shimmered with each sinuous movement of muscle.

Its head was ridged and bony, with knobbed scales protecting the eyes.

The teeth were twelve-inch fangs, ideally made for ripping and tearing.

Its smaller arms seemed a bit incongruent, added on as an afterthought.

The beast's talons gleamed like black steel, compulsively opening and closing. The wings seemed flimsy and inadequate to support the creature's weight in the air. Every third or fourth breath the creature exhaled a stream of smoke and fire.

It hadn't seen me yet. It was watching the Damsel.

SHE...

She was the most beautiful girl that I had ever laid his eyes on. I felt guilty immediately. (I apologized to Barb in my head, -as if the dead really care.)

I had laid my eyes on quite a few girls like her before I got married, but that's all that got laid.

Out of my league.

The girl was tied to a large wooden post in the middle of the courtyard, arms above her head. She was wearing a long low cut white gown that draped her body like a wet tee shirt. Her breasts were high and full, and she didn't seem to be in need of a wonder bra. Her arms were fastened to the post with ribbons that fetchingly matched her dress.

My pulse beat even faster. I didn't know how that was possible -as it was already into overdrive□.

Her hair was golden and silky, falling down her shoulders in a waterfall of abandon. Her cheeks were high and had this Vogue model sharpness.

Beautiful amethyst eyes caught my gaze and returned it with a lure of hope and fear.

The Dragon was on the other side of her, about a hundred yards away.

It began walking around in circles, like a dog does when it's looking for the most comfortable position to nap, dreaming about chasing rabbits.

Scared rabbits like me, wanting to hop the hell out of this place.

The Dragon found the right spot, and collapsed in a heap.

The ground gave a little shake.

The creature burrowed and snuggled into itself, closing it's eyes.

It then began to snore and make faint mewling sounds.

I tiptoed over to the life-at-stake.

"Ohh, my brave and handsome Knight," the princess moaned softly,

"You've come to slay the demon beast and set me free."

I almost turned around to see who she was talking to.

I stammered, "Uh...right...I'll do my best, miss."

"Let's hope so," said the Princess.

-Just a little too harshly if you ask me.

She softened her tone, "I'd do anything, anything at all, for the man that could destroy that evil creature who captured me!"

She gave her full lips a pretty pout and cast her eyes down demurely to her breasts.

Then she looked up again, to catch my eyes still at chest level.

Got me.

She smiled slyly.

I felt the blood rushing from my brain to more distant regions of my body.

Not now, you jerk, I said to myself. Got some important hero stuff to do.

I leaned and reached over her with the knife to cut her bindings.

"No don't!", she whispered frantically, "You have to kill it first!"

"What?" I asked, confused.

"Get that knife and ram it into the Dragons eye", she breathed seductively, "and I'll give you everything you deserve."

There was a hungry eagerness to the woman's voice as she sensuously licked her lips. For some odd reason it reminded me of... a snake.

"Do it!" she urged with a throaty growl. "Do it now, for me!"

Her eyes held a promise of flame and sweat.

I started over to the sleeping dragon, dancing a very soft-shoe in funeral silence, holding my breath.

It shouldn't be too hard, I thought. -I prayed.

I inched my way closer.

I reached the Dragon's head with dagger poised.

I lowered his weapon so the tip was an inch from the monsters right eye.

I tensed my right arm and tightened my grip on the inlaid handle.

The silver of the blade glinted with a dull sheen.

*And then the Dragon opened ITS eyes.*

\* \* \*

Now, -I should have killed that thing without a moment's notice.

But I did notice.

More than a few things.

Maybe it's because the wizard had warned me about things not always

being what they appeared to be.

Maybe it's because of how the damsel didn't seem exactly innocent. As a matter of fact she seemed downright bloodthirsty.

And it was peculiar how she managed to maintain that cover girl look being tied to a stake and all. Not a speck of dirt on her.

And just maybe it's because when the Dragon opened its eyes, I didn't see any hostility.

The Dragon's eyes were full of pain and pleading.

"KILL IT, YOU FOOL!" The girl screamed. "*KILL IT!*"

Fortunately for us all, and as much of a dog as I am, I had never gone to obedience school.

"I don't think so," I said, turning with a grimace.

"Too bad, you little bastard," she spat through clenched teeth, "Then my pet will just have to kill you."

She gave a commanding stare to the Dragon.

"Kill the nice Knight," she said contemptuously.

Well, I called it right. Then again, so what?

If you get whacked being right, death still sucks the big one.

With obvious reluctance, the Dragon lurched to its full height, -as if invisible hands were forcing the movements.

It was struggling to keep its snout closed and unseen fingers were prying them open. The beast's head reared back and gouts of flame whooshed into the sky.

I dove to my left. Actually, I slipped as my feet went into apoplexy.

The next burst of flame crisped my former location into slag.

I rolled with my fall. It was in a good direction. -Away.

In a situation like this, you usually don't think about much at all.

You scurry and scramble and duck and weave.

The rapids of violence pitch you in its wake, and we usually drown in them.

One way or another.

I was now about twenty yards away from the Dragon, who was lumbering towards me in giant strides. I thought of those blackened lumps speckling the courtyard and doubted that running would be helpful.

So much for the running away to fight another day jazz.

The Damsel was laughing with bright-eyed excitement.

I started to feel the fear condensing in my body. The fluttering became a beating of war drums.

The jelly of my legs hardened into solid iron.

Okay, maybe into solid aluminum.

Enough was enough.

I grinned back at the little witch-bitch who lured so many to their deaths,

-high octane anger propelling me stupidly forward.

I fainted to the right, and the Dragon missed me with a talon's swipe. I then ran at break-neck speed toward the girl.

Who didn't like this one bit□

She screamed as I raised the knife to her throat.

My smile was as thin and sharp as the blade. I wondered what Clint Eastwood would say□

*"Stop your pet. Now. Or you... are one dead damsel."* I rasped.

Hell, I sounded scary even to myself.

She saw I was dead serious.

I hoped I didn't have to find out if I was.

She was quick on the uptake, "Stop."

The Dragon who was breathing down my neck sat down with a sigh of relief.

I took the knife and held the point an inch away from the girl's right eye. For a second or two, I had it in me to nail her and ...then I knew I couldn't follow through.

She looked at me like I was a piece of rat shit and smiled.

“You’re too much of a coward, aren’t you?”

Me? Well, -I didn’t think that “woman and children first” applied to cold-blooded executions.

I started to go into panic mode, -but then remembered her reactions when I tried to cut her bindings. On a hunch, I slashed the dagger through the cords that tied her hands to the post.

"No!" She wailed, and stamped her pretty foot. "No! You've ruined it!

You've ruined all of it!"

The instant the last silken thread parted, well...

A whole lot of things happened at once.

Shimmers of rainbow light surrounded the Dragon. They pulsated and grew into a white brightness that was blinding in it's radiance.

A dark gray light began to enclose the form of the enchantress. It blackened and sunk into a well of darkness draining all vision.

Both darkness and light collapsed in upon themselves.

Where the Dragon had stood lay a bedraggled and smudged girl, stark naked and shaking her head in confusion.

She was beautiful too.

Where the damsel had stood was the Dragon.

Twenty tons of irritated unhappiness blaming me for its misfortune with razor sharp fangs and claws geared to even the score.

I started moving backwards and tripped over the girl.

Somehow, I got all tangled up with her trying to break my fall.

Our faces were inches away. Yeah, -I was great in a clutch.

I came up with a lame, “Uh□ Hi!□,” just as The Dragon roared in gleeful rage. It’s massive head darted to a foot above the girls and jaws dripping with stinking saliva widened to reveal a forked tongue.

I roughly threw the girl off me and yelled “RUN.” She rolled a few feet and stopped, paralyzed.

The dragon looked at her, gave a little snort and turned back towards me.

I just shut my eyes and gave it up, cringing as I waited for decapitation or flames to engulf me. I waited. Nothing happened.

Then I heard the wizard's voice...

"Excuse me ever so much for the intrusion, but no one answered at my knock." Merl interrupted.

I looked up to see the wizard standing between the Dragon and us.

The Dragon paused and took a dainty monstrous step backwards. Actually, it was as dainty as any thirty-ton reptile could possibly manage.

"Nice to see you've found a new friend to play with," the wizard said as an aside to me. "And as for you!"

Merl pointed his wand right between the lizard's eyes. "I'd suggest that you not move one proverbial muscle unless you want to provide a lifetime's supply of luggage for the kingdom."

The Dragon lifted its talons in a gesture of ireful surrender.

Merl took off his robe and threw it to the naked maiden.

"Cover up lass. No sense in making the lad here twice bewitched."

The girl caught the robe and hastily put it on.

I politely pretended that I hadn't noticed anything.

Really, -nope, not a thing.

She brushed her black hair from her face and said "Thank-you, Sir Knight," and smiled a thousand watts.

Merl gave the Dragon a wary, baleful gaze. "We've got other matters to attend to. Sorry we can't stay for tea." He nodded to me, "Fine job by the way. Thank our lovely hostess, help milady there and we'll all be on our merry way."

I turned my attention to the huge reptile. I saluted her with the dagger, and was surprised to see her flinch.

Hot damn.

I took the real damsel by the arm and the three of us sauntered across the courtyard. I did not feel as casual as I tried to appear. My body ached and my nerves were strung tighter than a violin. I tried not to turn around.

I was not alone in my concern.

"Ah, Joseph?" The mage queried softly through the corner of his mouth.

"Yes?" I hissed back.

"When we get through the gate and out of that creature's sight, I want you to do me a favor."

"You got it."

"Not quite." the wizard whispered. "I am sorely depleted in the magic department at present. Breaking through those wards was no easy task. So, when we get past the gates, I'd highly recommend that we all run like hell."

I gritted my teeth.

We strolled up to the gate and turned left. Legs pumped and shoe leather burned.

I wondered how the old man managed to keep up with the girl and me for the first hundred yards. Soon I was the one too busy catching up to wonder about much except putting one foot in front of the other.

Hopefully without tripping.

## Specifics at Mercy General

### Attending Physicians Report:

Patient is a Caucasian male, age approximately thirty-six and arrived in the Emergency unit at nine am, comatose. Injuries sustained in an automobile collision include occipital fracture, with damage to the right temporal cranium. The right eye has been ruptured. Hematoma is likely. Severe lacerations about the head, neck, and shoulders. No glass fragments. Sternum and ribs are cracked as well.

Antibiotic's and pre-op initiated. Blood pressure is dangerously high.

X-rays confirm the fracture. The patient was referred for surgery at nine-twenty.

Unusual rapid eye movement (REM) pattern combined with enhanced Theta brain wave frequency also observed. Blood type O.

Additional note: This could be a tricky one. Lefay is our best surgeon on call. The patient keeps mumbling something about "wizards."

She's the closest thing we've got to one.

Get her.

Stat.

Ralph Sanders, MD 12/06

## Food for Thought

For somebody who had run from everything for the last few years, I should have been better at racing.

After what felt like eternity, I caught up with the wizard and the girl. They were resting near a secluded pool circled by large boulders. I came in panting up a storm, not even bothering to pretend that I wasn't winded.

Pretense requires energy.

Merl walked over to me and stuck his hand out.

"Splendid job back there. "

The girl nodded in agreement.

I took the wizard's hand in both of mine in a firm grasp.

"Thanks. Good timing on your part, Merl."

"Yes, -If I do say so□"

The wizard smiled with chagrin. "Forgetting myself, - Joseph, may I formally present to you",

Merl beckoned to the girl, "Her Royal Highness, The Princess Elizabeth of Avalon."

"Hey," I said.

Elizabeth curtsied. She added, "Anyone who saves my life may call me Beth."

I bowed a bit awkwardly. "Thanks." My eyes met hers. "Beth."

I felt embarrassed and of course then felt flustered for feeling like such an idiot in the first place.

"A-hem." Merl rescued me from the attack of self-consciousness.

"I suggest that her ladyship wash off some of the souvenirs of her captivity," he said, eyeing the grime that covered her.

"And that we will... Oh, what is that word you people use after a mission, as it were? ah, - *debrief*. Yes."

I took the subtle hint. He wanted a private talk.

Good. I only had a million questions left...

Beth went to the side of the pool and eased her long and well-formed legs in with great pleasure. My eyes seemed to follow her of their own accord.

"Joseph!"

I reluctantly followed the wizard around a large rock where the two of us settled down in the warmth of the sun.

"How do you feel?" Merl asked.

"Exhausted."

"Yes, I would think so," the wizard concurred. "What about braver?"

"Don't know, -don't think so. Don't feel passionate about joining the dragon slayers club. "

"At the very least, you will always know that you stood up to a dragon."

"You never met my mother-in-law."

He laughed, and said, "Now, -any questions?"

"How 'bout if I just catch my breath?"

We sat comfortably for a while. It was good just to suck in the fresh air.

"Okay, -Where the HELL did that thing come from?"

Merl pulled an old briar pipe out of his pants and tapped it against a nearby stone. He lit it, took a puff and exhaled with a contented sigh.

"It is quite a story." the wizard began. "The Dragon has been around these parts for longer than the spoken word. Think of it as a dinosaur with intelligence."

"-It deviously disguises Itself as some fair and winsome damsel and those vainglorious asses all rush in and try to kill whatever poor maiden it's captured and bewitched into the seeming of a dragon."

"Nasty."

"Quite."

"I take it that it has some grudge going on?"

“Naturally, the beast hates all humans. Mankind killed off the remnants of dragonkind on most of the worlds. As you’re aware, for some idiotic reason, exterminating entire species and races is often considered extremely valiant. It takes a villain to make a hero.”

Merl added a mocking smile, "the Dragon extracts Its vengeance by making a mockery of what mankind considers noble and honorable."

"Did uh the princess, ah, did Beth... kill any of those guys?"

-I am a little morbid sometimes.

"You’ll have to ask her." Merl grimly replied. “I don’t believe she was there long enough. Even if she did, her hand was forced. Half of those blackened spots were local girls that the fools had killed first. All of those so-called warriors ended up pulling bloody steel out of defenseless lasses. The Dragon let them see exactly what they had done.”

“I don’t know if I could live with myself if...”

“After that, they didn’t have to live with themselves very long at all," Merl interrupted angrily, "after that, the Dragon generally fried the idiots.”

"Shit."

"Courage, my young friend, is much more than a willingness to fight, or even die for that matter. Sometimes it requires more courage to act with kindness.

Sometimes it requires more courage to question the accepted view of things. Sometimes it's stronger to actually be patient or to accept your limitations and disengage. The Dragon knows that. Somehow, - you knew it too.”

“You helped a bit.”

The wizard waved the complement off. “Justice requires harshness at times. But it also requires mercy.”

What do you say to stuff like that?

I shrugged my shoulders. "Yeah. Maybe. It’s all very confusing".

Merl clapped me on the back, "Perhaps confusion is necessary too.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

We were silent for a while, and then...I realized I had to get one more thing off my chest.

“Uh Merl?”

“Yes lad?”

“Could you knock off the “lad and laddie bit? Makes me feel like your pet dog.”

He looked me dead in the eyes.

“Of course, lad,” and got up to leave.

I didn’t know what his problem was, but I wasn’t about to get into another lecture.

“Thanks a bunch.”

Merl stretched his arms and nonchalantly remarked, “There’s a Door right next to us here, - can you feel it?”

I looked around and shrugged, still irritated.

“Close your eyes,.” The wizard commanded, “inhale slowly and be alert.”

I closed my eyes and took a breath. There was a nagging, tingling sensation at the top of my forehead. I nodded. “I feel... something.”

“Good la...work!”

I gave him points for listening.

“Ordinarily, I would take this route, but there are dangers about in the Borderlands, and I don’t want to expose our lady to any more threats than necessary.”

“Yeah, -I’ve had more than enough exposure myself.”

The wizard nodded. “Instead, we’ll have quite a long journey on foot.”

He tapped out his pipe and said, “ I need to think a bit by myself for a while, -why don’t you get more acquainted with Beth, learn about the Kingdom and so forth?”

Now I can see he was pushing me at her, but then I meekly headed back to the pool, ruminating like the smart cow I was.

I did a double take when I saw Beth.

She cleaned up well.

She was willowy tall with a full wide lipped smile.

Her long lashes framed exotic and inviting eyes that slanted just a touch upward. She was the kind of woman that other women love to hate at first glance.

Then they meet her and become as captivated as the men.

Barb would like her, I thought.

"Sir Knight," "you have me at an unfair advantage."

I wished. Woman have been a sometimes thing in my life over the last five years, and I never felt like I had any advantage at all.

What I did have, -no matter how good things went -was the feeling that the other shoe was going to drop on my head.

Godzilla would wear the shoe.

She added, "My gratitude is boundless towards you," and took a step closer.

"My father, the will be most pleased." Another step closer.

"And you are handsome." Another step closer.

I could feel her breath on my face as she definitely invaded my personal space.

"Uh.."

She tilted her head and half closed her eyes as her lips parted and she kissed me.

Her mouth opened and I could feel her tongue darting hot sweet in my mouth as shocks of electric current flooded me royally no less and my arms went around her and... there was just her body burning into mine and nothing else...

She pulled away, gasping and looked as startled as me.

I couldn't think of anything to say, except...

"Holy shit."

She looked at me quizzically, "You are offended?"

“NO! No. -the opposite of offense. Um...flattered, floored... that was....amazing, great...fantastic...wonderful... I just wasn't expecting...”

She actually blushed, averted her eyes and murmured, “Neither was I.”

Then she did a funny thing. She turned away from me and hung her head and I heard her softly say to herself, “No. No. I cannot be a part of this.”

Merl took that opportune moment to saunter in, looked at us and knew something was very off. He clapped his hands together, -put on a contrived cheery voice and said, “Well, it's time we were off, long journey ahead!”

I wasn't buying it.

“Beth”, I asked, ““You can't be a part of what?””

She looked at me contritely and the wizard scowled at her.

“Your HIGHNESS...”

She sneered back at him as if she just stepped in dog shit.

“Stop IT! He saved my LIFE! I'm not going to ...”

“We had AGREED...”

I looked hard at them both,. my blood turning icy. Then I focused on Beth, because I knew that Merl was not about to be up front. I cocked a thumb at the wizard, “He got you to make the moves on me.”

She nodded, guiltily.

"*Of course,*" I smacked my palm to my forehead. "*I should have known!*"

The whole scene started to become very unreal, or surreal. Anyway, I found a place to invest my apprehensions at last. Things had been going all too well for me.

“-Hey, I happen to know that if he ever existed at all, King Arthur is dead, and would be for almost a thousand years, damn it. I happen to know for a fact, a *Fact*, mind you, that he *never* had a daughter, and...”

"BUT I TOLD YOU...," interrupted Merl.

“SHUT the FUCK UP!” My fears needed venting. I couldn’t confess to what I was really terrified of, -that would have been too hard.

I had anchored this storm to harbor my anger for quite some time.

I pointed my finger at Merl. “*YOU!* YOU are a GODDAMN LIAR!” I took a breath. “Or some figment of my imagination. Or. I don’t know which is worse.”

“ The whole deal SUCKS...I AM probably in some God-awful car wreck somewhere.-With a brain concussion imagining all of this crap. There are no such things as wizards, or dragons, or magic. Period.”

"Lad, you must stop now. Immediately!" Merl ordered.

But I was on a roll.

"This is all *bullshit!*"

Note my high degree of esteem? By nature, I’m arrogant, knowing I am so much *MORE* screwed up than anyone else. And these guys wanted me to join their country club? Hah!

I crossed my arms and glowered. Then I sat down in exhaustion and muttered, “I’m not going *anywhere* with *anybody*.”

I closed my eyes for a brief moment. I wanted to get the hell out of there more than anything in my life. My mind began to play with everything being nothing, and I started to lose focus. The sky darkened to a somber gray. A chilling fog infused itself around me. Within seconds my vision was blanketed in mist and darkness. The smell of lightning began to permeate the air. I got up hastily, only to stumble around.

It was a perfect mistake. I opened the Door -again.

"*MERL!*" I cried out in panic, "*What's going on?*"

Merl's voice was a faint radio signal jammed by static.

"DON”T MOVE, LAD. I can't help you if ... Just try to..."

I tried to walk towards his voice.

There was another jolt. I felt myself being ripped into a million different directions, all at once.  
Colors shifted with the smell of burning metal.  
Time and space took a vacation.  
There was absolute silence.  
You could have heard a pin drop, but there wasn't even that to hear.  
And then I heard a rasping gasp. My own breath.  
The ground under my feet crackled like cellophane.  
Everything was a bit blurry and fuzzy.  
An off-white diffuse light illuminated his surroundings.  
Of Nothingness.  
I was back to where I started from, in what Merl called the Borderlands.  
Nowhere and Nowhen.  
You know that other shoe that I always expect to drop?  
Nothing quite like kicking yourself in the head.

\* \* \*

And what I didn't hear was□

*“Well, -don't just STAND there. Go after him!”*

*The old-young man turned to the girl and smiled sadly.*

*“I cannot. It's part of the knowledge he must earn by himself.”*

*She looked at him scornfully and spat out, “As I had the need to learn despair, being held captive by that monster?”*

*“That was an error in judgment on my part,” he apologized. “We passed too close to the castle, that's all.”*

*“The creature caught me unprepared and there was little I could do.” He shrugged, “And of course, You were rescued, were you not? -I had to pick up the novice for training and...”*

*“Spare me, Merlin, -please.” Her Royal Highness, The Princess Elizabeth of Avalon was not about to take any crap.*

*“If he’s to be any use to us in our battle, he’ll have to learn to trust himself.”*

*“Obviously, he’s learned whom NOT to trust. There wouldn’t be a battle at all if you and father...”*

*“ENOUGH!” The wizard roared. “I have my duties, -you have yours. You WERE NOT supposed to reveal...”*

*“He SAVED MY LIFE!”*

*“The lad is enamored, regardless... you were to encourage him, no more no less. You did your task well, milady.”*

*The princess glared at him and then became sadly subdued.*

*“He seems to be a good man. I just regret...”*

*“Give thanks we have a world in which you can feel regret. At time we must make sacrifices for the good of all.”*

*“Should we not all have the choice as to bearing that cross? To know the truth behind such offerings? Otherwise we are no better than what we fight.”*

*Merlin bristled, “You are being unfair.”*

*“AM I? You, wizard... have a heart of stone. Its touch does make us all cold and callow.”*

*“And you could have refused your task as well. Your father and betrothed would have understood. You blame me, when it was your own choice.”*

*“As it was my choice to change my mind.” With that, she turned her back on him and began walking.*

*The wizard felt the heaviness in his chest where he stored his pain and made another deposit. He bent down to the ground, scratched some mark and laid some stones. Just in case.*

*Then he followed her... from his usual distance.*

*The same span he always kept between himself and most mortals to protect them both. Not that it did much good.*

## Out of the Mire

It pretty rough when there is nobody around beside your self.  
It gets even worse when you are nowhere, with nothing to do.  
Add insult to injury when you can barely move. Or so it seems. That's how it appeared to me.  
Neither inside nor outside, here or there, in or out.  
Just ... stuck. In the Borderlands.

But I had just met a Dragon head-on and believe it or not, the Dragon flinched. On the other hand, I flinched big time when all my suspicions became reality. She scared the hell out of me. I use to feel much safer with nothing to lose. Merl screwed that up by giving me something to believe in. Despite all my protests about trusting him there was this part of me that hungered to have some kind of meaning again.

To belong.

If anyone you ever really cared about split for one reason or another, you'd learn to leave first, in self-defense. See? It's one hundred percent logical. There's always the fifty-fifty chance that we'll be rejected when we hit on somebody.

If we don't even try, then there's a hundred percent chance.

Me, -I guess back then I felt more secure with the sure thing.

Think that something is always better than nothing?

Think about it. If you're hungry, and the choice is between eating chicken with salmonella or nothing, -which are you gonna pick?

Of course I was paranoid anyway.

Even paranoids have enemies.

Except now I was getting the first hand on how empty Nothing really is.

So here I was. (-Actually, -here, there and everywhere and nowhere I guess.).

I tried taking a few steps and met the same opposition I experienced in my original feeble attempts to move.

It was like trying to wade through molasses that got thicker and thicker. At the point where I could push no more, all of the energy I expended thrust back against me, driving me to my initial starting point.

After several attempts to no avail, I slumped down exhausted.

I realized that I might be trapped in this Limbo forever.

Plus, Merl said that there were other dangers here.

Like what?

Maybe being bored to death.

\* \* \*

After God knows how long I became aware I was singing little songs and trying to remember all the movies I'd ever seen and all the books I ever read.

Every once in a while I'd get up and scream, running with all my might. You know, I faked like I had given up, -then charged full speed ahead, only to be pushed back again.

I got kinda crazy.

I took pieces of clothing off and threw them as far as I could.

They disappeared into the mist and I was left naked.

I couldn't tell the passage of time. I didn't get hungry or thirsty. Didn't have to piss or shit.

The benefits of Limbo.

So, -I got INSANE□. DERANGED□ DEMENTED.

None of this did me any good either. Hell, you would think being a one-time kind of shrink would give me some advantage. Well, first, let me remind you that most of us who enter the field of psychology are screwed up in the first place. It's a prerequisite.

Second, most of us get our clients and patients to work out *our* own shit. Those of us who work through these two little details actually get around to helping people.

I thought I was one of the elite who did.

I was wrong.

No need to go into embarrassing details here, but when there is no Outside to go towards, we go inside. I had a lot of baggage to sort through and went through it like that gorilla trying to screw up those well-made suitcases.

One thing I've learned is that you can keep puking long after you think you're done.

My anger flared into fury at all of those who had abandoned me. It was an extensive list. I began with accusations. I screamed at Barb for casting this spell around me, chaining my heart to memories that I could not touch or feel, -that only left me starving for something I could never taste again. I foamed at the mouth, berserk.

Then, I blamed my parents.

Why not? Everybody does, right?

When you are two feet tall you expect them to know everything and be capable of everything.

How disappointing to realize that they were merely human.

I could almost see them sitting in front of me.

Dad was glued to the TV. Mom was glued to a cocktail.

I was becoming unglued, period.

Where once I blamed myself completely, now I attacked them as the cause of all my crap. At that moment I truly believed that this was all their fault.

I began to rant and rave at them both as if they could, -for once, hear.

Well I did have plenty of time and space for this.

No one was going to guilt me or shame me, so I went for it.

About how my father couldn't say more than two words to me.

About how my mother couldn't shut up. About how my old man never once told me that he loved me, or praised me, or showed me stuff.

About how my mom used to make confusing and dark confessions in the blackness of night that

I was too young to understand.

And how they both drank themselves into stupors.

By the time I raged about how much I hated them both, my voice was hoarse from screaming. I run out of steam, limp and drenched in a cold sweat. My tirade didn't change anything outside of me. But inside, something had shifted...

It was if I had expelled a dark cloud obstructing my vision. Other memories began to gleam through. I remembered times when my father did show up. The dad who taught me how to swim, (okay, he did throw me into the middle of the pool and I almost drowned but... )

I remembered my mother's bright laughter at a picnic. All of us sharing a joke at the dinner table. My father had worked damn hard to support the family. My mother had given up her career to be with the man she loved.

Taking care of seven kids could drive anyone to drink. Hell, I had no kids and drove myself to the bar whenever I felt like it.

I began to tell the ghosts of my folks what I loved about them.

Deams get buried by anger and pain.

Of course I couldn't see what could be. I was too upset from constantly looking at what had been. Try driving forward using the rear view mirror. Won't get too far.

You can waste a lot of time thinking about the time you wasted. All of us know in our heads that sometimes, we'll be alone and lost. When you begin to understand this with your heart, the knowing takes a different voice.

The voice of the heart always calls louder than the voice of reason

My tears had been held back by the dam I built around my pain. The damn finally crumbled. The roar of the pain drowned me...

I remembered the time when Shawn was conceived. How we planned bringing that little soul in the world, and how we were that night. It was all about making love and making this part of both of us together that would live on□

I remembered his birth. I remembered their deaths.

Now the pain came, - a river of sadness with floodgates cracked wide.

My crying was not a pretty picture.

It was a gasping and racking sadness, the kind that leaves a bystander breathless and shaken.

Usual attempts to comfort those in such pain are often selfish gestures.

We get afraid that we'll be swept away in their grief, or their pain will torch our own. So, we make up lies about things getting better, or how it isn't all that bad.

But sometimes it is that bad, and sometimes you've lost something that's never going to come back again.

Ever.

I needed to feel this. I hated to feel this.

After minutes, or days, or months (who could tell in this place?), my heart was wrung out, my mind hanging on the clothesline. I went over all of my losses and mistakes. I thought about the raw deals and lousy hands and the stinking luck. I came to see my screw-ups in another kind of light. How you played your cards mattered just as much as the hand you were dealt. You weren't to blame if nobody taught you to play well and it wasn't anyone's fault if you got a lousy hand. Fate was the hand you were dealt; destiny was how you played it.

I abandoned myself.

I gave myself up after the murders. I made my needs unimportant, my desires inconsequential, my preferences trivial. I didn't really need anyone else to reject me, -I was doing a fine job on my own.

Why even blame myself now?

Blaming didn't change what happened. It just kept me stuck in my past, and prevented me from moving into a future.

Maybe, I thought, maybe we could all blame that one little amoeba thing that should have squiggled to the left instead of the right a billion years ago.

I laughed out loud to myself. It was a crazy laugh. But then I couldn't stop.

It was all so hysterical.

After that, I looked around myself, seeing the Nothing of the Borderlands.

I closed my eyes, and a Thought occurred.

How can you walk *away* from anywhere unless you're walking *towards* somewhere else?

Think on it. If you have this crappy furniture that muddles up your living room, you can't move the good stuff in until it's gone.

Since my mind was uncluttered by visions of the past, and regrets, and blame or fault, I had room in there for a change.

Room to move.

If seeing is believing, -then why couldn't the opposite also be just as true?

Why couldn't believing be seeing? There was Nothing here to view.

Except when I shut my eyes.

Then I could imagine a place to move towards.

I closed them and another Door opened.

I had nothing to lose, and man, I wanted to lose that nothing pretty damn fast. So, I grabbed on to the first images that came up, -Merl and Beth as I last saw them. I began to imagine the pool, and rocks, the smell of water. The sounds of the wind in the trees. The color of the sky. The feel of solid ground beneath me.

With eyes shut tight in desperation, I blindly got to my feet.

I walked slowly and steadily through the dreamy mists, until I stumbled over my discarded clothes.

I put them on, closed my eyes and Imagined.

There was no resistance at all.