

# *The Victors*

by **J.D. Cook**

© 2008 Jeremiah Dylan Cook

~ 1 ~

Victor moved slowly down the old, cobblestone Philadelphia Street as his steps reverberated in the morning silence. He marveled at how desolate the area was; he knew would become much more crowded in a mere few hours, once the shoppers and tourists arrived. Victor liked the city like this, before it became engorged with people. It almost made it worth waking up so early on a Saturday.

He reached *Mama Leone's Pizzeria & Italian Ristorante* and examined the new graffiti on the shutter. One particularly detailed tagger had sprayed the old communist image of the hammer and sickle, which both amused and angered him. What was both amusing and infuriating was the fact that someone would have taken the time and painted with such detail, this ridiculous artifact of oppression on the very business which, to Victor, epitomized what was best about the free market system. *Mama Leone's* was actually owned and operated by a 23-year-old Australian immigrant named Laura Baley, who emigrated to the US when she was 13, never having even tasted Italian cuisine.

After working for five years in her father's plumbing business in high school while simultaneously ranking in the top 10 of her high school class, Laura enrolled in the Fox School of Business at Temple University. As a freshman, she began meticulously planning for an entrepreneurial endeavor. This led her to an old run down

pizzeria in the South Street district. She began as a cashier and was promoted to night and weekend manager within a month. In a little over a year, she had convinced, Anthony Pagetti, the shop owner, to lease the business to her, so that it could be run her way. She dropped out of Temple to work the shop full time, which in many cases meant 16 hour days, 7 days a week. Within a year, profits had increased 250%, and when Pagetti got into a financial pickle with some fellows from the old neighborhood, Laura purchased the business outright for a “song” and renamed it *Mama Leone’s* after a line in an actual song by Billy Joel.

“Looks like another glorious day in paradise,” mumbled Victor to himself as he pulled the shop’s keys from the shutter lock and inserted the second key on the ring into the pizza shop door. He was always awed by the fact that, even before 7 am, the shop still smelled like fresh pizza, which was not a pleasant smell to him. It was usually around this time that Victor would begin questioning what he was doing here, having graduated magna cum laude from Temple some 10 months before with dual degrees in Business Administration and American History, along with a minor in Economic Geography. His Uncle Leonard, the man who raised him since he was nine, had been trying to get him to either pursue a graduate degree or find suitable employment in New York or Washington, DC. But Victor was content to stay in Philly while he figures out his next big life move. Although vastly under-employed, he greatly admires his boss who he had first met when they were freshmen 5 years ago. He was amazed at how Laura had perfectly telegraphed what she would do for a living way back then and had fulfilled her plan nearly to a “T”. He felt that this was about the most

honest job he has ever had, because it is the only one he can remember where he actually feels like his boss is better at the job than he is himself, and doesn't just order gratuitous directives to establish submission. In addition to being a great boss, he has come to consider Laura a great friend and, perhaps, more. When she told him something (whether business related or personal), he would take it in good faith and could not suspect the least bit of malice in her intentions. So he stayed, working the pizza shop 6 or 7 days a week. He felt that he contributed much being highly educated, competent, and trustworthy, and probably saved the business thousands of dollars doing his job with the efficiency of 2 or 3 of your average, working class laborers that Laura might have otherwise needed to hire were he not here. He felt in no way compelled to press for extra wages as he honored to putting his efforts towards this small business, entrepreneurial "cause".

Victor began to take all the chairs off the tables they were stacked on the night before, when he himself mopped up the floor. He then grabbed the papers from the sidewalk outside and placed them in the reading rack. He knew that the first customers would be some of the elderly gentlemen from the neighbor who would be here for coffee and cannolis in about 15 minutes.

Laura arrived about 5 minutes later. She had her hair pulled back in such a way that it looked like she hadn't spent more than a minute on it before running out of the house. Her face, however, seemed to have a distinct glow about it that Victor quickly surmised was not very unpleasant to look at – in fact, it was absolutely beautiful.

“Long night?” Victor asked with a dose of sarcasm.

“Good night.” Laura replied softly as the slightest smile crept across her face, enhancing the glow even further. Victor braced for the sharp ratiocination of Laura getting right to business of setting the day’s agenda in her firm, imperative voice, as would be her practice first thing most mornings. But mercifully, that blow did not come this morning as she continued in her soft, deliberate story-telling mode that was so incredibly appealing at this moment.

“We went up to the lake. It was a calm, warm night with full moon reflecting everything in the perfectly still water....” Laura alternated between looking downward at nothing in particular and locking eyes with Victor - all the long maintaining her subtle, beautiful smile. Each time they locked eyes, Victor felt a surge of fire shoot through his veins and he soon realized that he was no longer hearing, let alone comprehending any of her words. He was completely enchanted by the moment. Then, like a sudden icy glass of reality being splashed in his face, Laura’s first line echoed in his brain: “we went up to the lake”. We? What else could this mean? That smile was for some other guy! And like a fool, Victor had fallen under its spell without comprehending the significance of that first, awful word. We!

“We!?” Victor suddenly and inadvertently shouted out as Laura paused her story and looked at him quizzically. He would have given anything for her to pretend that she didn’t hear him and continue her tale. But Laura was not one for practicing faux social graces in the name of politeness, nor was she particularly troubled by uncomfortable silences. It was all part of her straight-forward,

right-down-to-business demeanor that Victor usually appreciated as a refreshing breath of fresh air. So he knew that she would wait until he came out with something.

“Ah... wha..., I mean...,” Victor started, stuttering like a fool. He then took a deep breath and tried to force the words out coherently; “You, ah, said ‘we went to the lake’. Did you mean, you and a signif..., I mean did you go there with yer bah...”

“Boyfriend? Is that what you’re asking me, Victor?” she asked, no longer using the soft, storytelling voice. Victor felt panicked as he panned his mind from side to side, trying to conjure up the appropriate words that could get him out of this conversation gracefully. Before he could speak, however, he was rescued by the most unexpected, loud cackle as Laura burst into laughter.

“No, no – no!” she exclaimed, raising both her palms vertically at chest level to emphasize that emphatic last “no.” “I haven’t got a boyfriend, Victor”, she declared as if the very premise was absurd.

But soon the slight smile crept back across her face and she once again began to speak in that enchanting, soft voice; “I just went up to the lake with some old friends and we just had a very, wonderful time.”

By this point Victor wasn’t sure if he was ready to laugh or cry. It kind of felt like he was about to do both. “That’s really good.” he said so softly that it could have been considered a whisper. He was at once thrilled by how this woman made him feel and ashamed by how foolish and juvenile he may have portrayed himself. And then there was that last revelation – she doesn’t have a boyfriend! He

wanted to run outside and scream this fact at the top of his lungs in pure, euphoric glee. Finally, he was able to muster up the strength to compose himself for just a few more seconds while he launched his escape plan.

“I think I’ll get started on the dough.” he said pointing back towards the back room with his thumb.

“Are you sure? Usually on Saturdays you like to talk politics with the old men.”

“Yeah, well – not today. I think I’ll get that dough out of the way.” Victor turned and walked into the back room. As he pulled down a 50 lb. bag of flour, he vowed to himself to stick to business for the rest of the day to try to diffuse any possible situation before he’d had the chance to properly strategize how he would proceed. This was completely foreign territory for him as he’s never felt a romantic feeling for a boss before. This was definitely strange and he was obviously not on his “A” game so he would now take a personal vow of silence and speak only when spoken to. It took but five seconds until he was, in fact, spoken to.

“So, have you ever been up to the lake?” Laura asked in a half-yell from the front of the store.

“Um, yes Laura. I’ve actually been to the lake several times.” Victor responded. Suddenly, like the Millennium Falcon hitting hyperspace, Victor’s mind was whisked back to THAT day.

~ 2 ~

**V**ictor had just graduated from Temple when he first met

Cassandra. It was an unseasonably warm Sunday afternoon in May and his friend Matthew had invited him to a cookout at a cottage up on the lake. The two slowly drove down a long dirt path, drinking the first of the ice cold brews and debating who had a better draft back in April – Matthew’s Eagles or Victor’s Giants. After what seemed like ten miles of extremely bumpy road through the newly-foliaged woods, Matthew’s car made a turn and a large, rustic house surrounded by a sizeable clearing appeared in front of them. Cars filled the driveway, and people filled the lawn. As Victor stepped out of the car he was hit with the unmistakable aromas of freshly cut grass, grilled meat, and stale beer. Ah – summertime!

“Good! There’s a diving board on the dock. Let’s hit the water right away! It’s got to be 90 degrees out here!” exclaimed Matthew grabbing his towel and another beer from the well-stocked cooler in the back of the car.

“Are you kidding me, Matt? That lake water is probably 50 degrees this time of year!” replied Victor.

“Hey, the cooler the better – I am sweatin’ to death!” exclaimed Matthew, dismissively. Matthew threw his towel aside and ran out to

the dock and onto the diving board, and leapt into the water in a clunky, sideways half-dive.

Victor could tell by the muffled splash that the water was, in fact, very dense and very cold. It could not have felt good to dive into. Sure enough, this theory was confirmed about three seconds later.

“Oh! Shhhh@#!” screamed Matthew, drawing the attention of most of the party goers. “Victor! Help me out of here! This f@#%’n water is freezin’!” he cried in a near panic as he realized the only way out was to swim to a ladder on the next dock, about 40 or so yards down the shore.

“No way, man - you dug your own grave here”, replied Victor, chuckling.

“Ah, come on, man...” pleaded Matthew “...this is really starting to burn! I’m gonna get hypothermia! Frost bite! Gangrene!” With that last, absurd term, Victor’s chuckle morphed into a fully-hysterical belly laugh which nearly made him double over. “Ya still sweatin’ to death, Matt?” he bellowed in a satirical *you-sure-got-what-you-deserved* manner.

“Just give me your hand and help pull me out, Vic!” Matt’s voice was now trembling with just a pinch of panic.

“Yeah, right – I extend my hand and you pull me in, no thanks.”

“You know, that’s not very compassionate”, came a sudden, slightly condescending female voice from behind the dock. Startled, Victor turned to witness a female clad in an extra-large hat, designer sunglasses, and a well fitted beach robe from shoulders to ankles.

She was stretched out on a lounge chair on the shore right next to the dock and was reading a book by *Noam Chomsky*, from which she had yet to avert her eyes. Taken aback, Victor stood silent for a moment.

“I think that’s the problem with this world”, she continued. “People just won’t help each other when they’re down and out”, she preached.

Slightly embarrassed by his behavior, Victor decided that he would help pull Matthew out of the water. But before he could move into action, the woman let out an over-exaggerated sigh and began rising from her lounge chair. As she did, her beach robe smoothly peeled off, revealing her two-piece bikini that snugly fastened to her curvy figure. She forcefully laid the *Chomsky* book page down onto the beach robe and then cavalierly tossed her oversized hat on top of that. She marched in annoyed determination up to the dock and past Victor. As she did, Victor was mesmerized by the rhythmic way her freshly-revealed black hair bounced in perfect harmony with other, select endowments of her physique, all accented by the distinct snapping of her flip-flops.

Without breaking stride, she perfectly measured her steps to end right at the end of the dock closest to where Matthew was frantically splashing about. She squatted and extended her right arm in one perfect motion and without any apparent concern for not being strong enough to pull him up. Matthew awkwardly grabbed her extended arm and struggled for a few moments to leverage himself enough to climb onto the dock, grunting and groaning all the while. Once he was squarely on the deck, panting for breath and on all

fours, she smoothly stood up erect, turned and strode back in the same rhythmic pace.

“Thank you”, Matthew spoke weakly, still not quite on his feet.

“You’re welcome.” she replied, as she strode past the closest proximity to Victor while not acknowledging him in any way. She continued back to her lounge chair and, in near inverse order she put her hat back on, picked up the *Chomsky* book, slipped the beach robe back on, and sat stretched back into position. Her only deviation in this entire sequence was the three or so seconds that she took to dry off her right arm. Victor could not help but stare at her during this entire sequence to which Matthew loudly protested his friend’s apparent unconcern for his plight.

“Let’s go inside”, Matthew, who was now embarrassed by his dive and subsequent panic, said more as a command than a suggestion. He got to his feet and quickly grabbed his towel and made a beeline for the house. Victor awkwardly followed, slowly turning to glimpse at the woman covertly and strategically along the way. She never diverted her eyes from the book.

He entered the house and migrated from room to room, through various small groups of unfamiliar people that were doing various things that ranged from frivolous drinking games to “serious” discussions on business, philosophy and politics. After several minutes, he finally located Matthew who had found some people that he apparently knew and was making serious preparations for heavy drinking as they had laid out the fifth of *Old Grandad* and

shot glasses and had placed themselves in close proximity to the beer tap.

“C’mon, Vic. Have a shot with us”, Matthew said, motioning to the other guys who each looked already intoxicated.

“Nah – you know what that stuff does to me.” Victor replied.

“Ah – come on! I’ve just been through a traumatic experience! Can’t you have one shot with me? It’s not like you need to drive – I’m driving.”

“That really doesn’t make me feel any better about the situation.” Victor retorted as Matthew frowned at the blatant absurdity of his last statement. “I’m going to talk to some guy about graphical design for the site. You gonna be here?”

“Listen to this guy.” Matthew said sarcastically to his drunken friends, “We’re at a party and he’s worried about graphical designing! Victor, it is a par-tay. Have a drink, man.”

“You gonna be here?” Victor asked, undeterred.

“Yes, yes”, Matthew said annoyed. “I will not desert you at the damn lake. Go talk about your graphical design-ating” Victor stared at Matthew for a few seconds but then slowly turned to go. Although he did not appreciate that last comment, he was not going to push the confrontation any further, being that he was at a distinct disadvantage. Not only was he at Matthew’s mercy for a ride home, but he knew exactly no one at this party. Further this was more the type of crowd that Matthew, who comes from much more affluence and inter-connected social circles than Victor, was used to. Of

course, Victor had no intention of talking to anyone about graphics design unless, by some strange cosmic coincidence, that happened to be her vocation.

As Victor slowly moseyed onto the houses back deck in order to stake out his lounging, book-reading, female prey, he began getting mentally prepared for the challenge by psyching himself up:

“She is a complete bitch. She hates me and she doesn’t even know me yet. The situation looks helpless. I love it! I am the comeback kid! I am John Elway and it is the fourth quarter!”

Suddenly, his stream of thought was disrupted by panic as he glanced and noticed that she had left her position and was walking in her rhythmic way, lounge chair and beach bag in hand, towards the parked cars up by the dirt road.

Instinctively, Victor began running towards the woman as his mind raced in further than his feet. What exactly would he say to her when he did finally catch up? No time for thoughtful, measured strategy – this was fast-paced, improvised, “Hail-Mary” time.

“He’s alright,” Victor half-yelled, followed by a couple of deep, panting breaths that he immediately regretted displaying. He was, of course referring to Matthew but immediately worried that she would not know what the hell he was talking about.

“I really wasn’t worried,” the woman said coyly, not seeming to be taken aback in any way by Victor’s sudden approach. “Jumping into cold water is hardly life-threatening, even for someone as stupid as Matthew”

Now, in fact, Victor was the one who was taken aback. “You, ah, know Matt?”

“Of course, I know everyone in that house”; she replied sternly, “Why do you think I was out here alone?” Before Victor could contemplate the full meaning of this last statement, she threw curveball; “Are you really going to let me carry all this?”

“Well, uh, of course not, I mean...I’m sorry, I didn’t get your...”

“Cassandra Marie Wellingham. Second cousin to Walter Winsley Wellingham, owner of this estate and several others throughout the tri-state area. You didn’t get an opportunity to say hello to “Ole W Cubed” when you were inside did you, Mr. – Stark, is it?”

“Ah, yes. Victor. Victor Stark is correct.” He decided to stop talking immediately and grabbed the lounge chair from Cassandra. At this, she gave him a quick glance but was soon back in full stride, observing the silent moment herself. Victor wondered how she knew his name but was sure asking would result in a terse explanation that would probably make him feel even more stupid than he already did. So he decided to be a gentleman, walk her to her car, politely say goodbye, and go back to the party to lick his wounds.

But once they got to her vehicle and packed her stuff, Cassandra once again threw a curveball at Victor.

“I would like to walk. Will you walk with me?” she asked softly, removing her sunglasses for the first time all day, which revealed her stunning, deep blue eyes.

“Uh, yeah, sure.” Victor replied, unsure as to what exactly he was consenting.

“It’s a pretty big estate, covers much of the southern shore. There are a lot of interesting things to see.” she replied, as if reading his mind. Further, her tone and mannerisms had taken a pleasant turn towards the agreeable and the polite.

It was an interesting hike, with various paths that snaked along fringes of the lake on its shallow, southern side where there was no fishing or boating activity. Victor caught himself wondering a few times why such an attractive and petite young woman would want to go here with an unknown “stranger” who she had just met. But he soon determined that this was possibly the most confident person he had ever met which, at this point, made her all the more attractive.

Around sunset, they sat on a large rock by a virgin lagoon and talked about various sectors of their lives. The hot day had broken into a cool, pleasant evening and Cassandra, still clad in her summer attire, got a sudden shiver – her first hint of vulnerability. Without hesitation, Victor took off his shirt and gave it to Cassandra, which draped down to her knees. As the two walked hand-in-hand back towards the party, Victor decided that this was the finest moment of his young life.

When they got back to the house, Victor was a bit shocked that the party was long over and all, including his ride home, had left. “Why didn’t Matt call him on his cell?” he questioned to himself.

“Ah, listen, Cassandra, you wouldn’t happen to be heading towards...”

“Downtown?” she finished.

“Ah, yeah that’s right”, Victor said excitedly.

“No. Nowhere near there.” She said firmly, quickly bursting Victor’s bubble. She couldn’t help but let him stew in embarrassment a few more seconds before she burst into sudden, frantic laughter. “Where do you live? Third Street – that old chocolate factory that overlooks the Ben Franklin bridge?” she asked.

“Yes...how?” he stopped mid question as he had not ceased to be amazed by her inside knowledge on him – not that it bothered him in the slightest.

“I’ve heard those lofts up there are pretty cool. I’ll bring you to the city but you have got to promise to invite me up so I can see one of them.”

At this, Victor just smiled. This was an excellent day indeed.

~ 3 ~

“So that website must be bringing in some substantial revenue?”

Victor stood dazed for a moment over the dough machine. He heard the question and comprehended it alright. But he could not, for the life of him, recall the context in which it was asked. He had been daydreaming about that day in May and had somehow lost track of his conversation with Laura. He knew ignoring her was futile, he decided his best strategy was to probe right back and try to fill in the blanks that way.

“You mean, *Erin-Go-Green*?” he asked.

“Of course, you don’t run any others, do you?”

“No” he said definitively. “And to answer your previous question, I’d have to say again, no. I don’t make any money from *Erin-Go-Green.com*.”

“Any?” she asked bewildered. She had thought that he was probably making as much, if not more than she was paying him for this job. She checked out the site frequently and found it very professional. Although she disagreed with much of its central thesis, she was impressed by how it carefully tried to present itself through mature and rational debate – a welcome departure from some of the more radical websites she had researched. For these reasons, she was sure that it would – if it hadn’t already – become very successful and

Victor would ultimately be drawn to devoting more and more of his time towards it.

“I thought you said that you pay your staff writers, and I have seen that you do not lack for advertising.” she continued.

“I do pay the writers well – I found that I have fewer headaches and get better content. I’ve tried to maintain the integrity of the site by either reinvesting or donating any and all profits.” he rationalized.

“I don’t know if that’s very wise”, Laura said shaking her head.

“You should increase your own viability by building capital and...” she stopped as she suddenly realized that she was starting to sound like a text book and quickly turned to a more pragmatic argument; “What about your loft? How in the world is that affordable working here?”

“I got a pretty good deal on that”, Victor said smiling ever so slightly.

“A good deal?” she asked, “Well, a good deal brings you down to – what eleven, twelve hundred a month?”

“How about zero? Nothing. Nada. Not a red cent.” Victor grinned.

“That’s a pretty good deal, isn’t it?”

“How in the world did you swing that?” she questioned, almost offended as if he was trying to pull something over on her while she was being totally serious.

“You see, my Uncle Leonard worked for Chesterford Chocolates way back in the late 70’s, into the early 80’s – he was one of the few

employees left at the time the company decided to close up shop and relocate to Tennessee. Well, all hell broke loose! First, the city of Philadelphia sued because Chesterford had signed a 99 year lease way back in 1912. This was something, apparently, that the company's current executives had no idea about when they decided to relocate. Meanwhile, there was a simultaneous action by the International Brotherhood of Chocolate Churners, which had a detailed contract at the time. It was a PR nightmare for Chesterford! Well, my uncle, along with a few other guys from the plant, came up with an ingenious solution in which they – the workers - would fulfill the Chesterford lease as well as work to drop the Brotherhood lawsuit in return for something like a five year severance package. It was an absurd amount of money plus they had full use of the building, which they eventually converted into what is today is some of the hippest and hottest residential real estate in downtown Philly.”

“And you got one of those lofts for free?” asked Laura.

“Yes. It was a graduation gift from my uncle lat year. I can stay in it or lease it out, if I choose, up until December 2011, when the 99 year lease expires.”

“Must be quite an uncle.” She replied, still contemplating the incredible fortune that befell this Chesterford group.

“He is.” Victor replied firmly. “He raised me, you know.”

“I did not. I don't think we've ever discussed your family.”

“I was an only child.” Victor started slowly. “I grew up in Hazleton, a coal mining town about a hundred mile north of here. Basically,

my entire extended family consisted of four adults and myself. There was my mother and father with my mother having one sister, my Aunt Amy, who had no children of her own, and my father having one brother, my Uncle Leonard. Uncle Leonard was married briefly but I don't really recall much about his wife and he never spoke of her. She left him about a year or so before that accident."

"Accident?" Laura asked with obvious concern in her voice. Victor got a slight lump in his throat as a sharp emotional pain crossed his heart for a few fleeting seconds. He worked hard to maintain his composure before slowly continuing.

"They were killed in an accident up in Binghamton, NY when I was nine. My father, Bernard Stark, was only 28, my mother, Sarah, was 30." Victor's voice quivered as he spoke his mother's name. He took a swig of his ever-present bottled water, took a deep breath and then continued.

"My Aunt Amy originally sued for custody of me and, at first I really didn't mind. Uncle Leonard was a bit of a drinker in those days and never seemed motivated to do anything. As a kid, not being bored is a very important thing. But then something sparked in my uncle – he dried up, quit smoking, and started to become very active in my life. But for some reason my Aunt became very belligerent towards Uncle Leonard. It seemed sudden but apparently there had always been some hostility there and as a kid I never really understood why. Anyway, she tried to stop him from seeing me for a while, disregarding my strong objections. Suddenly, I was trapped in a very hostile situation that I just did not understand." Victor pauses

and takes several seconds to for his next words. “I never felt so isolated in my entire life.”

“Wow, that’s a real shame, Victor.” Laura chimed in with sincere empathy.

“Yes, but that all ended one day.” He continued with much more positive enthusiasm. “Out of the blue, Uncle Leonard showed up at the door one day in a very good mood. He told me to pack go and pack my things and that I would be living with him. I was absolutely euphoric. For many years I ranked that as my greatest day ever.” Victor nodded to frame the point before continuing. “Anyway, unlike all the previous visits where Aunt Amy argued with him constantly, this time she just stood silently in the kitchen, drawing on here cigarette and staring into space. She never said another word to me that day or any day since. I never understood why and probably never will. She died a few years ago.”

“And you and your uncle, you’re good mates?” Being the consummate professional, Laura usually masked her Australian heritage. Victor found it quite endearing when she forgot herself and let some of her native tongue slip by.

“Yes, we’re good mates.” Victor said slyly. “He’s a real history buff, which is a big reason why I’ve become one myself. He has brought me to every historical monument within a 100 mile radius - maybe 200 – and, trust me; there are a lot of those in this part of the country. We would take day trips fifteen or twenty times a year. Bunker Hill, West Point, Valley Forge, Gettysburg, Manassas – you name it, we’ve gone there. And Philly? We’ve must have come

down here a hundred times over the years. It was always a thrill for me, coming down here. No other city presents you with the same mix of history, food, and nightlife, that's why I ultimately decided to go to school here. I thoroughly enjoyed each of those trips”

Victor's smile turned to a slight frown. “I never turned him down to go anywhere until just last month when he wanted to bring me out to Fort Knox. Kentucky? I just had no desire to go to Kentucky.

Besides, Cassandra, I knew she would give me static so I...I was kinda cocky and told him that, y'know, I've grown past these little national monuments and maybe he should really consider bringing me someplace cool, y'know, international – like the pyramids or something. I mean, it's not like he can't afford it these days. But, I could tell he was a little insulted and really disappointed.”

At this, Victor got silent and Laura paused the conversation as well, giving the deep revelations of his life some space for contemplation. But after a minute or two, her curiosity got the better of her.

“How exactly did your uncle gain custody of you?” she asked.

“Well, let's just say that he had something on her that she just couldn't let into the public record. So she withdrew her custody petition.”

“What was so damaging?”

The conversation is abruptly interrupted by a customer that had wandered in silently without either of them noticing.

“Excuse me.” said the middle aged man.

“How may I help you sir?” asked Victor, snapping to his professional mannerism.

“I would like a slice of broccoli and tomato pizza with some mayonnaise added to the top.” Victor couldn’t help, but let out the slightest giggle at the strange order. “Is there something funny about my order, young sir,” asked the man in a down-right snotty tone.

“No sir,” said Victor turning around. He then added in a sarcastic whisper to Laura; “if you came from Holland.”

“I didn’t catch that.” said the customer, who must have had remarkable hearing.

“I didn’t say anything,” lied Victor.

“I know I heard something!” the customer insisted. “You know, I don’t think I want that pizza any more. I’ve found out enough about this place.”

“Well then, fine. Why don’t you just take your business elsewhere?” yelled Victor in a sudden fit of rage as the man left the restaurant. “What a freak!”

“Victor!” retorted Laura in a scolding way. “We do not speak to customers that way! Any customer!”

“Ah, c’mon Laura, he’s a freak. Who the hell orders mayo on pizza?”

“Well, obviously he does. And we take the extra minute and carefully spread about 5 cents worth of mayo on his slice, charge him the extra 75 cents for specialty pizza, and do it all with a smile. He leaves feeling not like a freak but a like customer who is highly valued by *Mama Leone’s* and, for our trouble; we get an extra 40% markup on the product.” She put Victor in check mate and he suddenly felt embarrassed by his lack of professionalism.

The two remained quite quiet for the rest of the day until just before closing. Victor was hurrying to finish his cleanup duties when he suddenly took a header right onto the floor. He had slipped on a patch of some Mayo and the pair had a good laugh at the irony of it all.

~ 4 ~

About 5:00 Victor and Laura left *Mama Leone's* in the hands of Stan, the night and weekend man. As had become customary, together until they reached Laura's apartment, which was only about five blocks away and in the same general direction as Victor's Chestorford lofts.

As they walked quietly for a moment, he turned and caught a glimpse of her in the afternoon sun. Much the same beauty as he witnessed this morning but yet with a kind of distinction all of its own. It had been a unique, emotional, and exhausting day but he really felt that a quantum leap had been taken in their relationship, if they even really had a relationship before. In any case, he was excited about the prospects of moving it forward.

He pulled out his cell phone and turned it on to check for messages. He had gotten into the habit of turning it off at work because he did so much work involving both hands that answering the phone was just a nuisance. There were three messages in his voice mail; two from Cassandra (about half as many as usual) and another from his uncle. "Ah sh\*t!" he thought to himself, remembering that his uncle had also called him on Thursday and he never got back to him. He began plotting what he would do to make up for his recent neglectful attitude towards the man who stepped in and raised him.

The pair turned the corner onto Laura's block and she broke the silence. "Hey, Sandy's here! Victor, come over and say hello to my mate, Sandy."

Victor followed her up the steps of her tenement to the landing in front of a large red door. There leaned a firmly built, tall woman of about 28 or 29 with short blond hair. She remained much more stoic at the greeting than Laura. "Hello. I am Laura's, ah friend, Sandy. You must be the bus boy." She said tersely, in what Victor hoped was a jocular manner, although he wasn't really sure.

"He's much more than a bus boy." Laura replied while simultaneously, softly placing her hand on his forearm. "He's my life saver when it comes to that restaurant. I don't know what I'd do without him" With these kind words and physical gesture, Victor felt a jolt of warm passion shoot through his veins. The near-euphoric sensation was impossible mask as he grinned wildly and began to blush. The moment was suddenly interrupted, however, by the ringing of his cell phone.

"Hello." He answered.

"Where the hell have you been?" yelled Cassandra without saying hello. "Why haven't you returned my phone calls?" Fearful that she would be overheard, he quickly walked back down the steps and cupped the phone to the best of his ability.

"Sorry baby, I had a busy day at work." He replied at a near whispered.

“Well that’s not very considerate of my feelings. You have got to learn that...” As Cassandra’s voice merged into background noise, Victor turned slowly to glimpse at Laura and Sandy to see whether or not they were watching him be berated. They were not. Victor saw that the pleasant glow appeared once again on Laura’s face as she spoke with her friend. In fact it was more vivid than ever. He also saw the ever-so-slight hint of a smile come over Sandy’s face for a fleeting moment. “She’s not bad looking.” He thought. “Perhaps we can set her up with Matt once Laura and I get established. That’s right. Laura is going to be my girlfriend” Wow – Laura and girlfriend. Something about those two words together just seemed so...

“...dinner? Maginot’s?” Victor froze for a moment as he was brought back down to earth and into the phone conversation. “Victor! Are you listening to a word I’m saying?” Cassandra cried.

“Sure, sweetheart sure, I’m listening. Dinner at Maginot’s, right. But do you really want to go there again? I was actually thinking that you can come over and I can make us some dinner. Then we can kick back and watch a Tarantino flick and...”

Cassandra burst into condescending laughter on the other line. “No. How about we go to Maginot’s?” She said sarcastically, stretching every syllable for effect. “It’s Saturday and I don’t want to sit at home like some middle-aged geezer. Get ready and I will pick you up out front in an hour. One hour.” With that the phone clicked in a terribly rude act that was, nevertheless, much to Victor’s relieve.

Cassandra was a total knockout in physical terms, but what she brought in desire was counter-balanced by her lack of conversation skills and empathy towards him. Further, she had a way of manipulating him into going along with whatever plans she current had. He never felt free to think around her and he started to wonder if he was really in love with her or just in love the memory of the first, fantastic day when they first met by the lake. It had been ten solid months since that warm day in May, which he had ranked as his greatest day ever – even greater than the day his uncle “liberated” him from Aunt Amy. “Was it really that great of a day?”

Suddenly his thoughts came back to the events of today with Laura and he inevitably started to compare this one with that one with Cassandra. “Wasn’t today as good as or better than that day?” he wondered. “Can’t romance be just as potent during a day of hard labor at a pizza shop as it is during a romantic sunset by the lake?”

He tried to conjure up the pleasant thought he was having before being interrupted by Cassandra’s phone call. “Ah, yes – Laura, girlfriend.” He remembered. Victor once again entered his “internal strategy mode” on how he would make this arrangement become a reality. “It certainly could not happen tonight, but it will happen soon.” He thought.

Still holding the phone to his ear, he slowly turned his head to get one final glimpse of this Australian beauty before he would politely say good night and get ready for what was sure to be another bland date with Cassandra. “Laura, girlfriend.” The words kept repeating in his head with mechanical-like precision.

As he squinted upwards in the afternoon sun to see that still present, beautiful smile on her face he noticed an ever-so-subtle movement which lasted an ever-so-fleeting moment. Laura gently grazed the back oh her right hand along the back of Sandy's right thigh. Suddenly those words came back for one final iteration, but this time in a whole new context; "Laura, girlfriend."

Actually, all romance does take place at the lake.

## ~ 5 ~

**D**inner at Maginot's was typically bland – ok, but unremarkable food with excruciatingly slow service in an absurdly overcrowded scene. Victor had long since given up the fight to try to convince Cassandra to try someplace else on a Saturday night so for, perhaps, the ninth or tenth consecutive Saturday, here they were.

What was kind of weird was the fact that this was the traditional hangout for Victor and his friends, ever since college. Cassandra claimed that she had never even heard of this place until he brought her here on their first “official” date. Since then he has slowly grown to loathe this place as she has appeared to grow ever-more fonder. It just seemed to Victor like he never gets out of Maginot's with a good time, only a thin wallet and tonight would be exceptionally horrid.

After the mandatory 20-minute trip to the ladies room and the obligatory bitching about Jessica, her orange-skinned, bleach blonde, anorexic manager at tanning salon, Cassandra stealthily segued into pitching her latest article idea for *Erin-Go-Green.com*.

During their sophomore year at Temple, Victor was convinced by Matthew to help him launch a website dedicated to environment. Matthew was motivated at the time by his zeal to impress a girl (named Erin, of course) who once came to Sociology class clad in a very tight fitting halter top that read “Don't be mean..., go green!”.

Soon it was obvious that Erin had no interest in Matthew and, hence Matthew lost interest in the website. Victor, however, persisted and took the reigns independently as sole editor-in-chief. Being very diligent on providing the most useful, persuasive (but not extremist) information, *Erin-Go-Green.com* gathered several contributing writers, photographers, and artists and in less than three years, had built up a decent sized and dedicated readership.

Ironically, Matthew, the original founder who came up for the name of the Website, was now employed as the bar manager right here at Maginot's. Victor thought he might actually go and say hello but soon decide it would not be worth the effort being how busy he'd be on this Saturday night with this oppressively large crowd.

Early on in their relationship, Cassandra let Victor read a high school term paper that she wrote on industrial pollution, and he was impressed enough to run it as a feature article. Ever since then she had presented him with some mainly incoherent ramblings that she implicitly expected him to publish and, contrary to his own professional standards and intuition, he meekly obliged. Being the chivalrous gentleman, he had not been able to play devil's advocate to some of her assertions nor confront her writings with sober critique. But that will change tonight.

“Over 500,000 dead and...”

“Actually, sweetheart, I read it was just over 50,000 or so including a large number of missing and ...”

“Could you please not interrupt me, Victor? I’m trying to get to the point of the article!” scolded Cassandra as Victor sheepishly submitted.

“The point I’m trying to make is that this has to be global warming. According to a geophysicist at NASA, glaciers hold down seismic action, but since the glaciers are melting so rapidly, we’re going to see more and more earthquakes like this one today in China.”

“But, Cass, isn’t that a bit of a stretch – blaming earthquakes on global warming?” Victor bravely retorted. “I’m pretty sure that they are unrelated”

“Oh, really!” Cassandra snapped. “So you’re 100 percent sure that this earthquake was not caused by global warming? 100 percent?”

“Yes, 100 percent.” responded Victor defiantly. “Global warming is an atmospheric and surface phenomenon and I think we’d be wise to stick to circumstantial evidence above the ground.”

“Well, what if the earth’s temperature rose by 10,000 degrees? You don’t think that can cause major earthquakes and tsunamis and volcanoes and...”

“But, Cass that’s my point, we need to stay in scope of what we’re really trying to accomplish with *Erin-Go-Green*. If we start blaming every natural disaster on global warming, we are simply going to lose a good amount of sympathy from our more moderate readers. We have enough to advocate for as far as conservation and cleaner energy that we don’t need to get hysterical and start blaming everything that we don’t understand on global warming”, Victor

replied calmly. “Think about it, sweetheart – is blaming an earthquake in China on global warming any different than, say blaming the Black Death of the 14<sup>th</sup> century on the wrath of God?”

With this, Cassandra got visibly upset and substantially raised the level and tenor of her voice.

“This is a geophysicist who works at NASA! NAH-SAW! Not some pizza joint in Philly! You just think you know everything about...”

“Is everything alright, here?” a voice from behind Victor interrupted. Much to his surprise he saw that it was Matthew.

“Yeah, man we’re good. How you doin’, Matt?” Victor replied.

“We’re fine, Matthew.” Cassandra said annoyingly, staring at him intently.

“What’s up, man. You workin’ tonight? Sit down, I’ll buy you a drink.” Victor was relieved that find a convenient exit from the escalating argument.

“Have a good night”, said Matt stoically. He then walked away without any further word or gesture towards Victor.

## ~ 6 ~

**O**n Sunday Victor awoke with a feeling of disappointment and dread. He was disappointed that he had so badly read the situation with Laura, having all but convinced himself that they were on their way to a higher place. He dreaded the thought of having to patch things up with Cassandra and all the humble pie and humiliation that it would surely entail. But he knew that he was just not strong enough to let her go. Also, there was something else, even more profound that was really troubling him but he could not remember what exactly it was.

After a long shower, Victor shook off much of the bad vibes, and decided he would throw himself into his work on the website. At any given moment, there were always a dozen or so little tasks that needed to be done but were easily put off until a day like today when all cleanup is done. He poured himself a steaming cup of coffee, turned on *Fox News Sunday* for background rhythm, and opened up his laptop to get to work. Just then a loud rap came on the heavy, loft door.

It was very unusual that anyone would come calling so early on a Sunday and Victor contemplated not answering at all. But his curiosity got the better of him and slowly opened the door to see it was his friend Matthew.

“Hey, what’s up Matt?” he asked with a tinge of confusion in his voice. “Haven’t had you over in a long time.”

“Not too much, man. I came by to show you my new wheels. Come on out, I’ll give you a spin.”

Victor hesitated for moment because he was really ready to dig in to his website. Also, he anticipated a “morning after” call from Cassandra and really didn’t want to be around anyone while going through the inevitable, excruciating play by play review of last night’s fight. Nevertheless, he thought it might be cool to hang out with Matthew again. They really hadn’t hung together much at all in the past ten months.

“Yah, sure. Sit down and make yourself at home while I catch a quick shower. Grab some java if you’d like, I made a full pot.”

While in the shower, Victor pin-pointed the third thing that was bothering him this morning beside the Laura and Cassandra situations. It was the fact that he kept forgetting to call back his uncle over the past few days. Victor vowed to himself that he would put aside a good two or three hours later that afternoon for nothing else but a long phone conversation with his uncle.

Matt pulled his blue Lexis pulled up in front of the Chesterford building and Victor jumped in the passenger seat.

“Nice ride.” Victor commented. New job must be working out good, yes?”

“Yes, pretty good. I have a fifteen people working under me.” replied Matthew. “Although I would be nice to get a weekend off once in a while.”

“Nature of the business, I guess” said Victor.

The two drove around much of downtown Philly for about an hour or so, never really talking about anything of substance, which surprised Victor. He wondered why Matt showed up out of the blue without something heavy to disclose. It had been an altogether weird weekend for sure.

Victor did take a few opportunities to remind Matthew that the Giants were once again world champions, while Matthew's Eagles had yet to win a Super Bowl. Matthew seemed in no mood for such jostling, even this far removed from the season.

"Remember, on the way to that party up at the lake that I boldly predicted that '07 would be the year?" said Victor with a grin.

"Yo man, that ain't cool!" Matthew snapped back. "You know that wasn't a very good day for me. Why did you have to bring that day up?"

Victor was taken aback by Matthew's defensiveness. "Sorry man, I didn't know it was such a shitty day."

"Yeah, well I'm not really in the mood to talk about it. Listen, I'm heading over to Jersey to visit some relatives. Is it alright if I leave you off at the next block?"

"Sure, man whatever." Said Victor in baffled confusion.

"Give my best to Cassandra." Matthew said flippantly as he pulled to the curb.

~ 7 ~

As Matthew's car pulled away Victor's phone vibrated again and he pulled it out to find that it was a number he did not recognize. He stared at the number for a second before he decided to take a chance and answer it. He figured that the day couldn't get any stranger.

"Hello?" asked Victor.

"Mr. Stark?" asked the person on the phone.

"I'm not in the mood for telemarketers," Victor quickly shot back.

As he was shutting the phone he heard the plea, "I'm not a telemarketer!" Victor put the phone back to his ear quickly. "This is Hazelton General Hospital, and we're calling to inform you that your uncle, Leonard Stark is a patient under our care, in critical condition. You are listed as his next of kin"

"Is it serious?" asked Victor with a grim look passing onto his face.

"Yes sir, we need you to come here as soon as possible," said the woman at the hospital.

"I'll be there as soon as I can," said Victor hanging up the phone.

A thousand frantic thoughts raced through Victor's mind as he stood on the corner in utter confusion. Victor did not own a car and would use the bus to get back to visit his uncle normally. But today was

Sunday and he knew that the chances of a bus running today would be slim. There was only one car that he had driven occasionally and that was owned by Cassandra, who he wasn't even sure wanted to talk to him right now. In this emergency situation, he knew he had to try.

"Hey," answered Cassandra shortly, as if anxious to get the call over with as soon as possible.

"I need your car right now," said Victor urgently.

"Wait, wait. What? Is that what you have to say to me?" She responded in indignant disbelief.

"My Uncle's sick, really sick." pleaded Victor. "I just got a call from a hospital in Hazleton. He's in critical condition!"

"Um, okay." She started back slowly. "Where are you calling from? Aren't you with Ma...? I mean, where are you?"

"I'm at 11<sup>th</sup> and Vine. I can run over to my apartment and meet you there." He started.

"No!" she cut him off abruptly. "I mean, honey, let me come get you. I can be there in five minutes."

It did not even occur to Victor at the time that Cassandra lives a minimum of twenty minutes away. He just waited in utter silence right on that corner as his gut feeling of dread got worse than ever. Sure enough, Cassandra arrived almost exactly five minutes later.

“Thanks,” said Victor as Cassandra got out of the car, gave him a hug and offered him the keys. He got behind the wheel and impatiently waited for Cassandra to get in the passenger side. Much to his dismay she had stopped on the sidewalk to make a cell phone call, so he lowered the passenger window to yell to her. “Come on, sweetheart. I appreciate you letting me use your car but I really need to get going so I can drop you off and head up north.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Victor. I’ll just take SEPTA back.” She said with a smile leaning into the window. “You just be sure to take care of my car and don’t forget to bring it back with a full tank of gas. OK, bye, bye.” Her smile and words got even more saccharine. Victor had no time nor any desire to argue with her and he took right off towards the Vine Street Expressway.

His feet pumped harder than earlier, and now his fast pace had become a relay sprint. The traffic on the highway, although light because of Sunday, was maddening under the circumstances. The 90 minute trip gave Victor plenty of time to think about his uncle.

“That is not clean enough!” Amy screamed at Victor. “You have to scrub it more!” her voice seemed to be in a rage. “And don’t forget the dishes after this!” Victor heard the doorbell and ran passed his Aunt to answer the door

“Heya, kiddo.” Greeted Leonard. It had been over a month since Victor had seen him and he looked much different. He had cut his hair and shaved and seemed to be wearing more “grown-up” style clothes. But his voice was unmistakable.

“Uncle!” The 9-year old yelled excitedly and gave him a flying hug.

Amy walked down the stairs with an annoyed scowl on her face. “He still has chores to finish!” She barked with venom.

“I’m sorry, Amy.” Leonard started politely. “But need I remind you that the recent custody agreement says that I will have visitation with Victor for three hours every Tuesday, 5pm to 8pm. I don not believe there was any stipulation for unfinished chores.”

The fact that Leonard was so polite seemed to infuriate Amy even more. “If he is not here at one second past 8:00, I will call the police!” she shouted.

“Then we really should get started, hey kiddo?” Leonard turned to Victor.

“His name is Victor!” she shouted, face nearly purple with rage.

Leonard just smiled and put his hand on Victor’s shoulder. “Come on kiddo, we’ve got a full schedule for the next four hours.”

They drove quietly to the ice cream shop of choice with small comments about Victor’s favorite toys and sports. At the shop, Victor sat at a table as Leonard got them vanilla-chocolate ice cream with swirls, walked back to the table, and sat across from Victor.

“Now listen kid, just because your parents are gone doesn’t mean they aren’t here,” said Leonard knowing he had never had the gift of the silver tongue. It had still been less than six months since the tragic accident that took Victor’s parents, and Leonard had decided that he should talk openly with his nephew about the matter.

“What do you mean, uncle?” asked Victor innocently.

“I mean they are immortal as long as you live.” said Leonard.

“Oh you mean they’re in the place with the clouds,” said Victor acting like he already knew Leonard’s speech.

“No. I’m not talking about heaven,” said Leonard, “Though I’m sure if anyone would get in it would be your parents.” laughed Leonard.

“I’m talking about you. Your parents will always be alive in you. And, if they are alive in you, in your heart and your mind, then they are still alive somewhere,” said Leonard smiling.

“That’s not what Aunt Amy says,” said Victor licking his ice cream. “She said that they’re gone and never coming back.” said Victor still licking his ice cream.

“Oh?” said Leonard to himself, as a look of disgust came over his face. “Well trust me, kiddo I know what I’m talking about, and your parents will always be a part of you.”

“I do trust you, uncle.” Victor replied sincerely.

As he pulled the car into Hazelton General’s parking lot he felt his stomach start to churn like there was some butter inside him. He jogged to the information desk and interrupted the receptionist who was on the phone. “Can you tell me where Leonard Stark is?”

The receptionist gave Victor a dirty look before telling the person on the other line to hold on. “He’s in room 815.” she said pointing towards the elevators down the hall.

Victor took the elevator to the 8<sup>th</sup> floor and took off down the hall, frantically looking for room 815. After running passed it twice, he

finally found it and bolted into the room to find his uncle lying in a bed. There was something he immediately perceived about his Uncle that his emotions and consciousness had told him all day. Leonard Stark was deceased. Victor slumped against a wall, and slid down. His Uncle's face, which had seemed so wise and free of pain, looked as if it had been contorted by a monster. It wasn't that his Uncle's face was terrible to look at, but you could still detect the last pains felt before he passed away from this world into the mystery that beats all others.

A female doctor of considerable beauty walked in as Victor sat on the floor staring at his uncle. "Victor Stark?" she inquired. Victor sat speechless as he weakly raised his arm to affirm his identity.

"We have some paper work for you to fill out, when you're ready."

"How did he die?" asked Victor, voice trembling.

"Heart attack," said the nurse. "I'll be at the nurse's station when you're ready. Just take your time." She left Victor alone with his uncle one last time.

He pulled up a chair next to him and looked one last time upon the man who had raised him and influenced him so much. "Adios, kiddo." said Victor.

## ~ 8 ~

Victor sat silently in Cassandra's car preparing to drive back to Philadelphia. He had stuck the keys into the ignition but he could not turn bring himself to turn the key. He knew he had one last thing to do before he could drive away from his uncle. He pulled out his cell phone, and scrolled his list of voice mails from the past week, looking for the ones from his uncle.

"Hey kiddo, how ya been. We haven't talked in a while, and I know you have a birthday coming up soon. I got something special planned and hope you can come up, but if not I'll come down. Alright kiddo, give me a call back when you get a chance." The call ended and Victor shut his phone, putting his head on the steering wheel. Victor couldn't believe how suddenly his uncle was gone, free from the lives he'd left his mark upon. Victor at last mustered up the strength to start up the car and begin the drive home.

It was four in the morning when Victor arrived back in Philadelphia. He pulled the car to a halt in front of Cassandra's apartment, and locked it stepping out, and heading to her front door. He decided to forego buzzing her, and went in the back way, slipping into the alley and up the fire escape. He jumped up, and pulled it down as quiet as he could and climbed up. He stood looking into Cassandra's window. He reached down to lift the window when he noticed not one, but two figures in her bed. He squinted to make sure he the dark wasn't playing tricks on his eyes. Sure enough it was no

illusion of the dark. Victor slowly slid the window open, and stepped into the dark room. He pulled his cell phone out, and illuminated just a little bit of the room so he didn't wake them. He was looking at Cassandra and Matthew fast asleep and spooning.

Victor walked to Cassandra's bedside table, and set her keys down before slipping back out the window. As he stood on the fire escape landing he suddenly had the urge to just jump off. The world suddenly weighed on his shoulders. Cassandra had sometimes driven him crazy, but he really needed someone now. It felt as though and no one was there for him for the first time in his life. He stepped onto the fire escape landings rail and took a deep breath. In his mind he envisioned himself leaping off with vivid detail. Then he thought about Laura. "How would she salute my surrender? Would she view as a hero in this tragedy?" Inevitably, he knew that the answer to these questions would have to be 'no'.

He slowly walked through the cold, predawn air, with a surreal haze of horror all around his mind. After about a mile or so, he spotted a SEPTA bus and wondered on like a mindless zombie. Much of the bus ride was a blank as he stared out the window at nothing at all. After countless stops, he jolted out of his haze as he noticed a familiar landmark of his neighborhood. It was just before 7:00 when he reached his loft and, fully clothes, instantly collapse of his couch.

About 90 minutes later, Victor was awoken by the sound of the landline phone. "Hello." He said, groggily.

“Victor? This is Laura Bailey.” The female voice started, as if Victor would somehow mistake the deep Australian accent for somebody else.

Completely devoid of any context, Victor replied. “Laura! Wow, hi. How are you? Actually, I’m really glad you called. I really want to talk to you.”

After a short pause, Laura replied. “Oh, really? Perhaps you could speak to me by showing up for work like you were scheduled to at 7:00?”

“Oh, Lord. I’m sorry, Laura. I really lost track of time. I had a really long, hard, terrible night. My uncle – he, ah, passed away.” Victor’s voice started to quiver as he felt his eyes well up with tears.

“Oh my God, I am so sorry, Victor. Your uncle? You mean Uncle Leonard, the one who raised you?” She asked with deep concern in her voice.

“Yes.” He responded, now fully weeping.

Laura gave Victor a sizeable block of time before replying. “Listen, Victor. Take as much time as you need. I would suggest at least a week but will accommodate more if you need. Also, if you need any advance on your pay to get through this time...”

“Laura, you’re great, but his funeral is not until Friday. I’ll be in tomorrow, Wednesday, and Thursday if you don’t mind me sitting out today.”

“Of course not.” she replied. “Are sure about coming in tomorrow? I can cover for you, really.”

“No, no. I really need to keep focus and I think working will help me do that.”

“Are you sure, Victor?”

“Yes, absolutely. You can count on me being there tomorrow morning at 7:00.” He said with certainty.

“Okay. Well, in the meantime, if there’s anything I can do for you, anything at all...”

“Thanks, Laura. You’re great. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

With that, Victor hung up and fell face-first back on the couch.

~ 9 ~

Victor awoke about an hour later in a cold sweat. He would try several times throughout the morning to fall back asleep but just could not do it. He was exhausted and restless all at once and he still felt utterly empty on the inside. The ugly thoughts of a suicidal end began again to creep into his mind. At this, he decided to fight back by getting out and exercising these toxic vibes from his system. Victor took a shower, got dressed, and left his apartment for a walk.

He walked down towards Independence Hall, a place he had never ceased to appreciate even as it was just about a quarter mile from his loft. He sat outside in the brisk March afternoon air where regular, weekday business was happening all around, but none of this seemed to tamper his anxiety.

He started walking again, now towards other, less prominent historical sites, trying to conjure up the good memories of him and his uncle walking in the footsteps of Ben Franklin. This only served to add to his sadness.

He began to run as fast as he can in the general direction of South Street. "Perhaps" he thought, "I can find salvation in the pizza shop." After about four or five blocks of strange looks and honked horns, he found himself stopped and keeled over with a severe side-stitch pain. It had been over twenty-four hours since he ate or drank anything and he was obviously dehydrated.

As he looked up through teary eyes, he found himself in front of an old-fashioned corner bar named “Walter’s Watering Hole”.

Something about the place just seemed so out-dated and comforting that he found himself stumbling in through the door. Inside it was much darker and quieter with about six patrons and a bartender, all well over fifty, being the occupants.

“What da ya got on tap?” Victor asked softly.

“Three taps’ broke, only *Schlitz* still working.” Replied the bartender.

“Perfect.” Said Victor, who noticed a foggy jar of pinkish purple spheres behind the cash register. “Are they pickled eggs?”

The bartender nodded, as if annoyed.

“Great. Schlitz and pickled eggs for everyone!” Victor declared to a few, scattered “here, here” comments of appreciation from the bar patrons. The bartender turned to start doling out the goods to the bar patrons as Victor noticed a few, scattered bottles under the back of the bar. “You wouldn’t happen to have Ole’ Granddad?” he asked.

Victor was surprised that the sun was already down as he stumbled out of Walter’s Watering Hole. After standing in confusion of which way to walk for about ten minutes, he elected to go right and started wobbling down the street. After several such turns onto unfamiliar streets, he recognized the bustling activity of South Street up ahead. He passed several unfamiliar faces, still unsure as to where exactly he would go. “Perhaps it would be wise to stop in the shop and get a cup of coffee.” he thought. Then he realized that Stan, the weekend

man would probably be in charge at this time and Victor scrapped that idea. As he tried to stand up straight and collect his thoughts, he heard a familiar voice from behind him.

“I didn’t think you’d take the break up that hard.” It was Cassandra, all dressed up and looking fine, which only brought back some pain to Victor.

“My uncle’s dead, Laura has a girlfriend, and I can’t handle Ole’ Granddad.” he slurred, desperately attempting to regain some dignity by standing up straight, only to slip and fall down.

“Here,” said Cassandra pulling out a fifty dollar bill from her designer purse and, half erotically stuffing it into his front right pocket.

“I don’t want your f@%8n’ money!” He snapped, insulted. “I want your love, Cass. Why can’t you just give me some love?” he slurred, sounding like an intoxicated old hippie.

Cassandra bent to speak softly in his ear. “I had a tremendous amount of fun with you, Victor. But I’m nearly 25 and you don’t even have a real job or a car.” She stated firmly.

“But Matthew?” he asked, bewildered. “Couldn’t you dump me for someone else?”

“Don’t worry, Victor. IT will not last very long, he’s just a placeholder.” Said Cassandra with a cocky looking smirk on her face.

“But why now?” Victor said pleading. “I just need you to give me some love!”

With that Cassandra gave him a quick peck on the cheek. “Goodbye, Victor.” She said and then turned to walk in the same brisk, perfectly measured pace that he witnessed the first day he met her.

“I’ll give you some love, sugar.” Came another voice from not far away. Victor squinted to a beautiful woman, clad risqué, walking towards him. He sat up straight, and with a touch of beer speech called out. “You are pretty.”

“You live around here?” asked the woman.

“Chesterford Lofts.” replied Victor.

“Really?” She responded with enthusiasm. “If I get us a ride up there, can you remember which one is yours?”

“Sure” slurred Victor as he blacked out from exhaustion and intoxication.

The sun shined through Victor’s eyelids awakening him even as he tried to cover himself with a blanket that he found strangely missing. His eyes slowly opened to view an almost empty room. All that remained was his dresser, and the bed he lay on. His curtains, clothes, TV, DVD player, and every other compact item of value were gone. His front door remained wide open from the raid on his home. He checked for his wallet, and cell only to find he was not wearing pants. Victor jumped up as his head came to the full realization of his plight. He shut his front door as quickly as he could, and then made for his bathroom searching for a towel only to

find them missing as well. He was forced to rip off his shower curtain to cover himself. A knock came on the door, it was a police officer.

About an hour later Victor sat in the police station dressed in a Philadelphia Police T-shirt, and sweatpants. The officer who had first arrived on the scene of Victor's apartment came out of the office.

"Well," said the officer, "You've got some pretty pissed off neighbors. It appears that, by letting your "friends" into the building, you inadvertently aided them in committing about seven robberies."

Victor bowed his head in utter disbelief. He had spent the past 4 ½ hours detailing, not only every bit of equipment stolen out of his apartment, but also the final details of information stored on his laptop. You see, he kept the account numbers of his staff writers and other vital information on his laptop, which was now in the hands of the thieves. This included some vital information about *Mama Leone's* that he now had to go and explain about to Laura. He felt utterly sickened by his own knucklehead actions. "Thanks, officer." He said, standing up.

"Need a lift home?" asked the policeman.

"No thanks, I'll walk."

"You're not even wearing shoes" pointed out the officer.

"I'll be fine." said Victor. He walked away from the officer who had a look that showed his confusion outwardly.

Victor stepped out of the police station, and started towards his apartment barefoot and more depressed than he thought possible. He was now completely wiped out of all resources and couldn't even figure out how he would pay for bus fare to Hazleton for his uncle's funeral. It all just seemed to keep piling up on him at an unbelievable pace.

At the loft, he dug out a beat up pair of old sneakers and a paint-stained sweatshirt that were in a pile that had been ransacked but rejected by the thieves and he headed out to see Laura at work.

Once he got there, Laura was in no mood to talk. For the second straight day, she had expected Victor at 7am but he had not shown up and she had to resort to asking Sandy to come in and help out. A model by profession, Sandy was simply not cut out for the intense, physical nature of the job, which surely caused friction within the business as well as the blossoming relationship.

"The police were here." Laura stated coldly.

"I... I'm so sorry, Laura. I was such a knucklehead and..."

"Let's not talk about this here." She interrupted. "I'm doing all that I can to keep this place running today and I simply have no time."

From her post at the corner of the counter, Sandy turned and gave Victor an evil-looking scowl. It was cartoonish, like some villain out of an *Austin Powers* movie.

Victor persisted. "Laura, you don't understand, I..."

“Oh, I understand all too well, Victor.” She interrupted angrily. “My mother died when I was twelve! You need to take time and morn when such a tragedy occurs. It is not the time to exercise American male bravado!”

Victor felt a surge of anger with this last comment but still tried to calmly explain his predicament to Laura. “What I’m trying to say is...”

“Victor!” she interrupted once again even more firmly. “I need to run a business here. Take the week off. I do not want to see you until next week at the earliest.”

These comments were complimented with another silent but evil scowl from Sandy, which proved to be more than Victor take and his temper boiled over. “Why can’t you let me finish one sentence!” he yelled. “I came here expecting some compassion and understanding but instead you act like some bitchy Australian dyke!”

His words, which he immediately regretted, echoed through the half empty restaurant and all eyes turned his way in shock and dismay. Sandy stomped her feet, threw down her apron and started towards Victor in an aggressive way. She was about to kick his ass. Laura stepped in front of her, extending her arms to stop Sandy. “No, no, no.” She started. “No violence in the restaurant.” When Sandy didn’t immediately submit, Laura held up her index finger and firmly repeated. “No violence in the restaurant!”

Sandy backed off from her assault but stood in place, hands on hips, staring intently at Victor. He stood frozen, in disbelief of his own words or mannerisms while Laura quietly went to the cash register

and pulled out a sizeable stack of twenties. Without counting, she slammed down the stack onto the counter just in front of Victor. Then she looked him square in the eye and spoke softly. “You’ll find that this far exceeds the amount of your final pay. Goodbye, Victor. I am truly sorry for your personal loss.”

His heart broke as he could see the pain within her beautiful eyes.

~ 10 ~

As cars flew by on Valmont Parkway, Victor began to envision himself leaping out into the oncoming headlights to be splattered like a bug.

“AHHHHHHHHHHH,” he screamed, attempting to relieve the feeling of depressed anxiety. It had been two weeks since he witnessed his uncle’s coffin descend in to the ground and he had stayed in the Hazleton area, sleeping in his uncle’s place for much of the day and wondering around like a vagrant for much of the nights. He was subsisting in the most meager way, stretching that ever-dwindling stack of twenties as far as he can. He felt like he about to be swallowed by a tidal wave of dejectedness and despair. He looked like hell. His face was covered with hair because he had not shaved in over a week. His face wore lines of age that shouldn’t have been there, and his hair was greasy, and if you by chance looked close enough you could detect the slightest amount of gray. People on the streets turned away from him as fast as they could. One man was in the middle of crossing the street, and turned back so quickly he almost met a minivan in the process. By his own calculation, Victor had probably not spoken a word to another human in at least nine or ten days.

As Victor stood in the lukewarm shower at some ungodly hour in the middle of the night, he began to plan his own death. He had truly given up on everything except that narrow slice of pride that insisted

that go out in some grandiose way. But how? Leaping from a building? Diving off Niagara Falls? Sitting in the middle of a busy street and setting himself on fire? As appealing as death felt, the actual act of suicide was not.

Victor thought he could at least get started on the proverbial suicide note. “That could occupy my time for a few days, maybe a week. Then I can decide exactly HOW to do it.” He thought.

He sat down at his uncle’s desk for the first time. It was still in the state of “organized chaos” that he remembered fondly. He fired up the PC with the slightest bit of thrill, he had not been online in a long time and at least there should be some news and email to catch up on. “Tying up loose ends.” He thought.

But he was instantly disappointed when the system asked him for a password.

“Okay.” He said aloud to himself. “Uncle Leonard couldn’t remember his own address. He must have written this down somewhere.” He methodically started with the smaller desk drawers to the left, checking each scrap of paper for anything that resembled a legitimate password. His only rational candidates failed, and Victor’s frustration began to elevate again. As he searched each subsequent drawer, his was less and less careful with the handling of his uncle’s effects until he literally threw the last side drawer across the room in disgust. The only drawer left to explore was the large middle drawer which had a lock.

Victor sat behind the desk staring forward as the first bit of morning light crept through the eastern windows. The illumination gave

Victor a whole new perspective of the room, which he had never viewed from this angle. He noticed a shelf on the wall directly in front of him, which was full of his own little trophies and keepsakes that his uncle had kept over the years. In the middle of the shelf was a simple coffee cup which read “World’s Best Mom”.

When he was twelve, Victor asked his uncle what he’d like to get for Father’s Day. “But, I’m not your father.” Leonard replied. “Well, aren’t you kind of like my mother and father all rolled up in one?” Victor argued. To that, Leonard conceded the point and that following Mother’s Day he received this keepsake coffee mug.

Victor got up to examine the mug closer and, when he lifted it, heard a metallic jingle inside. He reached in to find a small key that fit perfectly into the lock of the large desk drawer.

Victor opened it and was astonished by the contents inside.

## ~ 11 ~

**V**ictor packed what little clothes, traveler's checks, and other such supplies into a duffle-like bag, and fired up his uncle's Buick on the way to JFK International. After checking to make sure he had his ticket more times than he cared, and a hair pulling trip through security Victor at last sat comfortably in seat 34 of the airplane bound for a connecting flight in London's Heathrow Airport.

After the surprisingly easy journey, Victor stood inside the terminal at Cairo, Egypt. It was a place he had seen millions of times on the Discovery channel, only this was real. He had no time to take it in before he caught the sight of his last name on a sign being held by a man dressed in kaki colored shorts, and a white dress shirt open and rolled up.

"I'm Stark." said Victor walking towards the man with the sign.  
"Victor Stark."

The man pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket. After he took a minute to look between Victor and it he announced, "So you are!" He extended his hand in welcome. Victor shook it with a slight hesitation. "The name is Nigel Pegg," Victor could tell right away that he was English. After a moment of silence he asked, "Should we be expecting Mr. Leonard?"

“He won’t be joining us.” said Victor grimly. “Unfortunately, he passed away about a month ago.”

“Bloody hell! I’m sorry, mate. Leonard contacted me frequently over the past 6 months or, combing over every detail of this agenda and sparing no expense! He set me up to be your comprehensive escort while in Egypt.”

Victor smiled. “He was a great man. He saved my life.” He paused. “Twice.”

After a half minute, Pegg got to business. “Well, I’m afraid we have to be off if we’re to make the chopper” he said, looking at his watch.

“Sure.” said Victor following Pegg to the car, his lone bag draped over his shoulder.

They drove a distance that seemed like that around a large city block to a small hanger and parked.

“If you would follow me, Mr. Stark,” said Pegg shutting the car off and walking out of the hanger with Victor behind him.

“It’s Vic, or Victor.”

“Ok,” said Pegg, leading Victor around the hanger to a helicopter that sat with a pilot inside checking the systems before take off. He paused before they got any closer. “Now, for today I thought we would survey Giza aerially. “

“I guess you never heard of resting after a long flight. You know, jet lag and all.”

“Your Uncle paid me to pack in as much as I could and he was especially adamant about starting as soon as possible.”

“Alright then, let’s go.” said Victor walking past Pegg and hopping into the helicopter’s open side door.

“Now,” said Nigel stepping in, “I’m going to ask you to stay seat belted in because we the doors don’t shut anymore, and it would be terrible to lose you on a sharp turn,” Nigel smiled, and sat next to the pilot as Victor strapped in. The pilot, and Nigel conversed in a foreign language and Nigel tossed Victor a headset. Suddenly the engines kicked on and the propellers began to circle slowly at first, but faster, and faster until they looked more like a giant metal circle then individual blades. Victor felt his stomach move as his body left the ground with the chopper.

Victor stayed silent as the helicopter moved noisily through the quiet dusk air. He actually believed that his uncle had defacto saved his live by preventing his suicide. When he opened that desk drawer on the early morning of April 6<sup>th</sup> and found those airline tickets to Egypt, dated April 7<sup>th</sup>, it was like coming out of a dark, musty, seemingly endless tunnel and emerging into a warm, pleasant, breezy spring day. He had literally been given new life at exactly the most crucial moment that he needed it. Was this all a coincidence? Perhaps. But there was no doubt how serious Victor was about taken his own life just a few days ago and now that was the last thing he would consider. He knew there were still major challenges and it would not be easy getting his life back on track, but he was happy to face that challenge.

Soon the pyramids were readily visible and Victor was completely in awe, beyond his wildest imagination. The helicopter dove in closer to the massive structures. It felt very surreal to actually view these monuments with the naked eye.

As they we're circling for the second time, the helicopter was hit with a massive gust of turbulence. Victor suddenly felt his seatbelt pop open just as the helicopter made an intense turn almost onto its side. Victor instantly fell down directly towards the apex of the Great Pyramid itself. As he fell he heard Pegg yelling over the headphones. "Oh, bloody hell! Not again!"

As Victor accelerated through the air during those final, long, stretched-out seconds, one overbearing thought traversed his mind again and again, repeatedly - "I want to live!"

## ~ 12 ~

**H**undreds of thousands flocked to see Victor. He was the prophet they had all prayed for. Love was made in the streets the day he arrived. A new creature that was intelligent.

Cries of, “Victor,” could be heard for miles.

“I hear he’s just another Didact,” said one unusually critical artist.

“Let’s hope he’s not another Linus.” said an old historian. The story of the stranger had spread through from inhabitant to inhabitant like wild fire. They lived in close proximity to each other, and hardly ever had anything to talk about so this made for an excellent gossiping system. To live in the limelight is usually the universal dream to those who think and feel, but to an inter-universal traveler like Victor it was just another brave new world.

He luckily was barely able to take in yet another new environment. He had been knocked silly by some unpleasant Narpets hours earlier and now he clung to his very life. If the inhabitants of the village he was now inside had a better knowledge of medicine he may have already recovered, but these villagers lacked the know-how to realize that Victor wasn’t just suffering from a head wound but from the effects of poison that was slowly working towards killing him.

It was a good twist of fate that one of the groups that had found him had also found a small box near him and had decided to take it. This

box was quite more than met the eye. It was in fact a small robot that essentially held in its core programming the command to keep Victor healthy and informed. While this small box sat motionless, its sensors suddenly detected the poison inside his system. Suddenly, it went mobile, as it flew off at lightning speed and the man who had become its caretaker was left wondering if he had not just imagined the entire event.

The box rolled through the streets, scaring many inside their homes. Unlike everyone else in the village, it knew that Victor was close to never arising. The box arrived in the building where Victor lied within moments after his heart had stopped beating and the creatures surrounding him had bowed their heads in serene sadness as they realized life was leaving him. The box rolled up to Victor on a small table and shot out three tentacle-like wires, which each had a purpose. One injected Victor while the other two shocked his heart to begin beating again. Breath issued from Victor once more as he arose with a start.

“Bloody hell!” exclaimed Victor, bewildered. “Now where am I Ray?” He asked of the box, which in the course of their adventures together, he had come to name ‘Ray’.

“These are the Uncivilized Heathens” replied Ray, in a voice identical to Victor’s Uncle Leonard. Ray was programmed to speak with the voice that would be most pleasing to its owner’s ear.

“Great!” replied Victor, hitting his head with his hand. “Are you guys going to tell me that you need to harvest my world for its

resources? Or perhaps, draw me into some “righteous revolution”?” he asked sarcastically.

After a moment of confusion, one of the Uncivilized Heathens replied “No sir, we’re all pacifists here.”

“Well that’s just dandy! I don’t suppose you have an inter-universal portal here?”

“What is that?” asked another Uncivilized Heathen.

“Ah, just forget it.” Victor replied in frustration, leaving the building with Ray in toe. Victor was immediately shocked upon his exit. A crowd had gathered quickly from all over the village and now it stood before him.

“Praise the Prophet!” said the crowd.

“Well, that’s a new one.” thought Victor to himself. “Hey, can I get a place to sleep?” he asked.

“This way prophet.” said some voices in the crowd. Victor followed a group that began to move. They led him through a small village that reminded him of an Indian preserve.

“Here is the softest of all beds,” said Lenin, one of the taller Uncivilized Heathens.

“Thanks. Now, I would really enjoy some peace and quiet.” declared Victor lying down.

~ 13 ~

“**Y**ou know, Marx said the exact same thing.” Said Victor.

“We are not Marx!” retorted Lenin firmly. “They were liars and were corrupted by the power they gained. We will be different! We will stay equal!”

“You know I’ve had just about enough of this equal crap!” yelled Victor in frustration. “Maybe I want to be better than some people out there!”

With that Lenin got angered; “They’ve just signed their death warrant.” He proclaimed. “Seize him, my equals!” Suddenly a group of Narpets flew forward and grabbed Victor. Their skin had a rubber quality and their wings looked like an insects. Something about their large heads reminded Victor of a pig. In any case, they would have seemed unimaginable to Victor a few days prior. “Conspiracy to be unequal is our greatest crime!” said Lenin.

Out of the darkness of the tavern this strange scene took place as another Narpet came. “Let him go!” demanded Boxer, a Narpet that had become Victor’s best friend while he championed the revolutions.

“Boxer, we heard them! They must be punished!” said Lenin smiling. Boxer was the only Narpet that Victor thought was more akin to a horse than a pig, at least in the facial region.

“No!” screamed Boxer. “Victor has taught me the joy of ‘I’ and I will not go back to being the same equal Narpet ‘we’!”

“That means war, Comrade!” said Lenin.

“Then so be it.” said Boxer leaping forth and grabbing Victor who in turn grabbed Ray. The trio flew out of the tavern with Lenin’s cronies in hot pursuit.

“Thank you Boxer.” yelled Victor.

“Live together, die alone.” He replied.

The flight seemed to last for ages, as neither the pursuers nor the pursued gave in. Then, at last Boxers’ old wings began to slow and he and Victor found themselves drifting towards the ground. Then, from above, one of Lenin’s henchmen crashed into Boxers head and they all hit the ground hard. Ray rolled away from Victor for the first time in many days as the Narpets locked into combat. If one could say anything good about the Narpets, it was that they sure knew combat.

Victor watched in terror as three of Lenin’s goons pounded a defiant Boxer who fought on with gusto. Then a fatal blow struck Boxer’s head and he fell. Whether Boxer was dead or unconscious, Victor did not know. Lenin’s minions moved on to Victor next. He turned and began to run, but suddenly a small and seemingly insignificant bug bit him. The bug, which to any of the natives of the Outerverse, was of little-to-no danger, was extremely poisonous to Victor. He was hampered by the effects of the bug bite instantly and one of Lenin’s men nailed him in the head suddenly and he fell.

## ~ 14 ~

**V**ictor got out of the extremely soft bed he had been given and strolled through the village. It was dark now and all of the Uncivilized Heathens were asleep. Victor observed that they were a very hairy species of being, covered almost entirely in it, with the exception of their genitals and lips, which were in plain view. They wore no clothing whatsoever and they smelled a bit too. Certainly Victor knew modesty didn't exist here.

Victor passed by a dwelling where some appeared to be still awake. He peered into their windows without being seen. Four members of the household were working with some craft of writing or painting. Then a couple began to make love. Victor turned away quickly from viewing this for too long, feeling it was not right. Although he did find it both strange and fascinating to watch what they did with their different parts, and placement of those parts.

“Some say you will be the voice of God.” said Apollo, a Heathen who had apparently been observing Victor from a far for some time.

“Who says there is a God?” asked Victor.

“You do.” proclaimed Apollo. “Your presence here is what we all had prayed for.”

“None of you even know what or who I am!” replied Victor, astonished.

“We know that you are Victor, we know that you are from the only other species besides Didacts and Narpets, and we know that your arrival here was a direct result of our praying to God.” Said Apollo with scholarly certitude.

“Please ask God to get me home again.” Victor demanded sarcastically. Sure enough, as he left Apollo stood praying.

Back in the bed he had been gifted Victor found his mind wandering to Galt, and his beginnings in the Outer-verse or the “real world”, as Galt had referred to it. If Galt had been right, then the Heathens were entirely wrong on their notions God. Victor had concluded that he agreed with Galt, having seen too much to believe in nonsense such as “God” any more. What ever happened, must have happened for no other reason then the utter chaos of chance.

The next day Victor found himself before another massive crowd of Heathens.

“What word from God do you bring?” shouted one from the crowd.

“He says don’t wait up.” Victor chuckled a bit as the crowd took his answer in.

“What are you?” asked another of the Heathens.

“A failed experiment.” said Victor.

“Are you our prophet?”

“Most certainly not!” laughed Victor. “I am only here because I was bitten by a bug.”

“Let’s leave Victor to his rest,” yelled Apollo stepping from the crowd, “You should keep the faith,” whispered Apollo as he passed Victor. He shrugged, and walked with Ray towards the river that flowed near the village.

Across the water that stretched out like a universe, lay the huge tips of the buildings of *Megalopolis*. It was the only city that the Didacts inhabited, and millions of years of social Darwinism and the practice of laissez faire capitalism had created a steel colossus of a city with no heart. Victor had been shocked when he witnessed a Didact literally sell his grandma for cash. Even with that horror Victor couldn’t help admire the technological wonder he had witnessed there.

“Ray, I need nourishment.” commanded Victor who, in response, extended a wire directly into Victor’s arm. Inside his mouth Victor could taste cherry cheesecake, as if he was eating the real thing. Ray was the prime example of Didact technology, a robot created specifically to help Victor become familiar with the new world Galt had thrown him into, or maybe it was Pegg the helicopter pilot who had done that. Either way, Ray was a fantastic help.

In the process of thinking over his experiences with the Didacts in Megalopolis Victor found himself remembering something Galt had said. Victor laid on the cold examining table as Galt and his fellow Didact scientists were studying Victor’s human physiology as well as installing in him a universal translator. Another Didact walked in, and whispered something to Galt, to which Galt just smiled and returned back to his job on Victor.

“What’s going on?” asked Victor.

“Nothing concerning you.” replied Galt. “Some of my business partners just purchased the Uncivilized Heathen’s lands for small, useless gaskets.” laughed Galt.

“Is that fair?” asked Victor.

“It is certainly fair for us.” said Galt.

As Victor reflected, he suddenly felt like a fool. Those statements had meant nothing before he knew what exactly an Uncivilized Heathen was, but now it meant something very unfortunate.

Ray finished feeding Victor and he walked back to bed. He found himself unable to sleep that night because the guilt of knowing the Didacts were planning a move against these Uncivilized Heathens, and not doing something to help was weighing on his conscience. Victor visited Apollo in the middle of the night and they arranged a town meeting for the next day. Upon returning from Apollo’s home, Victor found himself face to face with a Narpet that had a face like a horse. He was soon happily surprised to see that it was Boxer.

“I’m here to warn you.” said Boxer. “The Narpets plan to make the Uncivilized Heathens equal.”

“Great, more good news.”

“Why is this good news?”

“Sarcasm, Boxer.” said Victor with a slight annoyance. “How did you escape, and get this information?”

“I was taken to a worker camp and given a second chance when a revolt occurred against Fidel and Lenin did not want waste time pursuing us, I mean me. It was at the New Great Leader’s speech that he announced the plans to engulf the Uncivilized Heathens. I felt the need to warn you, my friend.”

“Thanks, Boxer. Would you care to stay here with me?”

## ~ 15 ~

**T**he masses of Uncivilized Heathens rallied around a small platform awaiting Victor. It had been used for small announcements such as changes in lovemaking or artist parades. Now Victor would attempt to inform the creatures before him that the only other intelligent creatures in the Outerverse were plotting to overthrow them.

“Have you received the word of God?” asked one of the Heathens. The crowd looked at him intently. He thought about the saying no but then got a better idea.

“Yes.” Victor replied. “He visited me last night in my sleep.” The crowd let out a collective gasp. “He, um...he said we need to fortify our position.” Victor said firmly. The crowd looked at each other with confusion. Apollo stepped next to Victor.

“What does fortify mean?” whispered Apollo.

“Oh yeah I forgot. Pacifists.” mumbled Victor before beginning to speak to the crowd again. “Well, my fine Heathens, it means that we must break our pacifist ways.” Another, even greater gasp erupted.

“Why would the lord tell us to do such a thing?” asked Apollo out loud.

“Because the Didacts and Narpets are coming to destroy the Heathen way of life.” Shouted Victor. “You will be given the choice to either live as either a Didact or Narpet or to die a Heathen martyr.”

“Let them come.” said one of the Heathens. “Our god will protect us!”

“I don’t think your understanding me.” said Victor confused, “He is telling us to defend ourselves! That is how he is protecting us!”

“It is one of the rules that we must never hurt another creature; it was the word of our first prophet Moses.”

“Did he say Moses?” Victor thought. “Ah, never mind.” he brushed it off as a coincidence.

“You are forgetting that I am your new prophet and I am telling you that God wishes us to create some sort of defense.”

“We will put it to a vote.” said Apollo.

A group of Heathens set about distributing a small leaf like material. Each Heathen marked an X for Defense, and an O for Nothing. Victor was introduced to some other Heathens as he waited for the tally.

There was Winston, a historian who seemed to know endless answers to questions involving his own people, but little when it came to the ways of Didacts or Narpets. Then he met Noah who had an entire building that housed exactly two copies of every document the Heathens had ever written. He was also introduced to Ike, who most people liked.

The crowd re-gathered and Victor now found himself in their ranks receiving strange and mystified looks. One of the Heathens who the members of the crowd referred to as Florida. The wisest and greatest vote counter in the village stood on the platform.

“The winner by six votes is the do-nothing group,” said Florida.

“What?” yelled Victor.

“Sorry sir, but a vote is a vote.” replied Florida.

“Well I’m going to build defenses anyway.” said Victor defiantly.

“Anyone who wants to help is sure welcome to.”

## ~ 16 ~

**V**ictor stormed off with Ray as Apollo watched them go. Victor arrived at the edge of the village by using Ray to get him there. (Ray was specially built with every conceivable need of Victor's in mind, unlocked the mystery of teleportation at this moment.) The large forest was filled with something akin to stone trees. They were structures that rose up in arches and were probably harder in substance than Earth's diamonds were, but with a soft moss growing out of the arches that could easily be harvested for sustenance and/or Heathen paper.

“We need to get as many of the arch tree things into large blocks as we can, Ray.” commanded Victor. Ray immediately set about carving up the arches, moving fast, but not quite fast enough for Victor's liking. He wasn't sure when the Didacts and Narpets would arrive, and the last thing he wanted was for them to arrive when he was in the middle of building. Victor surveyed the village as Ray kept working. He looked for a building that was large enough to hold the creatures of the village, but that's not too large to build a wall around. He decided that the only building that met this description was the Uncivilized Heathens Place of Worship.

It was lucky for Victor that the arch trees of stone were not stone otherwise they would have been extremely heavy. He found that he could attach two straps to his shoulders and drag one huge block all the way to its destination as Ray continued to cut it was in this way

that Victor created a solid base to his wall. Once he reached this point in the construction of his make-shift fortress, Victor started to become scared. He had no way to lift the blocks to start a new level. It was at this point, a few days removed from the vote that Apollo showed up at the edge of the forest.

“I have a few helpers but I have one question before we help you.” said Apollo.

“Shoot,” said Victor breathing heavily from his long work day.

“Why are you helping us?” asked Apollo.

“Don’t you believe that I am your prophet?” asked Victor.

“Such things are trivial you could Just as easily be a prophet for our destruction as our salvation.”

“Well, Apollo your species is the first I’ve seen that’s reminded me of my home,” said Victor with a slight smile. “Now how about them workers?”

Apollo raised his arm, and huge group appeared behind him.

“You will have to teach us to build for this type of work we have never done it.” said Apollo. “We inherited all the buildings you see around here. There has not been a new building erected here in millions of clicks.” Victor paused to try to ponder what exactly a “click” was but he got the point in any case.

“Well then let’s get stated.” Said Victor.

He spent the next few days teaching the Uncivilized Heathens to construct small structures, such as models and the like. He then showed them what he wanted to build around their church. It was many days removed from the initial vote that construction at last started on level two of the fortress. It was at this second level that the image of what he was building could be made out. It was going to be a large pyramid. Victor, of course was familiar with pyramids. It was, after all, the greatest one on earth that had sent him to the Outerverse through an inter-universal wormhole created on the top of the pyramid by the Universe's creators.

Upon arrival to the Outerverse he was told that the Universe in which he had resided on planet Earth, was actually little more than an experiment by the Didacts. Galt was the head scientist of the project, and he at first seemed friendly to Victor. He gave him a universal translator and the robot which Victor named Ray.

Victor was then invited to explore the Didact city of Megalopolis. As he walked the city streets he was struck by the enormity of the buildings, some of which stretched off so far that no light reached the surface below. Each Didact, a race that looked similar to humans except that their heads were disproportionate to their bodies and they had no discernable mouths, was an entrepreneur. They spoke through telepathy, but it was a strange sort as anyone could eaves drop on anyone (so it was that Victor constantly found himself listening in on conversations).

One Didact resolved to make a better teleported; another worried over whether someone would buy his home out from under him. The Didact way of life at first it seemed to work well from Victor's

perspective. Then he discovered a cancer bubbling just under the surface. The rich and powerful employed workers at the lowest possible wage to maximize profit, resulting in poverty to ridiculous proportions. Once you became poor enough to lose your house you were unceremoniously “recycled”. Nothing went to waste in Megalopolis, not even waste. It was all recycled, and reused for something.

When Victor put forth the question; “Do you think it’s moral to employ child workers, and recycle your dead for food?” Galt replied simply with “What are morals?”

This was a week after Victor’s arrival In Megalopolis and he was brought before the Board of Scientific Funding and Research. His arrival had been barely noticed except by the few that had to deal with him, a group of three Didacts named Locke, Carnegie, and Edison. They questioned him for hours on topics as diverse as math, science, and government. When Victor announced that on his planet there were morals and belief in God, the three frowned in disgust. They declared his species compromised and decided the Human experiment, as well as the entirety of the universe, was to be terminated immediately.

As Victor prepared to depart back to Earth on the inter-universal teleporter, he came to the conclusion that he couldn’t let the Didacts destroy his world. So, in haste, Victor karate-chopped Galt in the neck, killing him instantly. He had not meant to kill him, but millions of years without manual labor had made the Didacts bodies extremely fragile. Victor didn’t have time to consider his actions as he went straight for the room that contained his universe. In the

Outerverse, his old universe was no more than the size of “Coke” can.

“Ray, let’s get the hell out of here!” yelled Victor out loud. Ray rolled into the room at lightning speed.

“Where to, kiddo?” asked Ray the robot, adopting both tone and linguistics from Leonard Stark.

“Anywhere, but here,” screamed Victor. A bright flash illuminated the white laboratory room, and Victor and Ray vanished.

Days passed quickly as Victor lost himself in his work and almost actually felt normal again for the first time since entering the Outerverse.

~ 17 ~

“We’re finished with the sixth level.” said a Heathen named Orwell, who usually spent his time writing.

“Okay. We’ll break for today and start level seven tomorrow.” said Victor stepping up to the edge of the pyramid, and looking down. He could see the vastness of the terrain from this high point and wished he had a camera as this would make a great picture. Soon Ray arrived with a state-of-the-art Kodak.

Victor noticed that all the land seemed to slope gently down from the river as Megalopolis loomed distant and huge beyond the river. The village covered the land before the pyramid, dotted with a mix of actual buildings and huts. A black dot appeared into Victor’s vision suddenly. It was Boxer returning from the one of the Narpets castle like fortified cities.

“Good news!” said Boxer landing next to Victor. “They are coming in two weeks.”

“How is this good news?” asked Victor.

“Well it is better then not knowing,” said Boxer.

“You’re right there,” said Victor. “Are you going to stay here this time?” asked Victor.

“I do not know if these Heathens would accept me,” said Boxer.

“They have accepted me as their messiah.” said Victor, smugly.

“C’mon, I could use you in a fight,” said Victor. Boxer shrugged.

“I will stay then,” said Boxer.

Victor and Ray had just teleported from Megalopolis, and found themselves leaving the frying pan and entering the fire. A loud explosion echoed from somewhere far off in the ruins. Victor stood in a large city not unlike those of the Didacts, with the grave exception that all the buildings had long fallen into ruin and decay. Large yellow and blue vines grew over everything and Victor was surprised by this as he had taken to thinking the Didacts were the only form of life present in this world. He had been given no thoughts to the contrary in Megalopolis. Under his feet was another form of life - a pink growth that looked like moss. It was a very moving scene, nature taking back some long forgotten city. Then another explosion was heard, this time much closer, and Victor witnessed a building collapse in the distance. A buzzing sound began to fill the air, and being more than a little spooked Victor looked for somewhere to lay low. As he moved towards a close ruin of a building cut in two by time he was reminded that his robot had come with him. The buzzing grew louder, and Victor noticed the skies darkening on either side of what was once a huge road. Victor wasn’t feeling very curious as to what was approaching so he moved a little farther back into the building. As he was about move back further the wall next to him jettisoned bricks from it as something hit the other side. Victor broke into a run deeper into the building. The buzzing sound was deafening now, and parts of the building were

breaking everywhere. Victor reached an elevator with no power, and turned around to face what ever was coming.

“What the hell’s going on, Ray?”

“The Narpets are in the middle of a revolution.” transmitted the robot.

“What is a Narpet?” asked Victor as another crash was heard inside the building.

“The Narpets are one of three dominant civilizations’ in the Outerverse.”

“Three? What about the third dominant civilization?” asked Victor.

“They are called the Uncivilized Heathens,” said Ray.

“Sounds promising.” said Victor sarcastically. He looked around, but as he was about to decide where to run a dark presence appeared before him. It stood in the doorway to the elevator room staring at him. It had large insect like wings, and four large ape-like arms that it stood on. Long hair on its head reminded Victor of a seventies rock legend but with a face that slightly resembled a horse.

“Welcome. brother” said the Narpet, named Boxer with a booming voice gesturing for a hug with two of its large arms. Victor stood still unsure of what to do next.

“Hugging is an initiation into the Narpet clan.” said Ray. Victor took a step forward, and paused again before he stepped into the Narpet’s arms and felt like he was nearly crushed.

“So, then who are you friend? And what at last made you see that the way of equality was the right way?” asked Boxer.

“I’m Victor, and...” he paused trying to think quickly “...I was fed up with the Didacts.”

“Isn’t everyone?” said Boxer laughing. “We’re called Boxer and we were born equal. Well we think the major fighting is over care to hear our glorious leader address the equals?”

Victor followed Boxer out into the large nature controlled street to find thousands of Narpets. He was shocked to find the ruins more ruined than he had left them. It looked as if a war had been fought in his time inside the ruined building. As he stepped onto the street he heard a squishing sound. Looking down he found himself standing on one of many dead Narpet corpses that newly littered the ground.

“My fellow Narpets!” yelled a Narpet standing on a group of other Narpets. “We have triumphed over the old guard and now we shall impose our reforms with equal power!” The crowd erupted into cheers. “As we said when we began this crusade; no Narpet should find ourself above any of us!” One of the Narpets the Narpet was standing on twitched. “That former ruler thought themself a king, but we know there is no inequality. We implore any of ourselves to take action like we did against this kind of injustice.” The crowd erupted into applause again. “Now we shall all be equal until the ending of time and no Narpet should find ourself above any of us!”

The crowd erupted into cries of, “Oh captain, my captain Marx” apparently this was the Narpet’s name.

Boxer turned to Victor. “He’s the most equal leader in Narpet history.” Marx flew off, and the army of Narpets began to follow him. “Well, my lad we think you’ll need to climb on to us” said Boxer. Victor did as he thought he was told.

“I need to bring my robot” said Victor.

“What is I?” asked Boxer grabbing Ray and taking to the sky.

Soon they arrived in the Narpet’s home city, called *All Made Equal*. This name was displayed on a building that was overtly bigger than any other in the city. The Narpet’s home reminded Victor of a feudal-era castle with a large wall, and a huge tower in the middle in which the leader, Marx lived atop. Marx seemed to be one big contradiction and when a young Narpet named Fidel approached him in a tavern to ask his help in overthrowing Marx, Victor was quite receptive.

During his time in *All Made Equal*, Victor worked as a grunt with Boxer, who he found to be a very gentle and caring soul, if not a little dim. Boxer could only remember events up to a year ago, which disturbed Victor who felt that those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it. So it was that Victor bought Boxer the Narpet equivalent of a journal. Boxer, overjoyed with this gift, took to writing daily.

Victor, meanwhile, began working with Fidel to overthrow Marx. Together they found it surprisingly easy to rally troops and soon Victor let Boxer in on the secret. But Boxer was resistant stating; “We have just revolted, give Marx a chance.” Nevertheless, three

weeks later another revolution occurred, which Fidel dubbed “The Peoples Revolution Against Tyranny.”

The transition of power was quick as Fidel’s troops defeated Marx because they outnumbered them. Victor walked to All Made Equal’s town square to watch Fidel’s victory speech. Once there he found himself shocked to see Marx hanging by his legs in a crowd of Narpets.

“Let the execution of the Tyrant begin!” said Fidel.

The crowd began to beat Marx senseless, and his arm flew past Victor’s face as he screamed, “Stop.” Fidel noticed Victor screaming above the shouts of the Narpets as they mercilessly destroyed Marx’s body.

“What is it Brother Victor?” asked Fidel.

“You can’t start a new government in blood,” said Victor, “It didn’t work for anyone back on my planet.”

“This is not your planet.” said Fidel “And we will be true to our word, unlike the tyrant Marx.” A week later Fidel moved into the tallest room of the tower in the middle of All Made Equal, but unlike Marx Fidel set up a bigger military to keep control, and soon anyone suspected of being a former Marx supporter faced the same fate as Marx. Victor was horrified as he came back to Boxer’s house where he was living after some work digging graves.

“We remember Marx’s revolution,” said Boxer as Victor stepped in the door. “We wrote it down in the journal you gave us so we would

never forget and it was much like this. We suspect the revolutions will continue, they always do.”

Sure enough within a month another revolution had occurred, and Victor found himself talking to Boxer about the letter I. Boxer’s mind had grown by leaps and bounds with the introduction of the journal and he was more opposed to the way of Narpet revolution than even Victor was. Victor instructed Boxer daily on the ideas of individual freedom, democracy, and the checks and balances of power.

Soon Victor arrival that he was approached by another revolutionary named Lenin while he sat in a tavern in All Are Equal.

## ~ 18 ~

**T**he time until the other Narpets arrival drained quickly. With the work of Boxer, Ray, and the Uncivilized Heathens, it looked like they would just manage to finish. Victor stood at the base of the pyramid looking at the only entrance. Inside it was dark, but he was sure the walls would protect them from what ever the weapons the Narpets had. After all, he had lived with them long enough to realize they we're not all that technologically advanced. As for the Didacts he was not as sure.

“We’re done.” said Apollo walking down the large ramp they used the carry stones to the next building level.

“Great! And with a day to spare!” exclaimed Victor. “I need you, and the rest of the Heathens who helped me to tell everyone that if intruders should arrive this is where they need to gather.

“Yes sir.” said Apollo.

“So why did you decide on making the fortress a pyramid?” asked Boxer.

“I had a dream.” said Victor. “The second night I was here. It was of me falling towards the great pyramid of Giza. I thought I was going to die, but just as I was about to hit the top everything went dark, and I watched as planets zoomed by. Stars came within inches of my

feet. Black holes sucked at my finger tips, and comets synched my hair. Then I found myself inside the Didacts Laboratory container.”

“That’s a vivid dream!” said Boxer.

“Well it was a dream of how I got here.” said Victor walking towards the building he was staying in.

“There is movement to the north!” alerted Ray. “They’re early!”

The sun of the Outerverse was a strange thing. The Didacts had tried to explain it to Victor but he hadn’t grasped a single thing about it. No matter how the Outerverse’s celestial bodies worked the sun was going down. Victor yelled for Boxer, and he appeared in minutes.

“Ray says there is movement up north. Let’s go check it out.” said Victor. Boxer landed and Victor got on his back. The pair took off like a rocket and, sure enough, they soon spotted a large encampment of Narpets, no doubt waiting for daybreak to attack. Off to the right just barely visible Victor noticed another light.

“Let’s check that out.” pointed Victor. Boxer veered right and they were flying over a group of Didacts. They had tons of heavy machinery, presumably for clearing the Uncivilized Heathens village and starting construction on their own new structures.

“They’re both here at the same time!” cried Victor. “Get everybody into the pyramid,” said Victor. Suddenly lightning flashed across the sky.

“What was that?” asked a bewildered Boxer.

“Lightning. Haven’t you ever seen it before?”

“No.” said Boxer. The wind changed, and the flying pair was almost blown to the ground. They were just barely hovering off the ground when rain began to pound them from above. Boxer descended as his wings got wetter and heavier and soon they hit the ground with a smack. “What is this water from the sky?” asked Boxer.

“Come on we’re going to have to run,” said Victor. They were feet from the banks of the huge river and as they began to head towards the village, Boxer noticed something odd.

“The river seems bigger.” Victor paused to survey the land. “It’s going to flood and all this land is sloping slightly downward!”

“What does that mean?” asked Boxer.

“It means we’re all going to be underwater unless we climb the pyramid,” yelled Victor. The two sped off as fast as they could towards the village.

Once they reached the first hut Victor noticed that everyone of the Heathens was standing looking mystified by the rain.

“Run to the pyramid!” yelled Victor. The Heathens cast strange looks at him. Apollo stood beside his home as Victor ran towards the pyramid. “Apollo, Get as many people as you can to the top of the pyramid! Boxer, you need to go that way and try to get people. I’ll go this way.”

The pair split off and went about telling people to make for the pyramid with mixed results. The river, a short distance away was

cresting, and the Didacts moving with their machinery were staring at it unsure of what to do when it broke the bank. It began to surge towards the Uncivilized Heathens village.

“We must get to higher ground, kiddo.” said Ray rolling up behind Victor.

They made for the pyramids work ramp and got to it as water washed away the village behind them. Victor just made it the extra step out of the waters reach and he wheeled around to see Ray using its tentacles to hang on for dear life. Victor kneeled next to the rising water and reached for Ray. “Leave me, kiddo.” said the robot.

“Uncle, I’m not losing you again!” cried Victor, lost in the moment. He grasped Ray, and threw himself backwards as water hit his feet. “I got you, Leonard.”

He continued to the top and found a handful of Heathens. Victor lay on top of the pyramid as the water continued to rise and contemplated his life as he clutched onto Ray. He found himself wishing he was still working at the pizza shop with Laura. Hell, he would even trade his coming death by flood, for another dinner at Maginot’s with Cassandra arguing about global warming. Anything now seemed better than death in a faraway universe. Victor fell asleep and dreamed of a trip to Egypt with his uncle that had never occurred.

Sun warmed Victor’s face as he popped his eyes open to a water land. The rain, thunder, and lightning of the night before were all gone and the floodwaters had crested on the seventh of eight levels

of the pyramid. The few Heathens that had survived gave cheers of “Praise Victor, the pyramid creator.”

“Anyone up for a swim?” joked Victor.

Victor closed his eyes and wondered to himself “Had this been god’s wrath? Or his help?”

The Outer Verse was utterly changed by the flood. Gone were all the buildings of the Uncivilized Heathens, who had now taken to calling themselves “The Victors”. There was no trace of the Didacts or the Narpets. When Winston the historian began writing for historical accounts, Victor requested that he entitle the story of these days “Thank Leonard for buying those tickets.”

## ~ Epilogue ~

**V**ictor rolled out of bed and felt the sting as his bare feet touched the cold, hardwood floor. He quickly threw on a pair of socks and wrapped a blanket around his shoulder. He started some coffee and fired up his laptop, lamenting the moderate snowfall of four or five inches that blanketed the Philadelphia streets outside. This meant that it will be much more difficult getting around today, and today is a very critical day. Today is the start of the annual convention of the *The Leonard Stark Historical Society*. Over recent years, the society had grown exponentially to include chapters in every state as well as 43 countries worldwide. As president of the society, Victor is ultimately responsible for all the major logistical concerns that such a convention entails – accommodations, caterers, permits, translators, speakers fees, entertainment, not to mention his primary responsibility of reviewing all the content for historical accuracy. Also, Victor will be presenting to the board a group of five brand new vice presidents, including a young, female native-Australian who worked to become one of the most successful female women in Philadelphia.

Victor leaned back, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. Somewhere in the howl of the winter wind outside he swore he heard his uncle's voice whisper "Time to get to work, kiddo." With that he jumped to his feet and got ready to roll. Little did he know, but he would soon rank this day as his favorite day ever.