Grabbing at Water

December 21st

R,

You asked me once if there was a difference between loving someone and being in love. I wasn't quite sure how to answer at the time; your question caught me completely off guard. I've had a lot of time to think about it since, too much time, if the truth be told. And like you said, the truth should be told. The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer once wrote, "Life is short, and truth works far and lives long: let us speak the truth." The truth is: I still don't know how to answer you. There's a difference; I know there is. But what?

Before it can be determined what the difference might be, it's important to ascertain whether love even exists. After all, it can't be touched, tasted, smelled, heard, or even seen. Nevertheless, there it is. Could love be a light that somehow illuminates our lives? If it is, then my world was in utter darkness before I met you, as it is once again.

If I'm going to establish whether love exists in an analytical fashion, then it's probably best to leave personal experience out. Instead, I'll approach it like it was a problem presented in one of those Logic classes I took in college. Setting it up syllogistically, I'll begin with one popular definition of love as the major premise: God is love. The minor premise would then be: the existence of God cannot be proven. Therefore, the conclusion must be: the existence of

love cannot be proven.

Still, I believe love does exist. Most people seem to prefer more of an empirical approach to the topic. For them, experience is the only true path to understanding love. The rationale at work is that one must first be in love to comprehend love. That system creates a conundrum. When love comes, how does one know one is really in love without having first been in love? It's a serious problem. All I know is that before I met you, love, to me, was the null set. That's because prior to you, I only knew love through its absence--it was an emptiness, a yearning, an inexplicable melancholy. That feels like a lifetime ago; it was four months.

After all of this theorization, I still haven't come close to answering your original question. And really, it's not your question that vexes me; it's you. I sometimes wonder if it wouldn't have been better for me if that PAT bus we first met on would've just run me over instead. I don't think it's too great an exaggeration to say that I'd be no more wrecked than I am today. It feels like the time when I was in the second grade and one of the school bullies, John John Okinsky, punched me in the gut and it sucked all the wind out of me and dropped me to my knees. I haven't made it back to my feet yet.

What really gets me is now that I've loved, I'm not so sure I know any more about it than I did before. I only know that it's powerful, more powerful than anything I'd ever imagined. It destroys us—utterly obliterates us. And what remains afterwards? Well, I guess that's who we are.

D

Chapter I

It was Monday, September 23rd. What makes this particular date worth mentioning—since, in the scheme of things, one day is generally not that much different from the one that goes before it or the one that follows--is that it marked the autumnal equinox. The autumnal equinox happens to be one of just two times during the calendar year when the sun crosses the celestial equator, dividing day and night into equal portions. On the equinox, darkness and light, yin and yang, even cats and dogs, all stand in complete balance. It signifies the cusp of autumn, when the warm, sunny summer afternoons haven't quite given way to the cool, gray days of fall--the end of one season and the beginning of the next. As he and two co-workers strolled back to their office building in downtown Pittsburgh, in the center of seven hills, on a piece of ground where two rivers come together to form one, Drew Timmons was aware of exactly none of this.

"Let's go get some ice cream," Rudy suggested. Rudy and Drew worked as claims analysts for Hegemona Trust Company in their home office.

"I don't know if that's such a good idea," Drew replied; twisting his long, lean body to allow a heavy-set woman with Kaufman's bags in each hand to pass. The sidewalks were teeming with shoppers and office workers out on their lunch break, despite the tepid, overcast weather. "We've already been gone an hour and fifteen minutes and technically we're only supposed to take an hour for lunch."

"Technically--schmechnically," Rudy smirked. At thirty-two, Rudy had a few years on Drew, although the bags under his eyes and his squat, paunchy physique made him appear older

still. “I want some ice cream. How about you, Dena?”

“I don’t know,” Dena responded. Barely twenty years old, she was petite, with loads of blonde hair and striking, green eyes. She also worked at Hegemona, as a customer service representative. When someone would call Hegemona with a disability claim, she’d take the report and then assign it to a benefits analyst like Drew or Rudy. Rudy liked to take customer service reps like Dena out to lunch from time to time to try to ensure he that didn’t get stuck with any dogs. “Ice cream does sound good.”

“You see?” Rudy turned to Drew triumphantly, “Dena thinks it’s a good idea.”

They were walking down Sixth Street, approaching the six-story brownstone that was home to the Duquesne Club. A wide set of stone stairs, shielded from the elements by a canopy, led up to the main entrance, which was attended by a uniformed valet. It was said that at the turn of the last century, the fate of the country was often decided over lunch at this private business club. That was back when America’s business was big business and the Pittsburgh landscape was dominated by Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick’s steel mills. But Frick and Carnegie had long since passed, as had most of their mills. The dealings within the club were on a much more pedestrian scale now, but it nevertheless retained its aura of power and exclusivity.

As the three were passing a narrow alley adjacent to the club, out of the shadows stepped a homeless man. He was in his forties, dressed in tattered jeans and an Army fatigue jacket, and he had a light in his eyes that wasn’t all craziness. He stationed himself in front of the group, forcing them to halt abruptly. Having gotten their attention, he nodded at Dena standing in the middle and demanded of Drew, “She your girlfriend?”

“Excuse me?” Drew responded.

“You heard me,” he continued deliberately. “I axed you is she your girlfriend?”

Rudy stepped forward and interjected indignantly, “How do you know she’s not *my* girlfriend?”

The man sized Rudy up for a second. Rudy stood a good head shorter than Drew, was overweight and unkempt. Maybe anthropologists could find some obscure culture in the Australian Outback in which Rudy might be considered more physically attractive than Drew, but not in this one. The homeless guy smiled and said, “No, you too ugly. Gotta be him.”

Dena was not, in fact, Drew’s girlfriend, nor were they even dating. But he wasn’t certain where this question was leading, so he answered, “Yes, she’s my girlfriend.”

That seemed to be the response the homeless guy was looking for. He narrowed his eyes, as if taking a careful appraisal of Drew, and asked, “Would you swordfight for her?”

A cab stopped nearby to drop someone off at the club and the car behind it blared its horn. “Would I what?” Drew asked, nonplussed.

“You need to check your ears, boy,” the homeless guy snapped back doggedly, “I think you got a hearing problem--always saying, ‘excuse me?’ and ‘I beg your pardon?’ every time somebody axes you a question. I said would you swordfight for her? It’s a simple question.”

People were streaming by on either side of the little group, some pausing to glance back as they passed. Drew thought he spied an escape, replying, “I don’t know how to swordfight.”

“Don’t matter,” remarked the homeless guy, keeping himself planted squarely in front of the three. He wasn’t letting Drew off that easy.

Drew turned to his companions for help. Dena smiled at him uncomfortably and on the other side of her, Rudy was looking at his watch impatiently. “Well, then, no,” Drew stammered, “I guess I probably wouldn’t swordfight for her.”

The homeless guy turned and waved them past like a matador, exclaiming: “Then let her

go cause you don't love her. If you loved her, you'd swordfight for her, even if you don't know how."

The three looked at each other for a moment and, without saying a word, headed straight back to their office.

An hour later, Drew found himself in his cubicle staring at the telephone in disbelief. He swiveled his chair and glanced around, the beige walls were completely bare except for a picture of a Caribbean beach torn from a magazine and thumbtacked haphazardly to the back wall. His eyes came to rest on his digital travel clock, it was only two-fifteen; he still had almost three hours to go. It struck Drew that all he ever did, since coming to Hegemona three years earlier, was argue over the phone with complete strangers about work-related, long-term disability claims that he really didn't care about one way or the other.

"I don't understand what the problem is, Drew," came the voice from the other end of the line.

Taking a deep breath, Drew exhaled and began slowly, "Okay, let me explain this to you one more time, Mr. Sopher. My company is going to have to cancel your client's disability because it appears from our investigation that he is able to return to full-time employment. As I told you, we received some anonymous tips concerning Mr. Dudinsky so we assigned a private investigator to his case. Allow me to assure you, again, we are not discriminating against Mr. Dudinsky because he is of Polish-American descent, we simply follow up on all reports of this nature in the same manner. Our investigator has filmed your client splitting logs, sanding and painting his yacht and dancing a very difficult polka step with several different ladies at the Polish Club. These are all highly unusual activities for a man on total physical disability."

"It's not a yacht."

"Pardon me, sir?"

"It's not a yacht, Drew. You can hardly call a twenty-five foot vessel a yacht. It's a luxury boat at best."

"What's at question here, Mr. Sopher, is not whether it was a boat or a yacht but what your client was doing sanding and painting it." Drew began to absently finger a coffee mug placed on the far corner of his desk, filled with pens and pencils. The only personal effect in his workspace, the mug was dark blue with a gold seal depicting an anchor surrounded by a life preserver and crossed by two cannons. Underneath was printed: 'USS Redemption'. "According to medical reports supplied to me by your firm, Mr. Dudinsky is barely able to stand because of lower-back problems."

"That's right, he is barely able to stand. He has an almost crippling lumbar strain. It's awful; he's in constant pain. And now you're trying to add mental anguish to his very real physical agony by attempting to cut off his disability payments. That damn steel mill broke him. Even if he were in any sort of shape to go back to work, which he isn't, where would he go? The Homestead Works ten years ago--all of the steel mills have closed. That disability is my client's life-blood. How can he survive without it? He obviously can't work considering the shape he's in."

"He seemed to be doing all right with the logs and the yacht, Mr. Sopher."

"Boat! Besides, that was all medically prescribed therapy. He can't sustain those activities for long periods of time. Are you people going to take the word of some peeper with a camcorder over the opinions of three of the most respected chiropractors in Western Pennsylvania, all of whose reports are in front of me at this very moment?"

"I don’t have any other choice, Mr. Sopher. My examiner in this case insisted we deny coverage. There’s nothing I can do about it."

"That video won't stand up in court, I saw it. There is no way you can identify Mr. Dudinsky as the subject of that tape."

"I don’t know about that, Mr. Sopher, I let our attorneys worry about those matters. I do know, however, that we also have five sworn statements from witnesses."

"Okay, Drew, okay. You're a tough negotiator. I'm willing to take the pill and it's a bitter pill. My client has authorized me to accept a fifteen percent cut in benefits owing to his slightly improved condition."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sopher, but I told you, my examiner has instructed me to give your client a one hundred percent reduction in benefits. I don’t have any say in it."

"This treatment is shocking, Drew. In fact, it’s worse than shocking, it’s appalling! It looks as though I’ll have to settle this through litigation. You'll regret this decision, young man!" A ringing ‘click’ brought the conversation to an abrupt halt.

Gently hanging up, Drew took a gulp of coffee and muttered, "I usually do, Mr. Sopher. I usually do."

Later that afternoon, Drew and Rudy were waiting for the bus after work. “Oh man,” Rudy said, watching a thin layer of dark clouds roll across the late afternoon sky, “it better not rain. I don’t have an umbrella and I just got this suit cleaned.”

“It won’t rain,” Drew replied, not looking up from the late edition of the *Post Gazette*. Behind him, a group of twenty commuters, mostly working stiffs like Drew and Rudy, shifted restlessly around the tiny bus shelter. The street before them was thick with rush hour traffic.

"How do you know it's not going to rain?" Rudy demanded, turning to look up at him.

"It's just overcast," Drew answered, taking a drag on his cigarette. A strong breeze rattled his newspaper. "The clouds are blacker and more cumulus when it's about to rain."

"Cumulus? How do you know so much about it? Did you study meteorology in college or something?"

"No, I watch the Weather Channel."

Drew glanced over his newspaper toward the horizon and recalled his grandmother telling him when he was a boy that as late as the 1950's the sun was often obscured from the daytime Pittsburgh sky by a shroud of thick, black smog which issued from the steel mills. It wasn't unusual for an office worker in the 'Smoky City' days to return home in the evening to find his white dress shirt turned a deep, charcoal gray by air pollution. That was long ago, though, a different age. Attorney Sopher had been right about one thing, the mills were all gone now.

Rudy paced the sidewalk in front of the bus stop in agitation. "What time is it?"

"Pardon me?" Drew peered around the newspaper, his brown eyes coming to rest on Rudy's olive-colored face.

"I said what time is it?"

Drew placed the cigarette he was smoking between his lips and stuffed the paper under his arm. The wind tousled his short, neat, walnut brown hair. Glancing at his wristwatch, he responded, "It's 5:04, two minutes past the last time you asked."

"What's up with these buses?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, why's it take them so long? This is ridiculous. I don't know how anyone can

ride them. We should have a dictator."

"What?"

"We should have a dictator, like Mussolini in Italy. At least he made the buses run on time."

"What about the excesses and oppression of fascism? What about the Second World War?"

"I didn't say it wasn't without its drawbacks."

"Besides," Drew added, returning to his newspaper, "it was the trains."

"Huh?"

"It was the trains Mussolini got to run on time, not the buses."

"Whatever," Rudy dismissed the topic with a wave of his hand. "Here it is, finally."

With a hiss, the bus came to a halt and the doors snapped open. The crowd at the stop surged forward, men and women alike elbowing one another, jockeying for position to secure a seat. Rudy shoved his way to the front in time to save a pair in the center of the bus. Drew took one last drag on his cigarette, flicked the butt to the ground, stepped on it and boarded last.

"It's like a cattle call out there," Rudy observed as Drew sat down beside him and the bus pulled away.

"That it is, Rudy."

"How can you people put up with this? It's inhuman. Thank God my car will be out of the shop tomorrow."

"Oh, we get by, somehow." Drew unfolded his paper and went back to skimming the headlines. He was searching for anything upbeat--a happy story to bring a little light into this otherwise dreary day, but he was coming up empty. He couldn't even take refuge in the sports

section, since half of it read like a police blotter anymore. He was thinking distractedly: 'It can't help but make you wonder...' when he felt Rudy's elbow dig into his side. "What?" he asked, a little annoyed.

Rudy nodded in the direction of the man who'd taken a seat facing them across the aisle. He was a behemoth, and judging by his appearance, had probably been the subject of one or two episodes of *America's Most Wanted*. Standing, he probably went 6'5" or 6'6", with 260 pounds of solid muscle covering that massive frame. He wore tattered jeans, biker boots, a plain white t-shirt and leather jacket. A pair of reflective, wrap-around sunglasses covered his eyes and a cowboy hat, with the brim tilted back, rested on his head. Drew and Rudy looked wide-eyed at one another.

"He could play in the NFL," Rudy whispered.

"Or the Pennsylvania Correctional League," Drew shot back in a hushed tone. "Stop staring."

"Don't worry, I think he's asleep. Is he a PAT Transit regular?"

Drew shook his head, "I've never seen him before; I think I'd remember."

"Check out his hands."

Drew peered over his paper. The back of the giant, biker guy's head rested against the window and his thick chest was moving up and down rhythmically--he did appear to be napping. He checked out the big man's hands, which were cupped over his knees. Rudy was right; they were the most remarkable feature on an already extraordinary specimen. They were powerful and cruel--tools for ripping and smashing. The knuckles were thick and misshapen and something appeared to be printed on them. Without thinking, he edged forward and squinted in an effort to make out what it said. Crudely tattooed in India ink across his right hand, starting

with the knuckle on his pinkie finger, were the letters: ‘K I L L’. The message continued onto the first two digits of his left fist with the letters ‘E R’. He’d seen homemade tattoo jobs like this before, and thought, ‘Definitely Pennsylvania Correctional League’.

As he was studying the biker-guy’s hairy mitts, Drew began to get the feeling that he too was being watched. He looked up slowly to find himself staring at his own reflection in the biker guy’s sunglasses. The burly, biker-guy, who was now unquestionably wide-awake, locked onto him with a gaze that felt like a sniper's tracer beam. Drew found himself unable to move or to look away and his mouth had suddenly gone dry. The biker-guy sneered, curling back his upper lip to reveal some really bad dental work.

The bus lurched to a stop at a traffic light, depositing Drew in Rudy’s lap. “You’re fresh,” Rudy exclaimed.

Drew hopped back into his seat and snapped the newspaper up in front of himself like a frightened child pulling his bed-covers over his face.

"I don’t think he liked you staring at him,” Rudy leaned over and whispered, laughing.

“Thanks, Rudy.”

Drew glanced out the window; he could still feel the biker-guy’s eyes on him. The bus was approaching the final stop before leaving downtown. It was situated at the corner of Stanwix Street and the Boulevard of the Allies, adjacent to the sparkling PPG Place. Drew studied the five high-rise buildings that made up the complex. Their facades consisted of emerald green, plate glass and were topped with towers and turrets like a castle. While most observers mooned over the architecture, to Drew it was just one more example of the city planners attempt to erase any memory of the town’s blue-collar heritage. Steel city? What steel? Welcome to Disneyburgh! The fact of the matter was that without the steel mills that had made

it famous, Pittsburgh was just any other mid-sized, Northeastern city.

The bus came to a halt and more passengers began to pile on. Drew, newspaper held firmly in front of his face, was happy to have some bodies between the biker-guy and himself. As the last passengers were boarding, he heard Rudy exclaim: "Hello." The word rolled off his lips like a gambler who has just drawn into a straight flush. He lowered his paper to see what had so excited his companion.

Standing in the entry, depositing her fare was a young woman in a dark suit. She wore her lustrous, black hair up, with a few ringlets falling out from under a wide-brimmed sun hat. The festive white hat was in complete contrast to her otherwise conservative business attire, not to mention the weather.

After paying, she turned to make her way to the back of the bus. At her approach, Drew quickly smoothed down his wind-rumpled hair and tried to appear casual and unconcerned. It was an exercise in futility. Beautiful women had the same effect on him as car accidents--he couldn't tear his eyes away but he was powerless to act.

She swept down the aisle like a wave, creating a ripple of turning heads in her wake. The passengers who boarded after her could've all ridden for free that day because the driver, a tall, gaunt man in his mid-thirties, completely ignored them, staring after the girl. Taking no notice of the attention, or at least not reacting to it, she made her way toward the back of the bus. She didn't slink like a supermodel or walk the construction worker's wiggle; she didn't need to.

This was a girl unlike any other Drew had ever seen. In his experience, most beautiful women had that attitude like they invented being good-looking, or something. Not this girl. And there was something more, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. It wasn't so much a trait she possessed; rather, it was something that wasn't there. He saw this thing she lacked

hundreds of times every day on the faces of people he encountered in the office, on the street, on the bus. It was a slack, etherized look--like extras in George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*--as though one morning, over Cheerios and coffee, they'd been stricken with the realization that life had gotten as good as it ever would and what was there left to look forward to but thirty more years of work, cable TV, bowling on Friday nights and summers at Lake Pymatuning?

This girl was different. She was a spirit possessed of a body, not the other way around. He saw in her an opportunity, but not for romance or sex, like the other male passengers and the driver as well, for that matter. The possibility he saw in her was a chance at life. As she breezed past him, her dark eyes met his and she smiled. He tried to smile back but found his facial muscles frozen in place. She arched her eyebrows and laughed, a playful twinkle lit her dark eyes. Then she moved on. In real time, it had lasted no more than a fraction of a second. But for Drew, the moment crystallized and seemed to stretch out into eternity like a dying breath.

He watched as she picked her way to the back. There were no open seats but a young man who looked like a college student leapt to his feet and proffered his. She thanked him and sat down, while the student hung onto the handrail and grinned dumbly at her.

Rudy leaned over and panted: "Oh man, I'd like to--"

"Rudy," Drew cut him off in mid sentence.

"What? Can't a guy appreciate beauty? Anyway, did you see the way she smiled at me?"

"I saw her smile."

He tried returning to his newspaper, but found himself no longer able to concentrate. There was something about the way she laughed when she passed him--it wasn't a mocking laugh, nor was it a knee-slapping, yuk-it-up laugh. It was a warm, full laugh, nothing fake about

it. Drew thought he'd like to love a woman who could laugh like that. So, every few seconds, he'd steal another glimpse. She was reading a hard cover book with the dust jacket removed. An overweight man in his late forties wearing a green polyester suit sat beside her, sweating profusely. Drew watched him wipe the perspiration from his bald pate with a handkerchief and stare over his shoulder at the girl.

Since he was certain he'd never seen her before, he pondered what a beautiful girl like this was doing riding the bus. He understood that even the beautiful people had to work--some of them--but none of them seemed to ride the bus. At least, not any bus he'd ever been on. He also wondered where she might be heading.

The answer to his second question came perhaps a little sooner than he would've liked. After ten minutes on the Parkway, they reached Squirrel Hill, a tony section of the city populated mostly by professional types. Further on lay the Homestead Hi-Level Bridge, which crossed the Monongahela River. Beneath the bridge, on the opposite shore, lay the skeletal remains of the Homestead Works, the defunct steel mill where Drew's father had worked his entire adult life. Drew lived in Homestead, the once prosperous mill town on the far shore.

When she got up at the first Squirrel Hill stop, he realized he'd actually been dreading this moment. She walked to the front of the bus, glancing ever so briefly at him as she passed. He watched as she descended the steps to the sidewalk. From the profile, he thought the fine lines of her face and neck resembled a classical Greek sculpture. As four other people shuffled off after her, he contemplated falling in line with them and following her off. But that was just a fantasy; the door soon clapped shut and the bus pulled out with a groan.

As she walked away from the stop, the wind began to gust, forcing her to clamp down on her sun hat with one hand and the back of her skirt with the other. He trailed her with his eyes as

she disappeared over the hill. He was aware that this was probably the last time he'd ever see her. Glancing across the aisle, Drew noticed the biker-guy was also staring intently after her. Even thugs can appreciate beauty when confronted with it, he thought.

Chapter II

At the next stop, Rudy got up to leave. Drew folded his paper and tossed it on the empty seat beside him, saying, "Wait up, Rudy."

Rudy paused and looked back at him, "This isn't your stop is it? We haven't even crossed the bridge yet."

"Yeah, I know," Drew arose and followed Rudy off the bus. Once they were both standing on the sidewalk in front of a drive-thru beer distributor, the doors to the buss snapped shut behind them and it pulled away. Turning to Drew, Rudy said, "What are you doing? It's got to be at least another mile to your place."

"I just feel like walking, okay?"

A knowing grin broke across Rudy's face, "You're going to try to follow that girl home, aren't you? You're a stalker, Drew! Good for you, I didn't think you had that much spunk."

"I don't. I mean I'm not a stalker, Rudy. I leave those sorts of things to you. I just want walk today, if that's all right with you. I need the exercise."

"Whatever," Rudy said, turning to go. "I gotta get home. Ma's making lasagna for supper tonight, and she wigs-out if I'm not on time. Later."

As Drew watched Rudy march up the hill in the direction of the girl's stop, he shook his head--a thirty-two year old man afraid that his mother might be cross with him if he's late for dinner. For a moment he considered waiting until Rudy was out of sight and then trying to find the girl. But Rudy was right, something like that, no matter how innocent his intentions might be, would place him firmly in the stalker category. So he turned and began walking down the hill toward the Homestead Hi-Level Bridge. There wasn't a great deal of development on this

side of the hill. There were a couple small businesses, some fast food restaurants and the beer distributor--no houses.

Traffic was heavy across the bridge, but he was the only pedestrian. It was a long bridge, and not particularly close to anything, so most people drove or caught a bus across it. As he approached the far end, he paused to light a cigarette. Pulling on it, he shook out the match and gazed directly beneath him at the Homestead Works, or what was left of it. It had once, not so long ago, consisted of four hundred and fifty buildings sprawled over a four hundred and thirty-acre, three-mile strip tucked between the river and the hills. In its hey-day, it was more like a small town than an industrial complex. But the United States Steel Corporation had proven to be not so efficient at running the mill, as was its founder, Andrew Carnegie. In the mid-eighties, after years of cutbacks and downsizing, the gates of the once-mighty Homestead Works had closed for good.

Now it would be impossible for a passing motorist, not already familiar with local history, to tell that just a decade earlier a huge and bustling steel mill stood on the leveled, dirt tracts below. The slabbing, blooming and finishing mills had all been stripped and then torn down, one by one. Ten years after the company had closed the plant, all that remained were a handful of the satellite buildings--some warehouses, a few storage shelters--and a freestanding row of twelve smokestacks from a slab rolling mill.

Drew squinted in the fading light and couldn't believe that this was the same spot that had once been the world's greatest steel manufacturer. The Homestead Works had been a twentieth-century feudal estate dedicated solely to the production of steel. It was a self-contained city whose arteries oozed tons of molten metal--a city which belched the fire of ten thousand dragons twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year, without

interruption. Now it was gone, leaving only a gaping abyss. Drew wondered what was left to commemorate the hundreds of thousands of workers who'd made the mill go for more than a century, and whom the mill, in its turn, had sustained. Had they all, like his parents, crossed over into the void without a trace? Could this darkened plot of barren soil be the same place that had once smoked and thundered with all the fury of Zeus hurling lightning bolts from atop Mt. Olympus? The same place which would strike the young Drew mute with fear and awe each time he came near it? It seemed impossible but it was gone, all gone.

Dragging on his cigarette, he thought back to a warm June night when he was eight. School had let out for the summer a few weeks earlier and, with no homework to occupy him, he was free to roam the neighborhood. On clear nights, he'd often climb onto the rusty, tin roof of a neighbor's garage and watch the mill light up the evening sky. On this particular night, he decided to take a closer look.

It was just past nine o'clock and he was perched atop his neighbor's garage, watching the sun spread out a gentle tangerine and pink across the western horizon. A glance at the calendar would've shown it was the summer solstice--the longest day of the year. Being a fairly normal eight-year old, Drew was oblivious to this fact. He didn't need a farmer's almanac to realize he'd get a few extra minutes this evening before his curfew rolled around at sundown. And with his father working the second turn, he was less concerned about repercussions over returning home late.

So he scrambled down from the garage, and cut through the patchwork of crabgrass in his neighbor's back yard to his house. Following the cement walkway to the front porch, he pushed in the screen door and called to his mother that he was going for a walk. Not waiting for a response, he let the door swing shut and headed up the street. He dug in his jeans' pocket for a

super ball he'd gotten from a bubble gum machine at the grocery store earlier in the day. The ball was small--about the size of a gumball--and clear with ribbons of orange, green and purple running through it. Gently bouncing the ball, so that it didn't take off on him, he turned the corner at the end of his street and started down the hill.

The evening air was hot and muggy, but a light breeze was blowing, cooling things off a bit. The warm weather had drawn the entire neighborhood outside. All down the hill, people were relaxing on porch swings or in lawn chairs set up in their tiny front yards, sipping Iron City beer and Lemon Blend. KDKA Radio's broadcast of the Pirates game floated into the street through open windows and doors.

When he reached Eighth Avenue, the strip was alive. Carloads of teenage boys cruised up and down the street in hopped-up GTO's and Mustangs. The sidewalks bustled with men, women and children of all ages. He turned right on Eighth and followed the main drag for a while. Clothing stores, tailors, butchers and bakeries--they were all open in spite of the hour. Like the mill works that shared its name, Homestead was a town that functioned on three shifts.

A block and a half down the street, he came upon Espy's Drug Store. In this one establishment it was possible to purchase comic books, cherry Cokes, penny candy, baseball cards and bubble gum--more or less, everything a boy might want. Drew paused before the plate glass store front to see if Marvel's latest *Fantastic Four* adventure had arrived yet. With the sun beginning to dip below the western horizon, he didn't have time to go in, so he pushed on.

At the next intersection, he crossed Eighth Avenue and headed down Amity Street toward the mill. Battered, wood-frame houses and squat, orange brick duplexes, turned a rusty brown with soot, ran right up to the plant gates. In Homestead, there was no buffer zone between where work ended and life began. A block from the main entrance, he came upon Ponzie's Cafe. He'd

heard his father mention it many times; it was a pub where a lot of mill workers would toss back a few beers to wind down after their shift. The door hung open as Drew approached, allowing laughter and cigarette smoke to spill out. He stopped to peer in.

Although it was still light outside, the interior of the bar was dark. It was filled, wall-to-wall with men, and a few women sprinkled here and there, all in soiled work clothes. The men were stout and powerfully built, straightforward and plainspoken, like his father. He could see traces of soot, missed during quick, after-work wash-ups, on the necks and angular, Eastern European-looking faces of the steelworkers closest to the door. His father's face and hands often bore the same black smudges when he returned home from the mill.

He'd been lingering on the sidewalk, gazing in, for maybe thirty seconds when someone inside the bar shouted, "Hey Kid!" He didn't wait to hear what the guy might have to say; he bolted.

Directly in front of him now loomed the front gates. Just inside the compound towered a gray, concrete and corrugated steel structure four stories high and longer than a city block. Printed across it in giant, white letters were the words: "United States Steel Corporation, Homestead District Works." It was an awe-inspiring sight. Later in life, Drew found the only image to have a similarly profound effect on him was when he first glimpsed a battle class aircraft carrier in the Navy.

Before the gates, several rail lines, running adjacent to the fence, crossed the road. Standing sentinel over the tracks, perched upright like a row of candy canes on end, were the red and white striped crossing barriers. Behind that stood the fifteen-foot high, barbed wire topped, chain-link fence that enclosed the plant. Just inside the fence was a guard box past which everyone who entered the mill was forced to file. The place was locked up tighter than Fort

Knox.

Drew realized mill security wasn't about to allow an eight year old to just stroll in. He'd heard his father talk about how men who'd worked there for decades would be turned away at the entrance for not having their ID cards. He'd also overheard some boys at school discussing a loose spot in the fence through which a kid might sneak. He hadn't scouted it out, but he was pretty sure he knew which part they were talking about.

So he palmed the super ball and swerved right at the main gates, abandoning the pavement for the railroad tracks. He didn't have to travel far, a quarter of a mile, maybe a little longer, before he reached the location his classmates had described. It was still light, though the sun had almost completely set. He left the tracks and began walking through the scraggly weeds around the fence.

Not seeing any reason to rush, he ambled along at a leisurely pace. In the palm of one hand, he gripped the ball. Coming upon a dead branch that had fallen from a gnarled maple tree, he paused to pick it up with his free hand. Cautiously, he prodded the fence with the stick. He didn't really believe that the fence was electrified, as was rumored at school, but it never hurt to be sure. When nothing happened, he dropped the stick and began dragging his open hand along the fence. As he walked, his fingers dipped into and then out of each new chain link like a baseball card clicking through the spokes of a bicycle wheel.

Within a few more minutes, he came upon the opening. It was in a spot where a newer fence had been joined to the original at a right angle. The bottom two feet of the newer fence had been kicked in where it met the aluminum pole, and the ground beneath it had been dug out. The splayed edges of the fence were curled in and the furrow had been worn smooth by regular traffic.

Drew paused for a moment to look around; the coast appeared clear. He ducked through the fence and immediately headed for the area where his father worked. It was the first time he'd actually set foot on Company property, but he knew the layout well enough. He'd spent hours studying it from the roof of his neighbor's garage and from the Homestead Hi-Level Bridge.

His father worked in the Open Hearth, which was situated in the center of the mill complex from both a geographical and operational standpoint. The Open Hearth was where the molten iron, transported across the river by rail from the Carrie Blast Furnaces in the Rankin portion of the Homestead Works, was combined with various alloys to create steel. The newly formed steel would then be moved by rail to other parts of the mill to be molded into finished products. Every step in the transformation of the raw materials into consumer-ready, steel products--such as girders for skyscrapers and rails for railroads--took place within the Homestead complex. The Open Hearth was the heart of it.

Once inside the fence, he still had a bit of a hike left, the mill covered four hundred and thirty acres, after all. An exit ramp from the bridge ran almost straight down to the Open Hearth; Drew used that to guide by. Although the sun had set and a gray dusk had settled over the earth, the air remained muggy because there was no breeze to cool things off down in the valley. He picked his way from building to building, darting in and out of shadows, as he made his way across the plant grounds. He tried to avoid high traffic areas, because he knew if anyone saw him, he was done for.

He was amazed at how alive the mill was this late in the evening--it was pushing nine-thirty at this point. Small rail cars and buggies were running in every direction along tracks criss-crossing the installation. Automobiles, trucks and golf carts dotted the gravel-topped roadways between buildings. The metallic crashing and grinding of heavy machinery

bombarded him from every direction.

The layout of the Homestead Works could not be described as orderly in the least. Rather, it appeared haphazard and arbitrary--structures of all sizes and shapes, built from every type of material imaginable, dotted the grounds. He passed dozens of long, low-lying, corrugated steel buildings that looked a lot like military barracks. Rows of brick smoke-stacks, often four or five stories high, jutted from every roof, spewing a continuous stream of thick, black clouds into the darkening evening sky. Underfoot, the once fertile, Monongahela River Valley soil, from which the mill had sprung, was gray and barren. No vegetation could survive there now.

The Open Hearth was referred to as OH5 because it was the fifth open-hearth in the plant's more than one hundred year history. OH5 was built during the Second World War. At that time, the Homestead Works was the greatest steel producer in the world--free or otherwise. It was one of the leading contributors to the Allied war effort, providing the materials for tanks and battleships, among other things. During the war, and throughout the Cold War, the Homestead Works was considered to be one of the primary bombing targets, were enemy planes to enter American airspace.

OH5 was located amidst the rolling mills. The rolling mills were the next step in the production process after the Open Hearth. There, the gigantic, newly formed steel ingots, fresh out of the Open Hearth, were rolled like pizza dough. The immense, semi-finished squares, rectangles and rounds of steel the rolling mills turned out were then collected in the slab yard. Basically, the slab yard was just a giant picnic shelter that kept the rain and snow off the steel slabs as they waited to be taken to the finishing mills. The slab yard was located directly behind the Open Hearth.

After about ten minutes of walking, he reached OH5. To most people, the words 'open-hearth' probably elicit images of chestnuts and a wrought iron kettle roasting in a homey fireplace. OH5 was nothing like that. Probably three city blocks in length, it was twice the size of any of the other buildings he'd so far encountered. It was at least eight stories high and open on two ends, through which ran a number of railroad lines. Among those tracks was the line from the Hot Metal Bridge, across which was shuttled the molten iron from the Carrie Blast Furnaces, so named for Andrew Carnegie's daughter. Though he'd viewed it from afar many times, the sight of the Open Hearth from up close was both wondrous and frightening.

Drew knew the general floor plan from listening to his father. The interior of OH5 was completely open and was split down the middle. The two sides sat on different levels, reminiscent of a swimming pool that has been drained. Steep, open staircases connected the two sides. On ground level, directly before him, was the charging floor. The charging floor was divided into three sections length-wise. To his right stood the eleven furnaces, in which tons of iron were cooked with coke and various alloys at temperatures sixteen times the boiling point of water, to produce steel. The furnaces were huge, cast iron, monoliths--nothing like the furnace in the basement of a house. All of them were one hundred feet wide, twenty feet deep and forty feet high, with a three hundred ton capacity. Five different doors, each measuring five by six feet, existed on every furnace. The eleven furnaces were all lined up side-by-side, their fronts facing onto the charging floor. A fifteen-foot gap existed between each of them that the furnace crews used to access the tap hole. Behind the furnaces, out of his line of sight at the moment, lay the pit side.

Directly before him was a grunting, clanking contraption known as the charging machine. It looked like a gigantic, metal spider enclosed in a massive cage as it rode the length of the

charging floor on rails. The charging machine was a one-man operation. It had a long arm, like a forklift, which loaded, or 'charged', cold scraps--huge iron beams and such--into the furnaces. Behind the rails for the charging machine were control panels for each furnace. The control panels were manned by the first and second helpers from the various furnace crews. There were also supervisors overseeing the boards. Thirty feet of open space, through which ran several lines of train tracks, separated the furnaces and the charging machine.

The pit side, obstructed from Drew's view by the furnaces, began along the line where the furnaces ended, and it was what its name implied—a giant pit. The pit side had been excavated like an archeological dig, so that the edge of the charging floor dropped straight off like a cliff. Guardrails prevented the charging floor workers from accidentally taking a header onto the pit side, twenty-five feet below. The steep drop-off existed so that when the furnaces were tapped, the hot steel could run out and down smoothly, like a waterfall of molten metal.

Directly behind every furnace was an individual pit, dug deeper still. Each of these pits was far greater in size and capacity than a backyard swimming pool, and they were all completely crusted over with slag. When a furnace was ready to be tapped, a twenty-foot deep ladle, with roughly the same circumference, would be placed in the pit to catch the molten steel.

There were two elevated pouring platforms on the pit side--one on either end. Long and narrow, the pouring platforms were on a level just below that of the charging floor. They served as the drop off point for the molten iron that was brought across the river from the Carrie Blast Furnaces in Rankin. The pouring platforms were referred to as 'hot metal areas'.

The sky had grown dark. Because he wanted to see the pit side, he decided to cross the open north end of OH5 and enter on the far side. Staying low, he sprinted the fifty yards that spanned OH5's un-walled northern end, leaping railroad tracks like an Olympic hurdler. As he

ran, the crunch of the stones beneath his feet seemed even louder to him than the unearthly din within the Open Hearth. When he reached the last set of tracks to enter OH5, he followed them in. Once inside, he ducked into a back corner, adjacent to the number-eleven furnace. Panting, he crawled into a nook between the guardrail at the rear edge of the charging floor and an unmanned forklift. From there he had a view of the entire pit side and most of the charging floor.

Drew knelt, placing his arms on the bottom guardrail, one hand atop the other, as though he were in church. He leaned forward and rested his chin on his hands. In his bottom hand, he gripped the super ball absentmindedly. Before him, the primeval drama of steel making was unfolding.

He understood, more or less, what was going on around him; he'd done a report on steel making at Our Lady of the Unfathomable Miracle Elementary School. The Homestead Works utilized at that time, as it always had, the open-hearth method. The open-hearth method of producing steel had been developed at the Homestead Works in the late nineteenth century. It was the system around which the plant had been built and it was employed there to the bitter end. The night young Drew sneaked into OH5, the open-hearth method was already well on its way to becoming obsolete. The problem with the open-hearth system was that the turn around time for one batch of steel was about eight hours. Meanwhile, mills overseas had developed systems, such as the Cafter method, in use at that very moment, which could produce steel ingots in two to three hours. It came down to efficiency; continuing to operate a mill using the open-hearth method was like entering a leaky canoe in a power boat race.

The Open Hearth never experienced lulls; there were only periods of great activity and greater activity. The operation of the eleven furnaces was staggered in such a way that a

different heat would finish cooking almost every hour. Slow-downs or stoppages meant loss of money for the Company and that was the one thing that simply was not tolerated. When everything was operating smoothly, and production was running high, the workers would say they were 'groovin' the mill'. The evening Drew picked to sneak into OH5, the mill was groovin'.

Inside the Open Hearth, the din never stopped. It was a virtual symphony of clatter--from the hiss of hot metal, to the crash of heavy machinery, to the bells, whistles and buzzers from the sirens and alarms which were constantly sounding. The only sound that would've troubled the steel workers, all of whom were at some stage along the road to permanent hearing loss, was silence.

There were people everywhere--out on the charging floor and below Drew on the pit side, overhead in cranes, on catwalks above the furnaces. Drew guessed that there were close to two hundred people in there, each consumed with a different task. It was like an ant colony. Behind him, a high-pitched siren began bleating, startling him into thinking someone had spotted him and alerted security. His fears were quickly allayed by the screech of steel wheels on iron tracks. The siren was to announce the arrival of the 'torpedo cars', which began filing onto the pit side by rail. The torpedo cars traveled in two's or three's and were pulled by a small engine. They were constantly transporting the molten iron, fresh out of the Carrie furnaces in Rankin, across the Monongahela River on the hot metal bridge to OH5. Cast iron with a refractory lining, the torpedo cars, also referred to as submarines or subs, looked like fifteen-foot long, ten-foot high torpedoes--hence, the name.

The torpedo cars steered into the 'hot metal area', at the far end of the pit side. The subs had three man crews whose job was simply to move the hot iron from point A to point B. Once

they reached the pouring platforms, Open Hearth workers took over. Everyone in the Open Hearth, except the furnace crews, had to wear prophylactic uniforms referred to as 'OH-Greens'. Because of their proximity to the furnaces, the furnace crews were issued more highly protective gear. The OH-Greens consisted of pants and a long-sleeved jacket made of thick, fire-retardant material. Their color was a sort-of sick, lime green, which reminded Drew of the paint in the principal's office at school. They also wore noncombustible gloves and black, metatarsal shoes.

The torpedo car engineer was led into position on the pouring platform by his ground-man. Beside the pouring platform was a pit in which waited a fifty-ton capacity ladle. Once the first sub was situated over the ladle, or 'pot' as it was sometimes called, the engineer brought it to a halt. An Open Hearth worker in OH-Greens and a hard hat walked over and attached a thick electrical cord to the sub. The sub then began to tilt mechanically to the side. As it did so, the contents of the sub began spilling out into the ladle. The hot metal from the sub sizzled like bacon on a griddle when it hit the cool, refractory lining of the iron pot. Clouds of black smoke and steam billowed toward the ceiling more than one hundred feet overhead. Rivulets of molten iron escaped the ladle and oozed into the pit below like lava escaping a volcano.

Drew found the red-orange glow of the hot metal hypnotic; iron flowed from the sub like maple syrup. Once the ladle was brimming with molten iron, a hot metal crane--the tallest type of crane in the Open Hearth, more than fifty feet in height--scooped up the ladle with its giant claws. On the upper level waited a holding tank, which greatly resembled the furnaces on the charging floor. The holding tank was used to sustain the heat of the melted iron while it waited to be transferred to the furnaces. The hot metal crane operator, a sturdy-looking woman in her mid-thirties, swung the ladle over to the holding tank and poured the liquid iron into it, never losing a drop.

A buzzer from somewhere on the charging floor to his left distracted Drew momentarily. He rolled back on his haunches and gazed around the building, trying to capture the entire scene. It was impossible. It reminded him of the sprawling miniature railroad and village Buhl Planetarium would erect for the holiday season. Every Christmas, his parents would bundle him up and drive across town to the North Side to see it, come rain or snow. Usually, there'd be a wait. Sometimes, they'd have to stand in line for an hour or longer before they'd get in, but it'd be worth it. It wasn't just a couple of toy trains circling a Christmas tree. There were farms with tiny cows and farmers, an entire town with cars and people, a carnival, a coal mine--all of them intricately detailed and complete with moving parts. There were even rivers, with real water and old-time steamboats navigating them. Throughout all of this, over the bridges and around the mountains, ran the trains. Each visit, he'd find something he'd never noticed before--maybe it'd be a tiny woman actually churning butter, or children riding a teeter-totter that bobbed up and down. In a sense, the Open Hearth was like that, young Drew thought. There was so much going on; he could spend years trying to absorb every detail.

He returned his attention to the holding tank. A transfer car, with yet another giant ladle in tow, arrived on one of the countless sets of tracks. Once everything was in place, the holding tank pourers tilted the tank mechanically, filling the transfer ladle. When its capacity had been reached, the transfer car operator pulled the ladle to the charging floor behind Drew.

On the charging floor, another hot metal crane, with huge hooks on it like a fishing lure, hoisted the ladle from the transfer car and carried it to the number nine furnace-two down from Drew's position. He spun around to follow the ladle. The next phase in the steel-making process was about to begin. The crane balanced the ladle before the front-center door of furnace number nine. Between the furnace and the ladle stood the 'hot metal spout'. The spout, which

resembled a children's slide, was a great, iron funnel with the wide end facing the ladle and the narrow end running down into the furnace.

A member of the furnace team, standing at the control panel some thirty feet away, activated the front-center door. Like most of the equipment in the mill at that time, the furnaces were all operated electronically. A thick chain pulled the heavy, iron door straight up, creating a five by six foot opening. A second hoist, operated by a separate crane, swung over and attached its hooks to the tiller at the back of the ladle. The number two crane operator, this person Drew was unable to see from his vantage point, lifted the back of the ladle, causing the liquid metal to splash into the spout. Although his angle prevented him from seeing inside, he knew that the hot iron rushing into the furnace would mix with, and help to melt, the solid metal that had been placed there earlier.

Once the contents of the ladle had been emptied into the furnace, the crane operator removed the ladle and the furnace crew took over. The furnace crew consisted of three people: the first, second and third helpers. Drew was unsure whom, exactly, they were helping, since they were all helpers. His father worked as a second helper in a furnace crew, although he had no idea which one. Each furnace had its own crew. Had he known which furnace his father worked, it still would've been virtually impossible to pick him out. Everyone in the furnace crews had to wear bulky protective outfits that made them look like characters from a 1950's science fiction movie. Their suits and gloves were a heat retardant, shiny silver material. They also wore heavy, black masks and boots.

'Tapping heat', which was the final temperature the various elements within the furnace would have to attain before they could combine to form steel, was thirty-two hundred degrees Fahrenheit. The furnace crew would increase the heat incrementally, filling the furnace with

solid scraps as they did so. The scraps, which were actually chopped up iron and steel beams, were charged in through all five furnace doors. That's why five doors existed, to ensure a 'heat'--the term used for a batch of steel--was charged evenly.

The heat radiating from the furnaces was incredible. On a very cold day, because the two ends of OH5 were completely open, it was possible to venture as close as five feet from the furnace without getting singed. On sticky, summer evenings like this one, a worker couldn't get within ten feet of it. Cool air was constantly being blown down on the furnaces from giant fans hanging from the roof. This was done to keep the furnaces from overheating and breaking down their refractory linings. Drew's father had once recounted to him the story of a man from plant maintenance whose shoes had literally burned off of his feet while he was walking atop one of these fans in an attempt to repair it.

After iron, the second most voluminous ingredient in steel is coke, the impure carbon residue distilled from bituminous coal. Coke accounts for approximately one percent of the material in steel, depending on the grade. Relatively small quantities of other alloys are also added, such as manganese, chromium and nickel; again, depending on the grade. Inside the furnace, the metal bubbled and jumped like a pot of boiling porridge. Every hour or so, the furnace crew would check to see if the heat was being 'cooked properly'. His father had told him of old-timers working as first helpers or melting foremen who could determine what a batch lacked by eye--just by seeing its color and how much it bubbled. But this was no longer the Industrial Age; this was the Age of Technology. More precise testing procedures were demanded.

In order to test a heat, one of the furnace doors would be raised and a long pole with a small beaker at the end of it was inserted to obtain a sample. The specimen was then sent to an

on-site lab where different tests would be run, depending on the grade desired. If the sample didn't meet the specifications for that particular grade, different alloys would be added to bring the heat up to standards. This would go on throughout the seven to nine hours it would take a batch to cook.

Since the number-nine furnace was just being charged, and still had the entire cooking process ahead of it, Drew looked for a furnace closer to 'tapping'. Tapping was the climax of the steel-making drama. After a heat had been fully cooked and was shown to meet all specifications, the furnace would be tapped like a keg of beer, allowing the newly formed steel to pour out. He'd read about tapping procedures, and had heard his father talk about it, but he'd never actually witnessed it. It was reputed to be an extraordinary spectacle--his father called it the 'fireworks show'.

Drew saw three people in the silver protective suits walk around the back of the number-eleven furnace, directly in front of him. They were so close he could only crouch down further and hope he wouldn't be spotted. As they passed, a loud, low-pitched whistle began blowing at ten second intervals, 'doop...doop...doop...'. Number-eleven was about to be tapped.

He was able to observe almost everything the number-eleven crew was doing from his spot forty or fifty feet away. What he couldn't see, he filled in with what he'd read and what his father had told him. The tap hole sat low on the rear wall of the furnace, beneath the level of the charging floor. That permitted the metal to flow swiftly down and out when the furnace was tapped. The tap hole was eight or nine inches in circumference, about the diameter of a basketball. It usually took about forty-five minutes for a two hundred and fifty ton heat to fully drain. The furnace crew completely sealed the tap hole with a cement-like substance at the beginning of the process, before the hot iron was charged in.

The first thing Drew saw the crew at the number-eleven furnace do was to signal one of the hot metal crane operators--there were five of them in total--to position a ladle in the pit beneath the tap hole. A large spout, much like the one stationed in front of the furnace, ran from the tap hole to the ladle. As the furnace crew continued their preparations, the warning signal sped up to five-second intervals, 'doop--doop--doop—'. It wouldn't be long.

Using a thirty-foot long, metal pole, one of the silver suited members of the number-eleven crew loaded the 'charge' into the tap hole. The charge was made up of roughly half a stick of dynamite and some blasting caps. Everything was set; they were now prepared to tap. The alert whistle became frenzied, 'doop! doop! doop!'.

The number-eleven crew moved to the front of the furnace, crossed the charging floor and ducked behind the control panel. The pit side to the rear of the number-eleven furnace cleared like a public swimming pool during adult swim. Drew focused on the crew from the number-eleven furnace. For the moment, the floor was theirs. Standing behind the control panel, they looked like high priests at the altar of some great, pagan shrine. Two of the three reached up and placed their silver-gloved palms over the ear-holes to their heavy, black masks. The third crewmember reached for a button on the control panel. Drew held his breath, unsure exactly what to expect.

Then it came. After fourteen years working in the Open Hearth, his father still claimed to be startled every time a heat was tapped. With eleven furnaces in OH5, heats were tapped five or six times a shift--that makes for a lot of unsettling moments. The roar from the blast was incredible. It was like a peal of thunder when lightening strikes close by, like the crash of an artillery shell impacting on top of you; it was more shocking than a slap in the face. The explosives detonated with a terrible, ripping crack, firing the cement charge from the tap hole

like a bullet out of a high-powered rifle. The charge shot over the ladle and rocketed more than fifty yards into the opposite pouring platform, slamming into a concrete wall. All three crewmembers and their foreman, who was standing nearby, jumped back involuntarily. Every single worker in the Open Hearth, rookies and old-timers alike, flinched for that split-second.

Drew was stunned by the noise--it was the Fourth of July times twenty. He fell back on his haunches, as though blown over by the concussion of the blast, his arms flailing at the air. Landing on the seat of his pants, the super ball, which he'd been holding since he left his house, flew from his fingers. It touched down in front of him and took a mighty bounce. Molten steel began gushing out of the tap hole in red, orange and yellow waves. It looked like a fire hydrant that's been wrenched open. He watched in horror as the tiny ball bounced madly, making a beeline for the newly created steel.

Meanwhile, the number-eleven crew had left the control panel and was moving to the back of the furnace to monitor the flow of the steel. The second helper arrived first, in time to see the super ball take one final, desperate hop over the rail. It hung in the air above the ladle for what seemed like minutes; then it dropped into the river of scalding, liquid metal below. It hit the hot metal and evaporated with a 'hiss'. That was one alloy they probably didn't have in their steel-making recipes--super ball. And who knows, really? It might've improved the quality of the steel; it was a 'super' ball, after all. Maybe it added a unique, super ball-y quality to that particular heat like what McDonalds' Special Sauce does for the Big Mac.

The ladle in the pit behind the number-eleven furnace was quickly beginning to fill. The second helper ripped his heavy mask from his face and began looking in the direction from where the ball had traveled. Drew felt like a raccoon caught rifling through garbage; there was nowhere to hide. The forklift offered relatively little cover and the rail provided none at all. The

second helper seemed to look straight through him. The steelworker's hair was matted and sweat was pouring down his soot-streaked face. Drew recognized the man. He was his father.

Panic froze him for a second, but just a second. There was no saying for sure if his father had actually spotted him. Even if his father had caught a glimpse of him, it didn't ensure he'd been recognized. He ducked down and rolled out from underneath the forklift. He got onto the charging floor and scampered out of the Open Hearth, not caring who saw him at this point. His father didn't shout after him and Drew didn't dare look back.

When he hit the night air, he kept going. He ran flat out, not slowing until he'd reached the fence. Once he'd slipped through the gap by which he'd entered and was officially off Company property, Drew stopped to catch his breath. He leaned back against the chain link fence and slid to the ground. He kicked his feet out in front of him and tried to catch his breath. He felt completely drained.

The sky had turned an inky black and the moon and stars had emerged, sparkling and distinct, from their daytime slumber. Drew breathed hard and gazed up at them in wonder. They were so small and far away, they seemed pale frauds compared to the inferno blazing within OH5. In his mind, he saw again the image of his father tearing off his protective hood; his soot-covered face streaked with sweat and his eyes ablaze. He looked so strong, so sure of himself. Young Drew knew then, that was the type of man he wanted to be. From somewhere off in the distance, he heard a train whistle blow. It was time to head home; it was way past his curfew.

Chapter III

Later that evening, Drew sat on the lumpy couch in the living room of his one-bedroom apartment staring blankly at the blue glow radiating from the television screen. He'd purchased the huge, old console TV used, along with his sofa and breakfast table, from a furniture rental company. Two framed photographs sat atop it. One was a black and white wedding photo of his parents. The other was a snapshot Drew's mother had taken of his grandmother and him on the day of his First Communion. They were the only pictures of any kind in the place.

The apartment building in which he lived was a three story, red brick structure built in the Homestead Works' boom years during the Second World War. As far as he could tell, no improvements or modifications had been made since then. When the heat was turned on in the winter, the pipes would rattle like a submarine surfacing. From the high ceiling in his living room hung a fan that hadn't worked in the five years he'd lived there. The off-white paint on the walls, which Drew believed to be the apartment's original color, was chipped and spotted.

The smell of boiling cabbage drifted into Drew's apartment from the kitchen of the elderly Ukrainian woman across the hall. A plate of spaghetti lay cold and untouched on the floor beside him. Outside, the storm that had threatened earlier had at last moved in. Rain slapped against the windows and thunder rattled the walls, but it couldn't completely drown out the sound of the married couple arguing in the apartment directly beneath his.

Drew paid no mind to the commotion around him. Five seconds, ten at most--that's what he was thinking. That was what had prevented him from approaching her, the mere possibility of five or ten seconds of embarrassment, nothing more. There were guys who could've done it, lots of guys--guys who hang out at nightclubs wearing silk shirts and gold chains. Given a little

prodding, Rudy would've done it, for that matter.

But he understood there was more to it than that. Had he walked back there and tried to strike up a conversation, the college kid, the bald sweaty guy, Rudy, the biker-guy, probably even the bus driver would've all been hanging on his every word. There wasn't a person on the bus who hadn't noticed her when she boarded. He would've had a captive audience and he didn't need that kind of pressure.

At the same time, he realized he couldn't use the other people on the bus as an excuse. If they were the only thing holding him back, he could've simply followed her off the bus and struck up a conversation at her stop. There was more to it than that. He tried to remember the last time he'd gone up to a girl cold and asked her out. It wasn't that he didn't date; he'd had his share of girlfriends. They just always seemed to approach him, or they were girls he'd known for a long time.

He thought of Sharon Crowder, a girl he'd had a crush on throughout high school. She was a cute, little blonde with a smile that made him stutter. When they were in the ninth grade, he'd made up his mind to ask her to their school's spring formal dance. Every time he'd see her, he'd freeze up like a child edging his way onto the high dive. Invariably, the situation wouldn't be right or he'd find himself incapable of speech--something always prevented him from asking her.

A week away from the dance, he came upon her alone in the school library during study hall. He swallowed his fear, walked right up to her and asked her. She said 'no'. That was it; she wasn't mean or cruel or anything. Groups of his classmates didn't circle around him chanting and laughing. She just said 'no', and that was enough.

That was more than a dozen years earlier, nearly half his life. He was a grown man now,

not some skinny ninth grader. He now had experience with women but he'd blown it just the same. He'd been riding the same bus every day for the past three years and that was the first time he'd seen her. Maybe she was going to a job interview or perhaps her car, like Rudy's, was in the shop. The possibilities were endless. The one thing that he could pretty much be sure of was that he wouldn't run into her again. Pittsburgh isn't exactly New York City or Tokyo, but it's certainly large enough to separate two tiny people. He'd given up without a fight. The possibility of a lifetime of happiness--who knows, after all--had been surrendered for fear of five or ten seconds' worth of embarrassment.

And what of the future? He was twenty-nine years old and essentially trapped in a dead-end job. Two years of credit toward a philosophy degree, begun in Navy correspondence courses, and a less than stellar past weren't exactly the kind of resume stuffers most Fortune 500 companies sought. He was able to land his position as a disability benefits analyst for Hegemona Trust Company only because the Human Resources manager who interviewed him had worked in the Homestead mill with his father when they were young men.

Drew's personal life appeared even less promising than his career. He had no girlfriend, nor any current prospects. He figured he'd probably end up with a girl from his childhood neighborhood, which wasn't all that far from his current neighborhood. Not someone he went to school with, all the girls from his class had kids by now. And some were married. No, he'd get a girl from the younger generation but a neighborhood girl nonetheless. He could picture her: she'd be the type who wore Steelers jerseys on dressy occasions, had huge hair, chewed a lot of gum and addressed groups of people as "Yunz." They'd go to prenuptial counseling and swear they'd never had sex so they could hold their wedding in the local Roman Catholic Church. After a honeymoon at Lake Erie or Niagara Falls, they'd descend into a connubial bliss of video

rentals and beer drinking. The American Dream in all its splendor.

Drew felt as though he'd put himself on trial and he was losing his case. Was it too late for him to be saved? It couldn't be, not so soon. But he had to do something; he couldn't sit around and wait for things to happen as he had earlier that day. He had to do something. Drew decided that, given the opportunity, he'd make amends. If he were to see that girl from the bus again, he'd swallow his fear and talk to her. After all, how hard could it be?

The following afternoon, Drew and Rudy sat at a small table in the center of the packed cafeteria. A sprawling room with a checkered linoleum floor and flat gray walls, the cafeteria took up the entire fifth floor of the sixteen-story Hegemona building. He'd been at the same table when he first met Rudy three years earlier. It had been during Drew's initial week with Hegemona, while he was sitting alone reading a newspaper during a coffee break. Rudy, in a short-sleeved, collared shirt and wide rayon-blend tie, walked up with a Styrofoam cup of coffee in one hand and a bagel in the other.

"You're new here, aren't you?" he asked.

Drew glanced up and nodded, "Yes I am."

"You're with long-term disability down in the basement?"

"Right."

"Me too, I thought I saw you there. My name's Tony Rudiani," he set his coffee on the table and thrust his hand at Drew, "but I go by Rudy."

"Drew." They shook.

Sitting down, Rudy looked him in the eye and asked: "Do you gamble?"

Three years later, Rudy was one of the few co-workers with whom Drew had become

familiar. Like that first day, Rudy sat across from him as they ate.

"So, was she there this morning?" Rudy asked, tearing into a dry looking bacon double cheeseburger.

"Who?" Drew took a gulp of coffee and looked away.

"Who?" Rudy snorted. "Madonna! The chick from the bus yesterday, you know, the hot one in the hat."

"Oh, her. No, I don't remember seeing her."

"He doesn't remember seeing her," Rudy shook his head. "I'll take that as a no."

Drew stared at the tabletop and drummed his fingers.

"Man, what is with you today?" Rudy demanded. "You've been out of it all morning."

"Sorry," he looked up and blinked. "Hey, did I tell you I spoke with Art Sopher yesterday?"

"Arty? What'd that scumbag want?"

"He got a letter stating we were cutting off one of his client's benefits. We'd put a PI on the guy because we got some tips that he was tanking it."

"That must've felt good," Rudy grinned.

Drew shrugged. "After he hung up on me, he apparently called Williams to complain. You know how that works, they don't get what they want from us so they complain to our supervisor."

"Yeah, I know exactly how that works," Rudy replied bitterly. "We're nothing but speed bumps, you and I. The bosses just put us here to slow down the claims. Basically, we're just targets for the claimants and their lawyers to take their frustrations out on before they move up to the supervisors to get their cases resolved. God, I hate that."

"Me, too," Drew half-heartedly agreed.

"So what's eating you, anyway?" Rudy demanded. "I know it isn't just that Sopher went over your head."

"No."

Dena and another girl from the mailroom, also just out of high school, passed by holding trays. Dena, wearing a skirt that was a little too short for late September, smiled at Drew and said, "Hi."

A bashful smile curled the outside of Drew's mouth as he looked down and mumbled "Hi," in return. He could hear them giggling as they walked away.

"Hey, man, I think she likes you," Rudy leered after the two.

"Who?"

"Indira Gandhi. Who do you think? Dena, stupid. Didn't you see how she smiled at you?"

Drew's face reddened. "She was just being friendly. She's a nice girl."

"Oh, she's nice. She's *real* nice." The last words rolled off Rudy's lips with a lecherous smack.

"What are you talking about, Rudy? Do you have to turn everything into innuendo?"

"Since when did you become the moral minority?"

"I'm not. Dena's a nice girl, that's all I'm saying. You don't need to twist that into something perverted."

"Whatever," Rudy shook his head. "Is it that girl from the bus that's got you bugged? I saw the way you were making goo-goo eyes at her yesterday. Is that it?"

"I don't know," Drew sipped his coffee.

"Don't worry about it, you'll see her again. It's a small world, just like that song says. I remember one time, when I was in high school; we were at a basketball game. One of my buddies meets this cutie from the other school and he's really digging her. Somehow they got separated at the end and he wasn't able to get her digits.

"Did that stop him? Hell no. He knew her first name and he knew that she lived on Mt. Washington. The next night we drove up Mt. Washington to look for her. We must've stopped fifty people but, finally, we found out where she lived. Then we drove to her place so my friend could see her. Turned out she lived in this sweet house overlooking the city."

"Was she surprised to see him?"

"I'm not sure. Probably. The only thing I saw was when her boyfriend, the giant, came running outside threatening to kick all our asses."

"I'm supposed to take comfort in that?"

"Yeah. He found her didn't he? That was the point, it didn't really matter what happened later."

They were silent for a moment as Drew stirred his coffee and Rudy polished off his burger. Then Drew looked up and asked: "What do you think that guy meant yesterday--about the sword-fighting and all?"

"You mean the hobo?"

"Yeah, the homeless guy. What do you think he meant by saying: 'If you love a girl, you'll swordfight for her?'"

"It didn't mean anything, the guy was deranged. He was just looking for a hand-out."

"But he never asked for any money."

"The guy was a nut, okay? But if it makes you feel any better, maybe you can go down

to the YMCA and sign up for some fencing classes."

"I guess you're right," Drew stirred his coffee some more.

"Of course, I'm right. You know," Rudy changed his tone; "you could probably have half the girls in this place if you wanted to."

"You're crazy," Drew shook his head.

"I am not. You saw the way Dena looked at you. You just need a little confidence."

"I have confidence," Drew shot back.

"Right." Rudy wiped his mouth with a napkin, threw it on his plate and stood up. "You know, Drew, good looks are wasted on you. You don't know what to do with them. If I had your looks, I damn sure wouldn't be schlepping in this place. I'd be an exotic dancer, or in porno movies or something." Before Drew could respond, he turned and began to walk away. He called over his shoulder, "Looks like I'll be joining you on the bus again today, that jerk at the shop hasn't finished with my car yet."

Drew watched him pick his way through the tables to the elevators. The problem with anything Rudy said was, Drew could never be certain if Rudy was being serious or if he was setting him up to make an ass of himself. He'd been the butt of one or two of Rudy's jokes before; it wasn't pleasant. When Rudy had finally left his field of vision, Drew looked into his coffee cup for some sort of reflection, trying to see the man Rudy claimed he saw.

December 31st

R,

I'm tired of hearing about love at first sight. After all, if there were such a thing, wouldn't it be the most shallow of loves? Without ever having spoken to the object of one's affections, what is there to love? The way she walks, her fashion sense, her hairstyle? As for the rest, it's up to oneself to fill in the gaps. But with what?

I once read a book on the subject of love by a nineteenth century French writer named Stendahl. I picked it up at a used book store in hopes of figuring out how love works, the same way one might pick up a 'how to' manual on home repair. Stendahl believed that it is with ourselves that we complete our loves. That is to say, we project what is best in each of us, our personal paragon, onto our lovers. The problem is, we do it capriciously, without regard to whether these qualities belong there or not. So, according to Stendahl, it's really an idealized version of ourselves that we love, not the flesh and blood human beings to whom we've dedicated our lives. If, as is often the case, the actual objects of our love do not conform to our idealized versions, we make them fit. So, when it comes to love, we're constantly trying to shove square pegs into round holes.

Now I have a confession to make. Although I wasn't aware of it at the time, I was in love with you from the minute I saw you. I'm not certain what that says about me, probably just that I'm human. I 'd been waiting many years for you to find me, long before I ever actually saw you. So maybe I didn't

have to meet you to love you, because in my heart, I already knew you.

Before you entered my life, I was trapped in a dark pit of alone-ness and despair. I say alone-ness rather than loneliness because loneliness is too commonplace, too frivolous. I was alone, completely isolated, where no one could touch me and I could touch no one. I'd look up from the depths of my abyss and I'd see nothing--no crack in the rock to climb on, no rope or root or vine to grab hold of, nothing. With no light to guide my way, instead of pulling myself out I just kept digging deeper. And all around me there was only suffocating darkness.

What kept me going wasn't hope, for I'd forgotten how to hope. Nor was it any pipedream of happiness or fulfillment; I long ago ceased to dream. Instead, it was a dim recollection of joy, peace--wholeness, which wasn't developed enough even to call a memory. I had no control over it; it would come to me when the opportunity suited it. Perhaps it might be the melody of a song, the scent of a perfume, or the lines in a smile that would set it off. Just as quickly, it would be gone. But that's all it took, a moment--an instant, to know there was something out there that might make all of this worthwhile.

That thread-thin line was what connected me to the world. I didn't realize it at the time, because there was no way for me to know, but that line was you.

D

Chapter IV

After work that afternoon, Drew and Rudy waited together for the bus once again. It was still gray and wet from the previous evening's rain, and there was a light breeze blowing off of the river. Drew was trying to read his newspaper while more or less the same group of commuters from the day before milled around the stop. He'd been disappointed, but not at all surprised, when he didn't see the girl on the bus into work that morning. As he'd speculated, her presence on the bus the previous afternoon was probably a one-shot deal. He figured seeing a girl that beautiful and that unique on a bus in Pittsburgh probably occurred about as frequently as a solar eclipse. What kept him thinking about her, even though he'd already all but given up on her, could be boiled down to two simple words--'what if'?

Rudy rubbed his hands together, turned to Drew with a sly grin and said: "Man, I hope that smoking chick is on the bus again today."

Drew lowered his newspaper, dragged on his cigarette and said, "You can't smoke on the bus."

"I know that, idiot," Rudy replied, shaking his head. "Since you're completely ignorant of current American slang, allow me to explain it to you. By 'smoking' I mean she's hot. By 'hot' I mean she's good-looking, attractive--comely, if you will. And by 'chick', I mean girl—a member of the female species "

"Oh," Drew said, realizing he'd been wishing for exactly the same thing. He raised his paper without further comment.

"You don't have any thoughts on the matter?" Rudy persisted.

"Well," Drew said in a non-committal tone, still shielding his face with the newspaper, "I

don't hope she's not there. She was beautiful, I mean, hot."

"Thank you, professor."

When the bus arrived a few minutes later, Drew quickly ground out his cigarette and stepped to the front of the line. After flipping open his wallet to display his pass to the driver, he paused in the entryway for a few moments to study the other passengers, while the crowd behind him grumbled impatiently. The bus was half full, but she wasn't there.

"Let's go, let's go," Rudy said, shoving him from behind.

They made their way to the center of the bus and Drew collapsed with a sigh onto a torn seat facing the aisle. He surveyed the vehicle restlessly, checking and rechecking to make sure he hadn't somehow overlooked her. After the last passenger had filed on, the doors snapped shut and the bus rumbled away.

"You planning on reading that paper?" Rudy asked, nodding at the folded copy of the *Post Gazette* on Drew's lap. He shook his head, so Rudy scooped it up and began leafing through it.

There were still a few more stops before the bus left town. While the bus crawled through the downtown Pittsburgh rush-hour traffic, Drew tried to distract himself by reading the advertisements that bordered the ceiling above the windows. The ads were like rows of tiny billboards with a spot for almost every type of product imaginable: pantyhose, breakfast cereal, tampons, radio stations and TV weathermen. There was even a picture of his old friend attorney Sopher, pointing down like Uncle Sam, appealing to the injured, the upset and the unemployed to assuage their wounds--real and imagined--with healing cash.

The poster directly across from him caught his eye. It portrayed an island girl in a bikini emerging from waist-deep, azure water. Her shiny black hair stood out against a foreground of

sparkling white sand. Dangling from her left hand was a diving mask and snorkel. She smiled invitingly while above her, in bold, block letters, the Aruba Tourism Council urged, 'ARUBA: Dive In, Feel the Freedom!'

Drew replaced the model in the photo with his girl, the girl from the day before. She beckoned him to escape with her to a tropical paradise where they'd be free from mundane jobs, tiny apartments and rush-hour traffic. Together, they'd live from day to day, not worrying about the past or the future. He was jolted back to reality when the bus pulled alongside the curb at Fourth and Penn in front of the old Hornes building.

Several women boarded, but she was nowhere to be seen. There was one stop left and the bus was almost full. Drew fidgeted and glanced hopefully at the pedestrians hustling past. Beside him, Rudy was absorbed in the sports page. Drew closed his eyes and tried to relax; he'd never before noticed how agonizingly slow the bus's progress through town could be.

The final stop was PPG Place, home to many of the top businesses in the city. After this, the bus would merge onto the Parkway heading east and wouldn't stop again until they got off at Squirrel Hill. The men and women who waited at PPG Place were, for the most part, professionals. They were sharply dressed and they all seemed to carry a briefcase--and not, like Drew, just for transporting their lunch.

As this last group herded on board, Drew watched anxiously. Generally, this was the most crowded stop on the route. By the time the bus pulled out, it'd be crammed to the bursting point. The anticipation was torture, he felt like a teenager sitting by the phone waiting for it to ring. He couldn't take the suspense, so he looked away. He already had a crushed/deflated feeling, assuming his hopes were about to be dashed. She might not even be in the same state anymore, for all he knew.

Rudy exclaimed, “Oh mama.”