



Convergence
by Michael Mark

Dedication

This story is dedicated to my wife,
Debbie, whose presence in my life is a
constant reminder of the
infallibility of Love.

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*“What memory is not a memory, but your
identity? Only love.”*

from The Dialogues of A Course of Love

EVEN THOUGH you *know* the track of a whale is a smooth, undulating, uninterrupted course, you can only actually partake of discontinuous sightings— brief moments in which your thoughts saturate into white be-nothings as if they've been over-exposed, while you behold in grinning delight the spectacle of a humpback breaching the surface of the sea. You infer from these bouts of revelation a continuous path of the whale in question. You stitch together in your mind a deep sea movie about this particular whale— a tale of purpose, yearning and migratory instincts that you utilize to fill in the blanks of its undersea life. You might even begin to sense the *character* of your whale— ascertain a certain playfulness on its part, or perhaps a rote submission to the physico-chemical dimension of life.

You do not think to question, however, whether or not the whale you are watching surface every few minutes— the whale identified by that distinctive scarring along the trailing edge of its right fluke— is the only *instance* of this particular whale in all the universe, or if it might, in fact, be but one of an *array* of virtually identical whales— one member of a set, let's say— each of which inhabits a unique track of reality and has its own history, memory and circumstances, yet which also somehow shares a common, instance-transcending identity. The reason you do not think to raise such esoteric uncertainties to the light of day is not that you are close-minded or mentally dim; it is simply that you do not possess the innate aptitudes or talents of Shasta Whittaker.

Shasta, on the other hand, grapples with this *type* of question more than you might consider reasonable or sane, because he has himself, on more than one occasion, witnessed firsthand the awkward mental discontinuity associated with the convergence, unification, and subsequent differentiation of various similar looking, albeit non-identical members of the apparently very real set of Shasta Whittakers that exist in the Universe. When these awkward moments of mind-melding occur, he experiences himself as all of the Shasta Whittakers in the frame. When this self-same phenomenon happens to you, and more than one of the many interwoven beings that you are converge, you have no

sensation of the event whatsoever because, like a deaf person walking down the hallway outside of a rock band's audition for a new drummer, you lack the facility to engage with the available information. You simply keep walking, lost in your thoughts about the day's shopping list or a fantasy about your lover.

When these encounters with other long lost selves happen to Shasta, however, he experiences the moment like he is a train that comes into complete synchrony with a second train of virtually identical look and feel. They rattle around together briefly like two bulls in the same over-stocked china shop of a mind, and then there is just one source of rattling. For a split second it is impossible to say whether the two trains have really become one, or are simply overlaid on one another like circus performers engaging the audience in an innocent ruse. (Shasta doesn't even know if the distinction is relevant.) The train of superimposed-but-possibly-singular Shasta's then differentiates into two again, each just a twitch out of phase with the other, as if a new rattle within the original symphony of rattles takes on a life of its own, and off they go. The problem is that briefly the circus trick doesn't seem so innocent, because he can no longer tell which train he is.

He is both for a little while, and none. He is here, there, and nowhere all at once. Then, like a cliff diver piercing the boundary between air and water at thought-numbing velocity, he irre-

versibly crashes into the life of *the* Shasta Whittaker again, as if he was being dragged for a fragment of time behind himself like a kite through the ether, and is suddenly reeled in at infinite speed. It's *the* Shasta Whittaker into which he crashes, because it's the one he immediately and fully occupies and knows. The other one dissolves into nothing more than a static memory or two that he retains, but which are forever out of context, as if he had met, but not hit it off very well with, the love of his life. Such a memory would have no meaning or place in the life of the Shasta Whittaker who did fall in love that day.

Not to belabor the point, your memory of such an event would go like this: you would glance at your future lover briefly while sharing the view of a work of art; you would risk an awkward exchange; you would receive a very spry reply; you would go to dinner together that night, and you would simply accept the fact— for obvious and unforgettable reasons— that you fell in love that day. Shasta's memory would be the same, except he would have an *additional* memory of receiving a polite, demurring response to his open-ended inquiry, and of finishing his tour of the museum alone, in perfectly content contemplation of the works of various nineteenth century painters. This memory would go *alongside* of the one you and Shasta would each have in which your museum tour continued in the intoxicating company of a stranger of rapidly diminishing ambiguity.

Shasta might have been able to simply accept his condition without fretting over it during all hours of the day and night, were it not for the fact that he has retained a rare memory of unquestionable significance. This is one of those memories whose only dimension is that of pure feeling— no images, sounds, or colors— and the feeling in this case is brilliantly, perfectly, and stunningly good. In this memory, he feels safe, alive, whole, and everlasting— and he wants it *back*. In light of what he knows and cannot simply un-know, he has hypothesized that when he was very young, perhaps an infant, perhaps not yet even born, he leapt from a track of reality that was really, really good, and ended up here, trading places perhaps with one of those other Shasta Whittakers carrying on out there, while never once ceasing to be, for all intents and purposes, himself. He'd like, given his absolute faith in the hypothesis, to switch back to being *that* Shasta Whittaker.

So, when Shasta watches a pod of whales all looking more or less alike from a distance, breaching in various turns, he thinks of all the Shasta Whittakers that are undoubtedly quite real, existing along tracks not all that far from, but still remarkably out of phase with, his own. He is they, and they are he, but their tracks only occasionally intersect to exchange memories and possibility, like whales coming up to the surface to breathe. He thinks mostly about leaping back into the lost version of

himself that occupies a world of unsurpassable goodness, and when he does he thinks, "We'll both come up for air at the same point in space and time eventually, like those two whales there, only you'll just see one whale, because the other whale inhabits a different sea. We'll dance around, in, and through one another, and I'll leap back onto that other track, and all the pain and anxiety I've accrued in this track will fade instantly into a dull memory. That'll be really, really good."

He really does think like that. You don't, however, because you do not possess the innate aptitudes or talents of Shasta Whittaker. That's not to say you couldn't have, by the way- fate is a strange and inscrutable phenomenon.

SHASTA SUSPECTS there could be something like a *master* Shasta Whittaker, some type of awareness that knows and understands what all of the Shasta's everywhere know and have become, like one-stop shopping for the collected lives and experiences of Shasta Whittaker, but Shasta is a practical sort and he doesn't get too hung up about such abstractions. He did try to think about it once, but found the mechanics of such an awareness, even at a conceptual level, to be stupefying in their complexity. It was exactly like the problem Shasta has with playing his guitar and singing at the same time, only much worse. He figured it would be like playing the drums, the gui-

tar, the tuba, the harp, the tambourine, the glockenspiel, the triangle, and the xylophone all at once, while also singing the lyrics, dancing a jig, and whistlin' Dixie. To do that, you'd have to have all these versions of yourself sprinkled in many parallel places simultaneously, each one in each place with a different instrument and possessing the requisite history of training and experiences to know how to play it, and then you'd have to superimpose all those Shasta's onto one another— pile them all into the same mental living room at the same time like some kind of Christopher Nolan movie that blew up and went off the rails—without losing track of who was doing what.

"I could never do that," Shasta thought, and that was that.

Shasta is unconcerned about those things that work without any conscious engagement on his part. Instead, all of Shasta's fretting and analyzing is centered around how to control, rather than to simply observe, or be run over by, the experiences brought to him by his intriguing gifts. With reliable control, he believes he will one day make his way back to the track containing the very best possible version of himself there is. Shasta views himself as living inside of a fascinating puzzle, the solution to which will be this momentous return. Meanwhile, he goes around most days with the mindset that he is himself, but not really— as if he's not quite back to one hundred percent strength following a week in bed with the flu. He thinks of his

current life the way athletes with blown knees think of physical therapy— with the right mental approach and dedication he'll recover. He thinks, "This is who I am, *for now*." He knows not every athlete makes a full recovery, but he doesn't dwell on it. He focuses on the things he *can* control.

Mostly Shasta has to think these thoughts quietly to himself and keep his mouth shut regarding his condition; otherwise he'd end up in the nut house. Thankfully, he has met one person so far who believes him when he says it— you know, about the set of all possible Shasta Whittakers out there and the parallel but occasionally intersecting realities they inhabit. You might think this person would be a grad student in quantum cosmology, somebody obsessed with the Many Worlds Interpretation, or a person with advanced psychic abilities who receives channeled messages from extra-terrestrial civilizations, and such people might indeed give Shasta a bit of rhetorical runway, but actually it's a man named Stern Greeley.

Stern is a house painter Shasta hired once. One day fairly deep into the project they were talking about the paint swatches Stern had pulled for Shasta's living room— the next phase of the work. One thing led to another and they segued into a discussion about meditation and Pink Floyd albums, and then Shasta brought out the big guns.

"No shit," Stern said.

"Truly," Shasta replied. "The day we looked at whether or not two coats were necessary for the den, I was having two conversations at once, for about thirty seconds. In one you had already painted the bathroom across the hall blue, and in the other it was a soft yellow. Then I came crashing into the world with the blue one."

"Come to think of it, you did look kind of pekid that day. It's so funny you say that, though, because last night I dreamt that I went to put my coat on, and the inside of my hall closet was filled with nothing but the last color of a sunrise- you know, that kind of pale golden yellow."

"That's the one," Shasta replied, and it was.

That's the type of corroborating evidence you need, by the way, to accept these everyday anomalies. You can't just blow your mind wide open without basis or reason. Without at least circumstantial validation, you'd just have a furrowed brow and so much incredulity welling up inside yourself you'd either have to yell, "Bullshit!" as loud as you could and punch your fist through a wall, or go lie down and take a nap. Shasta saw the evidence was on his side, however, so he let the silence expand around them, giving Stern time to come to his own conclusions. Stern eventually chuckled. "Damnation. I am *blown away*, man."

Shasta just shrugged his shoulders. These things happen in

life. What can you do? "Would you like a cup of tea?" he said. "Let's call it a day."

Stern checked his watch. It was time to knock off, anyway. "Sure. So, what does your wife think?"

"That one's... complicated, my friend."

This nearly took the wind out of Stern's sails, as the way it was said belied a non-trivial darkness lurking somewhere behind the scenes, but he shook it off, because it was none of his business, and by rights things not of his business had no basis for compelling him to move in one direction or another. If he acted on things he wasn't supposed to know, that would be like insider trading. He let Shasta boil and pour the water, then began again. "When did this start?" he asked. "When was the first time you switched tracks?"

"Now *that's* a really good question. I've been trying to figure it out myself for a long time, because I think the answer may be the key to my entire life."

Stern looked up quickly from his half-steeped cup of Earl Grey, caught off guard, just as the mild orange aroma was beginning to perfume the air. His right eyelid made a nervous tic like it sometimes did— a quirk of being Stern Greeley that was associated with an upturned lawn tractor and a father whose split personality was a drill sergeant. Sometimes the tic came back when there was a high degree of uncertainty about what

was going to happen next, even if it wasn't associated with a possibly sudden foreshortening of his life. "How so?"

"Well... when there's a convergence, I—"

"A convergence? That's when you... uh..."

"Yeah, exactly."

"Right."

"So, when there's a convergence, I almost always walk away from it with a memory that's out of place. I get a little light-headed when I'm in the middle of it, but then afterwards, all my life is back to being one logical flow, except for one or two memories that belong somewhere else. They're like Asian pick-ups at a Texas rodeo."

"Right..."

"Well, I have this one memory I just can't explain. There's no image that goes with it, no location or song to associate with it, no context at all— just a feeling. I feel good, and more importantly, I know that's all I need. Just that feeling. It's the kind of good you'd be happy to curl up in and spend eternity. I mean, it's *that* good. I can't explain it very well, but anyway..."

"It's one of those pick-ups," Stern guessed. "Sounds like my glowing coat closet."

"Yeah, right... right. So, I think maybe the first time I ever switched tracks was when I was an infant, or maybe even when I was in the womb."

"Really, really interesting," Stern said, taking a sip of his tea as he thought about what he'd heard. "So why is that the key to your entire life? I'm not sure I follow that part."

"Well I would think it would be obvious," Shasta replied. "I want to get back to being *that* Shasta Whittaker."

Stern's lower lip scrunched up under his upper one as he tried to understand Shasta's urgency to become a feeling. He found it helped to bring some basic principles of parallel reality metaphysics to bear upon the problem. "Is that realistic? I mean, what if that other baby Shasta went on to become a petty thief or something?"

"No way," Shasta scoffed, moderately perturbed. "I know what I felt, and what I felt wasn't like anything I've ever felt since. There's no way it could have become anything other than what it was."

Stern nodded his head in acquiescence. He was obviously not the expert here.

"You been talkin' to my wife about this?" Shasta joked. The room was slowly dimming as the setting sun dipped behind the nearby hills, and Shasta ducked around the corner to flick on the kitchen lights.

"What? No," Stern laughed, grateful for the opening Shasta had afforded him. "Why? Does she worry you'll disappear one day or something?"

"Ha... not quite," Shasta said. "I mean, I don't think she thinks that *really*. I think she interprets my desire to switch back to another track as meaning that somehow I have decided that what we have, here and now, together, isn't enough. But that's not it at all. I just— I can't explain it. I think somehow it all fits together, like each reality— my life here with Emily, and then this other Shasta I'm trying to find— I think each one makes the other possible, but I can't see how yet. There's something about that other track that's bigger than any one life, in a way. It was almost like it was big enough to contain all our lives. It's like, if I could make it back there, then maybe someone else could, too. Maybe everyone could. You see what I mean? It's like breaking out of a prison camp— the first one to make it sets a new precedent, then a few more make it, and then a few years later the walls come tumbling down."

"And then the bricks get sold on-line."

"Right. The thing is, even if you die on the first attempt, or leave your buddy behind, you *have* to try. It's in everyone's best interest."

"Hmm. Maybe I see what you mean a little bit, but if you're always saying you wish you could find your way back to somewhere else, I could see that being a strange thing to hear, Shasta. Describing this world as a prison camp isn't all that warm and cuddly for the rest of us who feel beholden to it, either.

Does she even believe you switch tracks at all? Believe that it's possible?"

"Not at first. First she didn't believe me at all. She thought it was all just harmless jibber jabber, like I still had a little kid inside of me with a dream of being an astronaut. She cared about it because I cared about it, and because no harm could really come from caring about something that could never happen. Then one day I switched tracks and came into this one, but I still had a memory from the old track where she was a lawyer. I told her about it and she just clammed up. She'd always kind of wanted to be a lawyer, but we couldn't afford for her to go to law school after we got married and had our daughter Stacy, so it never happened. Not here, anyway."

"And then she was convinced? That doesn't seem real definitive, though. I mean, you already knew she wanted to be a lawyer, right?"

"I did, but that wasn't the thing. She'd never told me that around that same time she'd been having this strange sensitivity to kidnapping stories and related paraphernalia. She'd—"

"Paraphernalia?"

"Yeah, right... Kidnapping paraphernalia. Like posters or missing person reports, or a glimpse of one of those crazy real world cop shows. She'd see a report on the news, and just start crying. She'd get out the milk carton, and decide to take her cof-

fee black that morning. It was like *our child* had been kidnapped, she said later. I knew none of this, however. All I knew was that she started being way, way over-protective of Stacy. No Facebook posts. No movie theaters. No midnight hitch-hiking... Just kidding... Anyway, the important thing is that at the same time in the other track, in my pick-up truck memory, she was a prosecutor trying a horrific kidnapping case. Stuff no one should ever see or know about. When I told her about the other Emily Whittaker, trial attorney, from the alternate reality I *used* to live in but could hardly remember now, I told her about the case, and she couldn't help believing me for some reason, and then when the connection to our lives here sank in, she *believed* me."

"Makes sense. So her perspective changed entirely."

"Pretty much."

"So, now she's worried she could really lose you, or get a new you she doesn't even know, or worse, that you'd rather depart these shores and take the risk of leaving her in the lurch, instead of being content with the love you have. Allow me to reiterate that that's a pretty weird feeling to carry around, Shasta. I mean, *could* you disappear? *Is* there a scenario in which you get onto this other track and she finds herself alone?"

"I don't think so, Stern. I don't think it works like that, but how can an explorer know what lies around the bend? Even

though I don't think it could ever happen like that, how can I say for sure? I can't, but... I just hope it doesn't..."

"Well shit, man," Stern scolded. "Wouldn't it be kinda a good thing to know?"

"Yeah, probably," Shasta said. "Only one way to find out, though."

SHORTLY AFTER the painting job was over, Shasta called Stern and told him he wished he had another house for him to paint, and then it wasn't long before Stern and his wife Cheryl invited Shasta and Emily over one Friday night for kebabs and daiquiris. Emily and Cheryl both harbored not so secret obsessions with knitting, so they were exchanging stitch patterns, stories of sweaters gone wrong, and their bucket lists of project ideas before Stern even had the meat on the grill, which was good, because it gave Stern and Shasta a chance to talk alternate reality man stuff while bringing the coals online. Emily wasn't too keen on discussing Shasta's long-term vision of self-improvement in the company of friends, so at dinner they talked about macroeconomic theory, the new pope, and two of the craziest rooms Stern had ever painted. Shasta and Emily returned the favor a few weeks later, and their various friendships blossomed.

About a year after the paint job, Shasta called up Stern and

said, "Predicting when a convergence will occur is like predicting a seismic event, right?"

"Right," Stern replied. He was kind of backed into a corner, though— a lay person caught off guard, thrust into the role of validator by the world's only known expert on the subject. If it weren't for their friendship, Stern may have asked for the details.

"And earthquakes relieve stress, right? You know, between the plates."

"Shaz, man, it's like midnight. What's going on?"

"Emily's going away for the weekend, to visit her sister. I want you to take me out on the boat— your sailboat— and I'm going to bob there on the water without eating or drinking the whole weekend, and see if the stress on my system brings on a convergence. It's a little theory of mine. In addition, I'll be preparing by weening myself from solid foods an additional forty eight hours prior to departure. So... starting now, basically." Shasta was in his study, legs curled up beneath him on his favorite leather chair, staring at the yellow reflection of his desk lamp in the window, and twirling a rubber band around on the far end of a ball point pen.

Stern, who was horizontal and practically whispering into his cell phone in the desperate attempt to keep Cheryl from waking, thought about it for a minute, or tried to, since he was still le-

gally asleep. The message he received from his body sensations was that it was a non-standard request, but doable. The answer came in the form of a generally expansive feeling in his chest that left him thinking, "If I wanted to, I could get up out of bed and *do* something right now."

"Yeah, yeah, alright," Stern said softly. "Call me tomorrow you nut." Then, without ending the call, he dropped his phone onto the floor beside the bed, and rolled over.

"It *is* tomorrow, Stern... Stern?"

STERN MET Shasta at the dock that Friday afternoon while the sun was still a good sixty degrees off the horizon and transported his friend via dinghy out to the *Use as Directed*, a 32' fiberglass monohull painted a festive teal above the water line with an underbelly that was white as fresh crockery. Shasta had the clothes on his back, a Nietzsche, an MP3 player with earbuds slung over his left shoulder, and a leatherbound journal that smelled so new the ocean was thinking of filing a protest. He was bare-handing all of it. Stern, on the other hand, despite having already made one trip out to *Use as Directed* with various provisions and what-for's, was hardly visible to Shasta as he pulled on the oars, since the space between them was crammed full of supplies— a twelve pack of spring water, a sealed pouch of batteries, a four pack of handheld marine flares augmented by a

small carton of smoke canisters, two tarps, a jacket, a couple rolls of toilet paper, a vintage 1950 personal flotation device, a radio, a flashlight, a waterproof pillow, and a cooler stocked with gourmet summer sausages, green olives, a wedge of pepper jack cheese, a loaf of sourdough bread and beer.

The dinghy was riding in the water like a wounded duck.

"Where the hell do you think we're *goin'*, chief?" Shasta asked. "Narnia?"

"You tell me, boss."

"Well I'm trying to keep that open-ended if you know what I mean."

"Good. You do that. I'm trying to make it look like I know what the hell I'm doing so when you disappear or whatever it is you're gonna' do out there, and I have to explain to the authorities what happened, I at least have a leg to stand on."

"Smart thinking."

"So what's the theory here, Shasta? You get dehydrated and dizzy, and then swap out your life here for the one currently being lived by a version of you that is occupying the most idyllic Shasta Whittaker scenario possible, and live happily ever after?"

"Uhh... something like that. Sounds better the way I tell it to myself, though, I have to admit, especially since I give myself the benefit of the doubt and overlook all the obvious inconsis-

encies."

"Well just you know, I wouldn't be here if I thought you were totally off your rocker. And let me just say— I think there is something admirably Quixotic about all this. You're going after something you believe in, and I have to tip my hat to that at least."

"And I do thank you, sir."

"I'm not looking forward to training your replacement, however. And hey— who's to say the next version of you won't get the same idea you have? Frankly, he might be kinda' upset depending on what memory he hangs onto."

"Well for *godsakes* don't give him my secrets," Shasta hissed. "And anyway, I'm not sure it works like that."

"Like what?"

"Like *that*. I'm telling you— we think in terms of nickels and dimes, tit for tat chains of events and hot rods that blow up half way down the drag strip despite weeks of preparation, but that's now how the universe thinks at all. Stern, you have to start thinking like something that's so naive and complicated it can do anything. Plus, it's non-linear... *and* it's alive. It's some kind of organic, chaotic, mind-meldy, evolving Shasta Whittaker meets Stern Greeley in an M.C. Escher looping back in on itself painting kind of *thing*. If I make it, we'll all be grateful. I'm telling you, if I make it, everything will change," he said. "And

if I don't, we'll never know."

Stern shifted gears, brought the dinghy alongside the fiberglass hull, and focused on negotiating the transfer of his body and the stores from one craft to the other without littering the harbor floor beneath his mooring with any more sealed packs of batteries than were there already.

"If you do make it, how *will* we know?"

"Good question..." Shasta said. He was quiet for a long moment, thinking. Then Stern asked him politely to get his ass in the boat. "Really *top* notch question. I don't know."

"Maybe we'll know because I'll just be out on the ocean by myself all of a sudden," Stern said. "Or maybe you just won't be hungry."

THEY TIED-OFF the dinghy, set *Use as Directed* free of the ropes that bound her, motored out of the harbor and then shifted to wind power and turned south, sailing parallel to the coast. The sun was beginning to drop and Stern was antsy to find a harbor for the night— had one in mind in fact— but Shasta convinced him to embrace the full spirit of the quest and engage in a bit of night sailing. They decided to take shifts. Stern took the first one while Shasta went down below, put on the earbuds, and listened to a recording of Anthony Burgess reading his novel *Clockwork Orange*. Shivering, cold, and filled with expectant

joy, he passed out almost immediately.

A few hours later, Stern nudged him in full darkness, and Shasta rolled up into a sitting position, a tad thirsty, definitely chilled, and about as hungry as he thought he could get. He was jubilant at how well things were going. Stern stayed with him on the deck for a little while before turning in, and they sat together on the ocean in silence, skidding along at a nice clip below a crescent moon and the banded stars of the Milky Way. For a moment, Shasta caught himself wondering what in the hell he thought was going to be better than this, and then he thought, "I'm going to move *into* this."

When Stern stood up and put his hand on Shasta's shoulder to tag out officially and start down the stairs, Shasta said to him, "Hey, Stern-" and the way he said it was like he wasn't sure what he was going to say next.

"Yeah."

"...Thanks."

"Of course. Watch out for icebergs."

Ten minutes later, guiding his friend's plastic bathtub across the high seas using the stars— but mostly the backlit dials and touch screen displays— to navigate, Shasta suddenly felt as alone as he had ever felt in his entire life, but in the very best way possible, like a musical note Beethoven had accidentally left out of one of his symphonies that was trapped forever in si-

lence. It was a note that would go on forever— a note that possessed a pure tone. It was also a note that would forever desire to be shared, to be reinserted into the lines of music, to dance with others and be written into their own songs.

His feelings, and then his thoughts, drifted steadily to Emily, and he thought about where he would take her to dinner when he got back, and of their bodies warmly intertwined, their hearts diving into one another like seals through the water. He realized in a flash, with a certainty that surprised him, that it was impossible that she would be absent from the very best possible life of Shasta Whittaker. It was, he realized, the damndest, most foolhardy thought to which he'd ever given credence. In admitting this, he found he had always wanted to believe that, but had never felt it was fair to decide in advance what the mystery might hold, like it was asking for too much, or clinging to something he may not be able to carry with him to that other life. That night, however, he found there was a harmony inside of his remembered feeling, something akin to a multitude of voices, and when he let that understanding wash over him, that little note trapped in silence began to sing, to reverberate within itself, to transform one into two, to give birth to beats. A creative act was begun as that note reached out through the space in which it hung, stretching, yearning...

STERN BURST awake and lunged for the stairs simultaneously. The two events were not sequential, but part of one searing process, like a drop of water freezing as it flew through the Arctic air. He was so afraid he was like a stone falling to the bottom of his own movement.

Either of the two sounds, in the absence of the other, would have been enough to cause him to shudder and move with reckless urgency, but the two in sequence had brought him directly to the verge of grief. The dull thud and sudden shifting of the boat had awoken him instantly, spurring him into action, and he had been halfway up the stairs at the end of the cabin when he heard the splash of a large object into the water. He strained into the darkness, hoping against hope to catch a glimpse of its source, but all he could see were a few lazy, faintly lit swirls on the water's surface being shed off the back of the boat. The silence had closed in fast, sealing the breach, as if trying to prevent the formation of history.

Alone on the deck, all Stern could hear was the blood rushing through his inner ear, and the ticking of some steady beat in the background, perhaps the pounding of his own heart, as if it were a clock inside of his own head. His mind was like a leaf pinched oddly beneath a rock, riding out a typhoon, fluttering crazily, clinging to the steady internal rhythm that all of the living possess. As if to suggest the fact that tragedy like he'd never

known was paramount, Stern's mind provided him with a still image of what he must look like— just in case he was curious— a lone figure standing in stark silhouette on a drifting boat. It was like a grade school quiz. *What's wrong with this picture?* His mind then suggested to him that if he didn't see Shasta within the next five minutes, the likelihood of finding him before morning was less than three percent. Stern knew enough to know that was a complete figment of his imagination— but the feeling stuck.

Instinctively, he grabbed a seat cushion and flung it into the water on the moonlit side. It hit the water and slipped steadily from view. He was moving fast. Dazed, he looked around again, scanning the darkness. He was too scared to do anything but whisper, "Shasta... *please...*"

Tick. Tick. Tick.

A decision had to be made: get the boat slowed and turned around first, then shoot a flare, or vice versa. His conscious mind was still gawking into the decision like a raindrop approaching a fork in the Mississippi when he flung open a nearby seat and began rifling through the compartment underneath for the flare gun. Through the sheer force of will he squeezed indecision away from himself like he was extinguishing the life of an ant between his fingertips. He squeezed like his life depended upon defeating this ant and he was uncertain of just how long or

how hard to squeeze. He just kept squeezing until thought was an impossibility altogether. He loaded a cartridge, moaning to himself in mounting agony, aimed at a space in the sky above his best guess at the location they had been just thirty seconds prior, and pulled the trigger. There was a sizzling sound, and then a hot stripe of color dancing erratically in the sky overhead, drifting like a science project from a tiny parachute.

The world shrank from an endless expanse of darkness to a tiny dome of light, as if the light from all the stars of space had collapsed around him at a constant radius, but Stern wasn't looking. He used the light of the flare to work by, quickly releasing the jib sheet, then the main sheet, draining the tension instantly from the sloop's two sails. He cut the rudder to bring *Use as Directed* into as tight a turn as he could muster. The flare was burning out, so he loaded a second, aimed upwind of the last point in the sky the previous flare had occupied, and pulled the trigger. While it burned he started the diesel and aimed for the last known position of his friend Shasta Whitaker.

He had no idea how far he'd drifted since the splash, or how long he would have to motor to get back to his previous position, or which way Shasta would have drifted, so he needed information quickly. At the same time, he didn't have an infinite cache of flares. Every moment was an intolerable decision

point. Obviously-right answers were somehow out of reach. Like phone numbers from childhood once urgently memorized, now long forgotten, they existed as an empty familiarity, as the irrepressible knowing that something that *should* be clear, was not. Wrong answers, on the other hand, encircled him like a flock of half-starved gulls around a bit of cake, clamoring to be heard. In the end, trolling along to the drone of the diesel in virtual blindness began to feel a whole lot like taking it lying down. There was only so much of that Stern was willing to take. After a full minute of wincing into the darkness, he loaded and fired a third flare. It sparked and popped up in the sky.

As it drifted overhead, he got his voice back and began yelling, partially to disgorge the residual panic from his system, and partially to test the night for a response. After an initial flurry of plaintive shrieks, he settled into a pace and volume he thought he could sustain for hours— a flowing molasses of quiet waiting broken only occasionally by booming calls he lobbed deep into the night.

Just as he began to entertain the question of coming around for another pass and further disorienting himself, the night emitted the characteristic sound of the world's largest mammal clearing its blowhole. Glancing instinctively to port, he glimpsed a shiny dark surface slipping back into the water, a patch of space traveling at a slightly different rate from all the

rest. Was that twinkle of light reflected from an eye? As the sinking shape fell down again into the deep, Stern saw a tiny prick of light in the sea far beyond, scarcely visible, like the first star to appear in the evening sky. Three hundred yards away? Four hundred yards? It was so faint he wasn't sure he would even see it again. It disappeared, eclipsed by a swell, and then reappeared, sliding sideways through his vision. When he looked right at it, all he saw was blackness, but when he looked slightly away, towards a point off to the side, it was there— a flicker that came and went, the tickle of a photon rattling around on the back of his eye, a whisper of hope inside the beating of his chest.

He turned for it immediately.

Shasta had been wearing a vest?

Waiting for the beacon to become strong enough for him to see directly was interminable. For a moment he thought the distance was lengthening. Then it was shortening. His mind was like an auto-focus camera caught in no man's land, telescoping back and forth between the height of despair and the sweet feeling of relief, but neither would really stick. He tried to look indirectly for the light, using his more sensitive periphery vision to keep in touch with the tiny fiber he was following across the sea. As he steered the boat, correcting for drift and miscalculation, the memory of placing his arm on Shasta's shoulder before

ducking into the cabin returned to him. He could feel the fabric of Shasta's shirt in his palm, the blade of his shoulder, the warmth inside the curl of his lower neck, the soft muscles in between.

Stern was confident: there had been no vest. Something was happening whose scope exceeded the daring of his imagination, yet he had felt not even the slightest hiccup in the steady flow of reality. Are the moments of greatest transformation more subtle even than whispers? Stern found himself enveloped by a subtle knowing, the type of knowing that requires no object or conclusion around which to wrap itself, and slowly but surely, the intensity of the pulsing light strengthened.

SHASTA FOUND himself in the embrace of music. A strand of piano notes twirled past in formation and became an arpeggio of blackbirds lifting into the sky, scattering into the waves of auro-ra borealis that were inspired by the cellos, then merging with the darkness beyond. Underneath, Shasta was dancing— a sashay to the right, the drag of his toe along the granite lane, a spin, arms reaching into space, a jolly here-we-go pumping of his arms and legs to the beat of distant drums, as if his mind was theatrically clear and he was embarking on a march to the promised land at the front of the stage. He felt celebratory. He slid his right foot behind the left, ducked slightly forward and

tipped an imaginary hat, then twirled again before continuing down the lane. The granite beneath his feet twinkled, as if there were stars both far above and far below. He was in a state of carefree anticipation.

At the end of the street the horizon was a glowing line suggesting a golden brass surprise was gathering itself just beyond— a vast congregation of trumpeters, trombonists, and saxophonists poised to sweep in from the eastern flank. As they warmed up, running through a quick scale, the horizon pulsed with pastel splashes of light that gave way to batteries of radiant terns diving upwards into the sky.

The one caveat to the situation, the one and only feeling that was slightly out of place, was the question why. *Why* did he feel like an entire collection of saints about to march into heaven? Shasta wasn't alarmed by the question; instead, he felt like he was following the aroma of fresh-baked bread through a maze of tiny streets, searching for a hot stone oven banked with glowing coals, without being the slightest bit hungry, without knowing when his last meal had been, or if he would ever need to eat again. Why would somebody do that? The question begged for an answer as easy and light as a scent carried on the air. It was an answer that drifted down from the sky and settled upon him like the most spacious thought you could imagine. "*I am* why," he thought. It was as simple as that.

Shasta came to a stop, and with him, the music. He looked up, squinting into a brilliant artificial light. The billboard said "Shasta Whittaker Reunion", which seemed *precisely* like the right thing to see. He sauntered up to the ticket booth, curious and enthused.

"Ahh, you made it!" chimed the box office clerk, sliding him his ticket.

"Yes," Shasta replied, "Of course." Better to just roll with the punches. Despite the warm and familiar welcome, he was still not wholly clear on what exactly was transpiring. "Where am I?"

The clerk pounded the ticket desk smartly. "Ha! You Shasta's crack me up, man, I swear. You guys broke the mold."

"Oh yeah. Tell me about it." Shasta turned to see another Shasta falling into line behind him. Something about it felt completely normal. At the edge of his vision, materializing from the darkness, he could just make out the translucent image of a third. The second nodded politely, then toyed with his cuff links. Shasta nodded back, then looked down and gave himself the best once over he could. He was wearing a pair of wool dress slacks, a pair of recently polished, albeit now slightly scuffed black leather shoes, a white dress shirt, and a fully inflated personal flotation device. Very strange.

He looked up at his other self.

The other Shasta just shrugged his shoulders. "We've always been adventurous," he said, gesturing to the life preserver. "Honestly? I feel like the outcast here sometimes. I'm an accountant. Go figure." He extended his hand, which Shasta shook.

"I don't know what I am," Shasta replied.

"Ahh, first time to the big dance. I know how you feel. Make sure you check out The Book before you leave. I could stand in the Book Room forever I think. It's a place like you've never felt in your whole life."

"Like what kind of feeling?"

"I don't want to spoil it for you. It's different every time, in a way. Just check it out. Trust me."

With that, Shasta took his half of the ticket from the clerk and proceeded through the double doors into the auditorium. Round puddles of light were scooting along the walls like swiftly processing jellyfish, and a jazz band was riffing away on a stage at the far end of the hall, the bassist reverberating in place like an idling Model T while the adjacent flautist, a tiny woman with dark black glasses, wrote a story that hung in the air in a beautiful, slowly fading neon script. The drummer was a rambunctious sort, keeping time by not overtly doing so, but overtly doing many other things at once, and was obviously lost within a cloud of reckless improvisation. Shasta warmed to the music

instantly, recognized himself inside of it in the same way you or I would recognize our reflection in a mirror.

As his eyes adjusted to the busy half light, he discovered the hall was filled with round tables, each of which was inhabited by a vibe of Shasta Whittakers– (a “vibe” being a whole shooting match of Shasta Whittakers in one place, just as the term “flock” would be applied to a comparably sized assembly of geese). Shasta made his way through the crowd towards a table with some empty air space, collecting a flute of champagne along the way, and listened in for a bit.

"...she says, 'You've never baked a cake in your entire life, Shasta. What makes you think you can pull off this one? Your daughter is turning sixteen. This is only going to happen once, you know.'

"So, I say, 'That's it exactly. I've been savin' it all up for this one, perfect cake. I wasn't plannin' on making cakes *forever*.' "

Amused laughter rippled through the vibe. Shasta found himself smiling with a joy that had snuck up on him from the inside. He looked around the table at these other instances of himself– an oddly comfortable ensemble of nearly spitting images who each seemed both part of who he was, yet somehow unique at the same time– and his gaze settled on a quiet one seated diagonally opposite himself. The seated man had a distant look, slightly swollen jowls, a gold ring of the sort you are

given, but never buy, and a flowing greenish-gray tattoo on his right forearm.

As if on cue, he said, "What's her name? Your daughter."

"Rebecca," the baker said.

"Mine, too... Amazing, isn't she? We call her Becky, actually. We, uh..." Then he hunched over slightly in his chair, as if caught off guard, as if muffling a pain that had clutched his insides and caused his words to coagulate into strange webbing within his throat, like a bolus of dried cotton. After a moment, he recovered enough to speak again, but his voice came in rasps, like quick bursts released from an overly pressurized tank. "Be grateful, man. Mine's gone..." He snapped his fingers. "Happens in a wink. Poof."

The whole vibe was stung. The baker winced and shifted onto his heels. Shasta gripped his seat tightly, his knuckles whitening, as a heavy weight nearly bowled him over. He knew exactly, intensely, how the other man felt. It was as if a hammer had pounded upon the soft tissue of his heart. As the pain cleared, he thought instantly of Emily. Her face flooded his inner vision, and she seemed so close he could nearly reach into the air and touch her.

"I miss her. I miss her so much, man..." the tattooed Shasta continued, and then he lapsed into a thick silence that swirled through the entire vibe. It was a silence of dancing shadows,

and it flickered between them. Thoughts leapt from one to the other like crows flung from hidden nests, suddenly airborne and in search of new dwelling places. The flock swirled in, through, and around them, clamoring and restless, spiraling up and away, then flaring en masse out into the night sky, leaving behind an emptiness that the whole vibe occupied. A pain had passed between them and been released.

Shasta's thoughts returned again briefly to Emily, then gave way to a feeling so warm and full it was like a sunrise over the ocean. He wanted to give that feeling to this man, to his friend—to himself. He wanted to place it square inside of him. He walked over and put his hand on his shoulder. A portal opened between them, a connection, and for a moment the two were sparkling, ionic cousins bathing in a common solution, the sharing of a brilliant simplicity. "I'm not sure what to say. I just—"

"I know," the man with the tattoo replied, looking up, wiping his cheek, placing his hand onto Shasta's. The two Shasta Whittakers just held onto one another for a moment. It was a moment that spread slowly, like sap, across the table. "Thank you," he said finally, squeezing once and then releasing Shasta's hand. He sighed, turned back to the table, sat up straight, and then laughed. It was a mighty and cleansing chuckle. He smiled warmly to the rest of the vibe, then dissolved, and was gone.

SHASTA STUMBLED backwards a step or two, stunned. He was looking around without seeing, staring into places that could only take shape in his mind. As his eyes came back to the room, they settled on the rest of the vibe, still gathered around the table. They all looked pretty normal: their lips were like floorboards, their eyes narrowed into zen-like slats.

"What happened?" he said.

"He got what he came for," said a Shasta seated nearby. This one wore glasses, had a neatly trimmed mustache, a bolo tie with a silver and turquoise slide, and the smartest cowboy hat you ever saw. He was relaxed, leaned back in his chair with one arm on the table in front of himself, the fingers of that hand twirling a toothpick, and the other arm resting on the back of the freshly vacant seat. He set down the toothpick and lifted a sweating tumbler of iced tea to his lips, pointing to Shasta over the top of the glass with his index finger as he drank, then said. "And, if I had to guess, so did you, my friend."

The rest of the vibe was indicating agreement, either by nodding their heads imperceptibly, or just in the way they were chewing their gum, staring fixedly right at him or smugly looking over their shoulders at the other tables like, *yeah*, that just happened.

"I did?"

"You gave him a real memory, man. We all saw it. Damned impressive if I don't say so myself. That's how we help each other, though, just like that. Completely natural. We Shasta Whittakers, we stick together don't we boys? Shapin' up to be quite a night in here, fella's." His tumbler made a loud snap as he cracked it back down on the table. This one had a flair for the dramatic.

"Okay, so... where'd he go?" Shasta asked, pointing at the empty chair. "The tattoo. What happened?"

"Oh, come on now, you felt it same as us. You gave him a hot potato. He's out makin' hay while the sun shines. You can't get a real memory and just sit there with a smile on your face all night. No way, no how. They move like the wind, and they take you with 'em. They got places to go. People to be. Worlds to form. They're like power pellets."

"Pac Man was where it all started for me, too," Shasta mumbled. Raised glasses clinked all around amid a smattering of chuckles. Apparently there were certain themes that ran through the entire vibe, Pac Man being one of them, right up there alongside of the Shasta Whittaker theme. "I'm still confused, however. What do you mean by a *real* memory?"

"You serious?"

Shasta winked at the one in the cowboy hat, smiling like a freed prisoner at a snow cone vendor who was parked outside of

the jail house, and said, "Humor me."

"It's a memory that can't be written down. Won't go in the Book, that's the salient feature. Some say, though, you can't have an identity line without one. No real memory, no life, no being, no *existence*. It's what makes us who we are, what renews us, gives us strength— like you just did for Becky's dad there."

"I don't even know how I did that. I just... I don't know, tried to reach out to him, to give him something I was feeling."

"We know. We all feel it when one of us is hurting. Same as when one of us is flying high. It ripples through us, affects all of us. That real memory, though, that's a little different. It's like the deepest point within us, where we all converge, and every once in a while, it goes to work, man. Like a damn reconvening of the Dreamtime. It changes everything, top to bottom. Reshapes the entire landscape— resets the whole topography for all of us. You can't control it, but you can't stop it either. It's the sweetest feeling ever."

"I'd like to get hold of one of those real memories, myself," Shasta said. "I think that's what I came here to find."

"Well good luck with that. Not sure that you can. It's like I said— they're not memories like you can store away or take with you. They're more like a life inside of you that has to get out than a snapshot of some moment or feeling. You felt it, didn't

you, how it wanted out, wanted to live and breathe?"

"Yeah. Think so. I guess I must have..." Shasta was dimly aware that certain metaphysical scaffoldings of his life were undergoing significant revision in realtime. He had the awkward sensation that some quest of his was about to end with an unexpected failure, but he was unwilling to concede the point just yet. He searched his mind for an alternate path forward. Cowboy Hat was the second instance of himself to speak of the Book. "I think I need to see the Book."

"It's worth a gander for sure," the other replied, pointing to a set of doors just a few tables away, along the outer wall of the auditorium. "Right through there, friend."

"Thank you," Shasta replied, and with a self-excusing nod not easily offered with the personal flotation device hanging off his neck, he strode off briskly in the indicated direction.

Shasta pushed through the doors, expecting to see a huge leatherbound book on a dais in the center of the room, or at least shelves upon shelves filled with volumes of an endless story unfolding in thousands of parallel worlds. Instead, he found a single touch screen interface on a makeshift wooden table, and a creaky folding chair. He sat down and touched the screen with his finger, which caused it to spark to life and begin booting up.

As he waited, he glanced over his shoulder, and realized the double doors had vanished. He was alone in a space of unde-

tectable extents, filled with a silence that seemed to be bristling with potential, as if it might at any moment boil over. Time continued to pass it seemed, but its passage carried no meaning, as if it were nothing but a construction of the familiar intended to put his mind at ease.

On the screen, a video of Shasta appeared. He was in sixth grade, seated at his desk, taking a history quiz. A wooden graphite pencil whirled in his hand, dragging a worn eraser nub in succinct pink streaks through the air. Shasta watched closely, warmed by the image of his boyhood self seated at the plasticized wooden table, completely devoted to his task, his tongue pressed against his upper lip in concentration. The answers came out slowly, in deliberate one-by-one etchings, and in between them he would pause to read the next question, one elbow on the desk propping up his head, his cheek and lips a smear of splayed fingers. As Shasta watched the scene continue, however, the warmth and curiosity slowly waned. The sequence was uneventful overall, and in real time it soon became uninteresting and dreadfully slow—something stale.

He remembered he was looking for something.

He reached out experimentally and dragged the screen sideways, from right to left, and watched as the scene skipped ahead a couple of years into his future. He saw himself seated on the front steps of his parents' house, practicing guitar chords. It

was dusk, and stray song birds were jumping from tree to tree along the drive. Mr. Miller drove past, parked his white Pontiac Fiero in the hot-topped drive across the street and dug a bag of groceries out of the passenger seat. He backed his torso from the confines of the cabin and waved back towards Shasta, as much to retain his balance as to be friendly, then propped the screen door open with his foot and twirled through a pile of keys. He stepped inside, closed the door behind himself, and was gone. The lane was still again. Sprangly guitar chords resumed, and threatened to continue unabated. This wasn't it either.

Shasta dragged his hand across the screen once more, swiping vertically from top to bottom this time, and found himself observing a different instance of himself altogether. This new Shasta was the same age as the would-be guitarist had been, but he was on a stage, rehearsing for some sort of play. Shasta had never been in a play in his life. He watched briefly, intrigued to see the spitting image of his boyhood self gesturing theatrically and talking while on the move, as if to no one in particular. Shasta looked closely, studying the movements, looking for some sort of signal or cue. The boy spoke, turned, walked—wielded his props with practiced care. He turned and looked to other actors, his face a question, then a sinking, then an aha. The longer Shasta observed, the more this scene, too,

began to take on an empty feeling. He couldn't quite grasp what the younger version of himself was seeking to accomplish in this moment, through this play-acting. What was driving him? The figure on the screen hadn't been acting for *him*, after all— for some later re-examination of his life— but had been drawn to this stage in response to some inner impetus that had taken up residence in this one specific instance of himself, particular to this other place and time. There was something happening *within* the young man on the screen of which Shasta couldn't quite catch hold, yet to which he was intimately connected. He realized he was witnessing nothing but the factual recounting of events, viewing scenes of his extended self from the outside.

He flipped quickly through a few more tracks, sliding up and down and back and forth through the collected events in the lives of Shasta Whittaker, watching snatches of various lives, wondering how they all fit together. The results were the same.

What had happened to the inside? Where was *that* stored? How would he know which one was the living fruition of the beautiful memory he carried? He had always imagined it would be obvious, but now he wasn't certain of this conclusion at all. *That* Shasta Whittaker could be doing just about anything, he realized, and he'd never know it by what he saw on these films. He could be a maitre d' or a television commentator, a bookie or a financial consultant. What would it matter?

What did any of it matter?

Shasta felt confused, yet close to something important— like he had been given a chance to sample a rare and exquisite wine, a once in a lifetime opportunity, and it had been wasted on him because of a taste-squelching sinus cold. It may as well have been water. It had sloshed in his mouth, flavorless, possessing all the distinguishing characteristics of the primordial liquid from which all *actual* liquids were derived.

Still... he had drunk the wine. How much closer could he get to the exquisite flavor that he sought, than to carry it in some way within himself? He sat back in the folding chair and rubbed his eyes. He felt as though he had been seated there for hours. When he reopened his eyes, the screen was dark, which was just as well, since fatigue was creeping up through his bones and fanning out radially through his body. Nagged by a question whose language he didn't speak, too overwhelmed to conceive of a next step, Shasta leaned back, relaxed, and dozed off.

As he slipped away, he could hear in the distance the booming of drums, and the muted ripples of trumpets. Hovering on the verge of sleep, he hummed along in time with them, offering a hitching to and fro of plaintive tones that were at once a question and an acceptance, like an old wooden wagon jouncing across the landscape, carrying a family's entire estate towards a

gap in a mountainous horizon. A peaceful sensation haunted him, staying close but never merging with him, darting in and out of the edges of his awareness like a starving wolf in the presence of both food and man, torn between trust and instinct.

"Come closer," he whispered into the darkness.

AS SHASTA SLEPT, the Book Room filled with sea water. The level rose until Shasta was picked up from his seat and carried away by the flotation device still secured around his neck. His head lolled back, and his whole body rolled gently in the deepening water. The space overhead filled with stars, a soft wind began to blow, and gentle swells filled-in the distances all around. In time, the *Use as Directed* slid past, and Stern, having tied himself securely to the boat's rail, leaned out and grasped hold of Shasta in an adrenalin-fueled embrace. Stern gasped in relief, then made himself into a quiet sponge and waited, clutching his friend close, pleading with the very air around them for some sign of life. Soundlessly, his lips hardly brushing the air, he mouthed his desire insistently, "Please... *please*..."

It was listless, but it was there. Shasta was breathing.

Stern's whole body relaxed, sagging against the railing. Holding Shasta tightly as the boat wobbled side to side, still drifting beneath the night, Stern freed one arm and looped a rope around Shasta's chest. He pulled it snug beneath his

friend's limp arms, secured it into a fixed loop, and then began to ratchet the limp body up the outside of the boat.

Once Shasta was safely back on board, Stern laid him flat on the deck, stripped off his cold wet clothes, and checked for cuts, contusions, strangely swollen pockets of flesh, or broken bones. Finding none, he wrapped him in dry, woolen blankets, then focused on putting the boat back together and sailing for the nearest harbor. As he worked, Shasta slept, the steady rise and fall of his chest the only movement, the only sign of life. Just after dawn, Stern pulled into the harbor, exhausted, and Shasta, still unconscious, was ferried to shore and packaged into a waiting ambulance that disappeared over a small hill.

OBLIVIOUS TO Stern's entire rescue operation, Shasta slept for nearly twenty four hours after reaching land. On his journey back to the shores of his own consciousness he navigated a landscape of memories and dreams. He talked to strangers, asked for directions from another Shasta Whittaker with whom he was sharing a bicycle taxi, purchased a pair of moccasins for a daughter he didn't have, and practiced swan diving off of haystacks into pristine swimming pools while watching lightning storms pass back and forth on the horizon like sentinels for a land beyond. Mostly the contents of the landscape through which he passed were nonsense— a potpourri of garbled impres-

sions and strangely placed artifacts of his rising consciousness—but one demanded attention, like a door frame flooded with light standing at the end of the cereal aisle.

In this memory, Shasta felt himself slip and fall, smacking his head against the surface of something hard before tumbling into cool water. He sank. He was aware of himself falling down through the dark water, plunging like a stone, but no matter how he tried he couldn't move his arms or legs. His body was limp and unresponsive—beyond his conscious control. He realized with certainty that he was dying. This was the memory of his death. A fear threatened to overwhelm him, a fear that magnified his heaviness, as if gravity were strengthening by the second, or a magnet were pulling him towards the deep. His mind was scattering into pieces like a puzzle left on the front porch in an advancing wind storm, blowing across the yard, whirling beneath the car and up the sides of trees. He could feel himself thinning, losing focus, as the weight of the moment continued to drag him down through the water. He was coming undone. He called out for help, though his lips couldn't move. It was the kind of cry only a heart can make—something silent and far-reaching.

Unexpectedly, the storm calmed. The whirling bits of his mind were waved aside, flung out of the way, as if commanded by a gathering presence that wrapped around him. He felt—

through and beyond the fear and the fragmentation of his own thought— the vastness of reality that was Shasta Whittaker. He could not encounter this feeling, this memory, and retain even one shred of awareness of a particular place in space and time. It was *so* large, *so* great. It was a feeling he never wanted to leave. He experienced the entire, radial tapestry of living threads and tendrils that emanated from a single core of being, all at once, as a single and undivided whole. He felt every one of the extensions of his heart into space and time, each instance of himself growing over, across, up, down and through, like fingered vines exploring an ancient rocky surface. He felt the one desire that lived within every part of himself. It was the desire to be Shasta Whittaker— all of Shasta Whittaker. Every bit of Shasta Whittaker that could possibly be, he desired. And they desired him. The endless, interwoven presence of Shasta Whittaker came to a pause, and listened to his call. As the entirety of his being converged upon his sinking image, carrying with it this one true feeling— this one real memory— Shasta felt the fear that had threatened him retreat, even as he continued to sink. A calm acceptance arose to take its place.

"This is how it is," he thought. "This is who I am."

Then the memory billowed and expanded, as if breathed into by a glowing silence. Shasta was enveloped by a feeling that seemed as old and powerful as the world itself. He was held,

motionless, as time seemed to pause and circumstances to lose their rigidity. Something behind the world was being rewired, and a second memory, overlaid upon the first, began to take shape.

He felt a second Shasta Whittaker draw near, crawl up inside of him, and superpose himself into the same track of space-time. He felt as though he was in two places at once, and the two places had joined. He was both, but not two— a vessel holding two fluids, neither of which was displaced by the other. This second Shasta was nearly identical to the first, with one key distinction. He was wearing a life vest. There was a merging, a commingling, a differentiation, and when Shasta emerged once again he found himself floating on the surface of the water, breathing, but still unable to move his limbs.

As light began to slip over the horizon off in the distance, Shasta finally broke through the surface of his reverie, and awoke in his bed. He was lying on his back in the hospital with an IV in his arm, and his headache was profound. His eyes felt like they were going to burst from the sudden stimulation. When they calmed, he scanned the room and found Emily sleeping in a chair along the wall. Her legs were crossed beneath her, her arms folded on her hip, her head leaned awkwardly to one side against the wall behind her. Shasta winced just imagining the effects of occupying such a pose for extended periods of

time.

He wanted to wake her, to go to her immediately, but he did not. The grace of the moment held him in its sway. The way the light poured in through the window, her quiet presence, the hum of the building, and the aching desire he felt within himself all flowed together like a great, wide river. He sat and breathed, sharing the space with her, giving himself time to ponder the words he would require when she did awaken. As he sat and let his thoughts carry him along, a solitary tear formed and ran down his cheek.

"I found it, Em," he whispered, reaching instinctively for her sleeping form, willing his words into the deepest recesses of her being. "I found what I should have known all along... what I should have recognized... that it was right here, and you were always there with me..." What came next evaporated as it came through him, passing straight from his heart into the beyond, bypassing our world, and was taken upon wide and untiring wings, like those of an albatross, through the roof and up into the sky above.

Emily shifted on her seat, groaning briefly, and navigated the top-down process of unfolding herself and apologizing to the various muscle groups she would undoubtedly need throughout the coming day, then came over to Shasta and wrapped him in a warm embrace. "I don't sleep very soundly in the scrunched

curtsy position,” she confessed, “so I heard part of that, but I think you should take it from the top.”

“It goes like this,” Shasta replied. “A vast conspiracy, bigger than the sky and all of time, exerts itself behind the scenes of the world, resulting in the following: something perfect happens— actually a myriad of perfect things happen— then we discover that this is so, by staggering through one perfection after another until we obtain this understanding. If you’re lucky, like me, you spend most of the trip looking Love right in the face.”

She squeezed his hand. “Take me with you next time?”

“I’m not going anywhere. I already went there, and it brought me here— which is the most perfect thing you could imagine, on so many levels. And plus, I’m not sure it’s possible for me *not* to be where you are. There’s some kind of a *thing* happening that involves both of us. You know what I mean? It’s just the way it is.”

“Uh huh— and how do you know that, Shasta Whittaker?”

“It’s a little theory of mine,” he said.

She punched him on the shoulder and went off in search of breakfast.

A few minutes later, Stern Greeley walked in with a hot coffee in his hand. Seeing that his friend Shasta Whittaker was finally awake, he stopped short, raised his eyebrows and his hands, dropped his lower jaw, and, being mindful of the fact

that he was carrying a cup of hot coffee in one hand, shaped himself into a question as best he could.

Shasta looked at his friend for a moment, pulled his breath in and opened his mouth with confidence, building expectations all around, but nothing came out. He closed it and began the process of regrouping. You can't say seventeen things at once, you see, and some things you can't say at all. "I'm not even sure what to say, Stern."

"Then don't, you nut. And don't try and tell me it didn't work, either, because it sure as hell worked for me."