



# 1

Today is my birthday. Not a good day to die. But whatever happens, happens. The readiness is all.

I wonder if my brother is still alive? I sense that he is - identical twins have that energy. But San Diego lost communication with Humboldt ten days ago - same day the Golden Gate flared into blue smoke and scant pieces of twisted metal. I go on faith. I imagine he mirrors my presence at the edge of the sea.

So you wanna know what pisses me off?

Don't play stupid. You know it. You live it. You survived it. Up to now, you survived it. I think maybe you should go away, maybe go back to the Valley, and then if we see one another, then we got something going. If we never see one another again, then *cest la vie*.

Quit mumbling in your cups.

Mix some tears in there if you want some sympathy.

All right now.

You need to shut up and watch and I will show you my story as it unfolds.

"Is it a short story?" you ask.

*Only if I die soon.*

Damn, my response came so quickly. I dropped over the edge a long time ago.

*I want it to be a long story,* I whisper through your silence.

It's your story too but you're still dumbstruck and can't mouth the words. Some of you can't even think the thoughts and when a glimpse of "history" shudders through your shattered brain, you jerk your head out of the way like a beaten dog from the open palm of its so-called

*"Masta, Sir."*

Let me pause for a few seconds. Just the facts. Pull the emotion in. Keep me under control. Save my energy for the fight. *Which one, you ask?*

Most of them don't have names anymore. They run into one another too quickly.

*I've never heard you speak so much,* you say and I just give you that stare and finally reply,

*The time for talking will soon be at an end.*

Standing astride the shore, I watch the incoming seawater sweep about my feet, pushing long fingers of red kelp strands against them. When the tide recedes, the kelp is drawn back and around the black wetsuit that covers my ankles. I feel it tighten and take hold and pull on my balance and I think, wouldn't that beat all, the child of a former Navy Seal being drown by a secret enemy weapon of killer kelp. Has the war now come to our shore?

Rumors of war had circulated for years as demonstrations and fire fights and civil wars broke out at various locations throughout the world before they were briefly quelled, only to have the winds carry the turbulence to some other part of the globe. Ubiquitous as COVID, they became frequent in occurrence, they became engorged with participants. On the side, the committee of vultures waited patiently. Watching their meals, waiting their time.

I keep my balance, the water slides back into the ocean and the killer kelp falls quietly to the sand around my feet and I look up to the murky morning sky to see my *Watching Bird*.

My *Watching Bird* is an Osprey, crying in the wind currents high above me for these past seventeen days. I no longer question her appearance. Just another domino lining up beside me, ready to be set in motion at my need. I first became aware of my Osprey at the San Diego County Fair, set December 7 in the year of our Lord *naught*.

"Naught?" you ask.

At the middle of this year, the California legislature, when they were still semi functional, started the slate again. We are now year 0000. Go figure. Some positive thinking hocus pocus crap designed to raise the morale of the populace that everything is hunky dory and we are beginning anew. This was about the same time we heard that Berlin was ransacked and swept into nothingness.

I was watching three large sailor boys on 24-hour leave from one of the nuclear aircraft carriers that patrol 24/7 off the San Diego coast. Their ship was anchored one mile off the Del Mar beach, set in the water like some gray behemoth watching the natives. They were taking turns at the High Striker, screaming their lungs out at their limited shore leave, drinking their coveted Mexican beers, and throwing their mallets against the lever in a quest to outmuscle one another. They cursed the game, they cursed

the wars, they cursed the dearth of Tijuana whores. The virus had chased the latter back into the Jalisco Mountains where their families lived in a village of adobe huts and mountain stream drinking water.

Ironical, that in a new world where there was so much information available to anyone with a signal, that no person, no entity, no government knows how the end began.

Things got real serious about three years ago, and even the Pollyannas of the world started to frown at the daily news. Facts, alternative facts, network news, Internet fake news, outright lies and fabrications wove different stories. Enough truth in each story to make it impossible to sift out the mendacity and follow the credible narrative. When I asked my grand father about it, he said that when the Politicians and Bureaucrats of the United States are such practiced, compulsive liars, who can ever know the truth?

When I asked him about the politicians in the other countries, he just closed his eyes and took a long hit from the local harvest and whispered, "worst than here. Inbreeders. All a bunch of stinkin Inbreeders."

We do know that those three years ago somebody shot missiles into North Korea. It could have been us. Everyone denied it. It was the usual, "maybe, could have, perhaps,

some people say," blather that everyone practiced. But needless to say, during its demise, North Korea reined destruction upon its southern brother and Japan and all degrees along the compass. This set off White Russia against Red China and the chaos flowed like a tsunami wave over the countries adjacent to them.

Simultaneous with this, or maybe shortly before or after, as often times inventors in diverse locations of the world are working on the same creative discovery, missiles escaped from the Mideast and from Europe, and landed among themselves and in countries bordering the Pacific Ocean and perimetered within the Africa continent. The dogs of war had been unleashed and why New Zealand was not spared and how the large cities of Central and South America came under attack, no one ever explained, and it was never disclosed, before world communications ceased about a year ago.

I wonder if the people that initiated the End are still alive, hunkered down somewhere, surrounded by technology that no longer connects them to the fractured world?

Two of the boys were twirling their mallets in imitation of Samurai sword fighters, a skill they learned on past deployment to Japan. That had to be more than three years before, as shortly thereafter North Korea made Japan

look like a Harry Truman reprise. The third sailor crushed his mallet against the lever, only to raise the puck halfway to the bell. He cursed and looked at me and my tennis shoes and said,

"What are you looking at you scraggly-haired girl? Take your blue suede sneakers outta here and let men do their job!"

"Put a dog mask on that mug of yours!" I shot back, ready for anything. I didn't tell him I was a boy still waiting for my hormonal growth. None of his business and hez probably too dumb to figure it out.

One of the other boys, watching our encounter with mirth bubbling up inside of him and out through his mouth, laughed and slapped the back pockets of his trousers and came up with empty hands stretched to his sides. He said to me in a loud voice for all the world to hear, "That's last year's crap! If you're gonna die, your gonna die, and ain't no mask gonna save your ass!" He looked about the mask less people and continued, "tell that one to those mask mongering techo-billionaires that tried to hide in their McMansions in the Amazon rain forest. They're all dead now!" He stood there, looking for approval, "I don't know, maybe a pygmy shot 'em with a poison dart, but I heard Covid tracked their ass down and choked 'em out!" He raised

his hands for glory, but the people began to walk past and his buddy dogface held the mallet out to me.

I thought about showing them up, making a go of it, when this old gypsy woman, smelling of garlic and olive oil, enticed me into her fortune-telling tent. What the heck, I thought. Maybe she is prescient about my non-existent love life. I nodded "no," to the sailor boy and he smirked and drank more beer.

People still hoard garlic as a hedge against disease, like the black plague. I don't believe it works for the bombs: atomic or nuclear; but most of those were ripped asunder by intercepting missiles, exploding in the atmosphere, their warheads cascading to the earth with minimal immediate damage. The fallout, the radiation, took several months to affect more misery on the populous. It's the biological creations released from drones that lift off submarines cruising off the coasts that inflict the greater part of the destruction of the species.

About two years ago, with the Internet still up there was displayed a professionally created video of a turbaned man with a long white beard who exclaimed in perfect British English, "The masses of the earth have been in revolt, and now is the time for the *dis*United States and her evil partners to pay for the sins of their fathers."

Then he was gone from the World Wide Web. Never to be seen again. At least not by anyone that I knew.

That was when Washington D.C. ordered the nuclear aircraft carriers to depart San Diego for the east coast. The federal government showed they didn't care about us anymore--assuming they ever did anything for us but collect our taxes. The commander of the Pacific Fleet refused, eloquently stating, "We live here, our families live here, and if needed, we die here." The sailors tossed their hats in the air and cheered in support. And D.C?

Within six months D.C. was next and when the smoke blew off the city to reveal *Nothing*, people assumed any survivor there was living in Mount Weather. The Pentagon was a giant hole. The Washington Monument was razed, but somehow the Lincoln Memorial stood intact. Go figure.

The lady had the de rigueur red flower in her shoulder length black hair that draped over her man's tight white linen shirt. Her hips were adorned with a wide ankle length skirt of variegated patterns of red and yellow and blue. She was bare foot in the sawdust sandy sea soil that served as the tent floor.

She sat me down at a small table covered with a purple tablecloth and oriental light and took my hands. We both had dark brown hands from the California sun. Hers were

adorned with silver and gold rings and a leather beaded turquoise wrist bracelet that I recognized as Navajo.

"Monument Valley?" I inquired.

"Si." Her dark eyes glanced quickly at my green orbs before she looked down again to my hands. Her Spanish was European. Same as my mother.

The red flowered lady studied me and said, "Your voice is still high, your skin is still smooth, but dark." A few seconds passed and then, "you're a boy?"

I had heard this before, but I still blushed as she ran her fingers along my palms for many seconds and then she said, "You're going to live to be one hundred."

I smirked at this thought. The world is going to Hades and I'm going to live to be a hundred. Who else is going to be there? I thought about my eighty-year old grandfather now living in the rest home in Crescent City along the Northern California border. An eclectic figure with a rich history of observing the world. I revel in his stories. My twin brother was visiting him when the quarantine went into effect and now they are together. I wonder if we again will ever see one another, or even speak with one another on some working electronic device.

Ten months ago, before I was introduced to my future, more bulwarks fell. Moscow was destroyed by something more

powerful than Napoleon and Paris burned to the ground long after Hitler's disregarded orders. By then, the Great Wall of China enclosed a small fraction of living people, and their total shrinks each day. We only know this from some cell phone texts with attached photos that made it through cyberspace. Are they real? If so, when did it occur? No one knows. Not even the military can verify it.

People in San Diego have discussed the inevitable since the Korean fiasco. It is only a question of when and of which manner of death each of us will experience. More people embrace some sort of religion. Many fled south to Mexico with the hope of delaying their exposure. Some killed themselves with pills or drug overdoses or the usual weapon. Sensualists smoke and drink and fornicate wildly to the ridicule of the religious.

The San Diego civic and military leaders tell us we have about a year before the descension and that the military personnel will protect us as best they can. The troops smile glumly at that proclamation. They are the last hope of "America's finest city."

Six months past, Boston and quickly Chicago turned into swarms of people and cars and chaos as the inhabitants tried to flee . . . to where? Myriad pictures of their *death grappling* with one another sprang up on the

flickering Internet. There was no trace of the armies. Where had they gone? Rumors flew that the individual soldiers had left for their homes and families--wherever that might be. But no State National Guard, no organized police agencies, no nothing! Then Denver and Mexico City disappeared. When the Internet came up for half an hour, satellite images showed rubble all about with no signs of life. It looked like Hiroshima at ground zero, like tornados had torn through the areas.

Four weeks ago parts of LA fired up in the Santa Ana heat as the third world communities overran Beverly Hills and other decadent enclaves. Reports said the raggedy armies had overrun the National Guard and were heading north toward Silicon Valley and San Francisco. They apparently want to pitch a last battle against the techies before the viruses or bombs obliterate them as well as their intended combatants.

The Gypsy lady looked further into my palms, this time studying them for several minutes, glancing back and forth between my hands and face. The High Striker was eerily silent, the room quietly felt sacrosanct, and then I felt a drop of water on my right thumb. Surprised, I watched the red rose tilt up with the lady's head and our eyes met. She was weeping. She carefully folded up my palms and said,

"You've been living in the eye of the storm. Soon it will overtake you."

California had quarantined for the past year, watching on inter state communications her neighboring states descending into chaos. With the latest riots in LA, the California counties were now barricaded from themselves, like feudal cities of the past, with families like mine separated. Everybody knew the day of reckoning was soon, but maybe this lady was a seer, maybe she was a psychic and could tell me the exact date and time and manner, and so I started to ask her for more detail but she held a finger up to silence me. She stood up and I followed suit. We were separated by two feet of dark silence. Slowly and quietly she said,

"The stars are not aligned for your lady. But her spirit will open up." She stopped, putting in a theatrical pause that I have witnessed in the great orators of the world, and continued, "The rest is up to you."

She knew all along why I permitted her to bring me into the tent. Or am I giving myself too much credit in speaking of my free will? Did I really have a choice to meet with her? Is this part of the Odyssean journey of my life that the gods have planned out? Who's in charge here or is there

more than one wind directing my sail? Or God forbid: is there no God?

She moved against me and gave me a good hug, which I reciprocated. She broke from me and quickly nodded her head in the direction of the tent flap.

I stood up, confused for several seconds. I reached into my pocket for a six-ounce bag of wheat flour, but the lady refused my money. She ushered me to the tent flap and gently touched my elbow and quietly whispered into my ear, "follow your intuition," as if it were a secret between me and her. She lightly touched my scraggily hair and whispered again, "the time for cutting this will mark the next chapter in your life," and then she gently pushed me out to the bright sun and the loud clang of a High Striker winner of a stuffed pink pig. I looked up to see the rung bell and I saw the object high in the sky. At first glance I mistook it for another drone hovering in the sky. There were still some left, flying and spying throughout the county. But as I stared at it for several seconds, I realized it was an Osprey, silhouetted against the high white November clouds, swirling from side to side on the onshore sea breeze, like a slow motion slalom skier dancing before a snowy mountain slope.

Her encounter famished me. I paid no attention to dog faced sailor boy who was celebrating his strike by draining two Pacifico beers at once, each pouring into opposite sides of his mouth. I knew he was a short-timer on this earth, he should be allowed to enjoy his shore leave unmolested. I walked about a hundred yards to locate one of those "Hottest Hot Dogs of the World." I used some flecked gold to buy a super jumbo one smeared with onions and relish and mustard and when I tilted my head back to stuff it into my mouth, I saw the bird was still above me. I finished that dog and then ordered up a second one. The Osprey was still looking at me when I did my second tilt to put that second dog down. Intrigued, to test if it were a coincidence, I walked from the 4H Club chicken exhibition to the penny arcade with all the weapons. I stopped there for fifteen minutes to win a trophy with some expert shooting of a rifle in accordance with my late father's teachings. Then I carried my stuffed clownfish prize with me past the cotton candy stalls and over to the side show tents where the bearded women and dwarfs were basking in the afternoon sun. We exchanged pleasantries and then I walked toward another corner of the fair.

Everywhere I went, the Osprey followed high in the sky. I named my Osprey, Hermes. A nod to the God or gods that

keep making significant appearances in my life, our lives, my family's lives. I decided to back track to the High Striker to challenge the sailor boys to a throw down. When I arrived, they were gone, having been replaced by some drunken teen-age boys and girls. They were swinging the mallets under the shadows thrown out by the sun-setting west behind the carnival tents.

I moved past them and around the High Striker to see the gypsy woman. Her tent was gone. The sawdust sandy sea soil that served as the tent floor was unswept. I looked closely at the ground and I could see the imprints of my blue suede tennis shoes: where I walked through the tent flap; where I moved over to the table and where I sat down with the chair and table leg imprints in the soil. I saw my tennis shoe imprints where I stood with her and where I had walked back out the tent. But I did not see the prints of her bare feet. I actually kneeled down on the soil to find any trace, any trace I could. There was none. I was perplexed.

I walked over to one of the tipsy girls, who was leaning down to pick up the mallet that had slipped from her slack fingers.

"What happened to the gypsy woman?"

The girl screwed her face up with inebriated thoughts.

"Who?

"There was a gypsy woman in a tent right over there about an hour ago," I said.

"Never saw her," she muttered, leaning up with mallet in hand.

"How long have you been here?" I asked the group.

One of the boys spoke over the foamy beer cup attached to his lower lip. "'bout that same hour. We took over from sailors that got called back to their ship."

"Three big white boys?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's them," said a second boy lining up his mallet over the lever, "and we didn't see no gypsies 'round here."

"Thanks," I said and as I walked away with my stuffed clown fish in my arms and my Osprey high over my head my ears heard the girl say with a stage whisper, "Is that a boy or a girl with that long burnt out hair and those blue suede tennis shoes?"

"That's Jack Fluke," was the hushed slurred reply from the first boy. "Don't mess with him."

The tide again sweeps up around my wetsuit and unlocks the kelp from my ankles. The water is hot for December. I smell the decomposition of fish and plant life in the sweaty sea. Searching for my surfboard, my eyes survey the ash and broken kelp on the surface of the water. I see the watery mirror reflect the low ceiling of black clouds that cover the sky above me. Then my gaze slides over to my reflection looking back up at me: long dread-locked sun gold hair framing a brown sunburnt face with my mother's sharp Spanish nose atop a boyish body six inches over five feet.

My gaze at my image is interrupted by a shout of my nickname: "Jackie Rat!"

I recognize the slow low voice and look out toward the western sea. My eyes are distracted by my Hermes who flies close past and away from me, like an edit wipe from an old time motion picture, to reveal a stocky long-haired boy in a wetsuit the same color as mine: midnight black. The boy holds a long surfboard against his body with his right arm. Water drips from his board down to the ocean.

"Party Boy!" I shout back at him. He flashes our sign; the left hand with thumb and little finger raised and points down at the left thigh of his old wetsuit. I see a

fresh cut in the wetsuit and a little bit of blood coagulated on the inner lip of the tear.

"Simmons do that?" I ask with a little jealousy.

"Yeah," he grins with his teeth set in tan skin, his long hair pulled back from his face and tied in a man bun.

"Your board get cut up?"

He lifts his right arm and shows his board and smiles further, "Rolled right over that Simmons reef. Backwash held it off the barnacles, kelp softened the blows. Not so for me. Ha." It was a curt laugh filled with irony. A dinged board needs the glass repaired, the human body can usually heal itself. Now the human heart, well . . .

"Where's your board?" he asks, "floating around without a leash?"

"Floating around here somewhere," I reply. "Had a little wipeout and my board washed into shore." I gesture to the shoreline. "We don't need no stinking leash!" I shout in joy to my brother of the Old School of Surfers. Party Boy smiles at me and drops his board into the water and kneels down on top of it and begins to paddle back out to Simmon's Reef and the incoming waves. Then he suddenly stops and looks back at me.

"Alice B wants to see you now at her place!" He shouts.

"Did she tell you why?" Since we moved here three years ago we have celebrated my birthday with her. She has known my grandfather for decades. Before, there was me and mother and brother and sometimes grandfather. But today it is only her. I wonder if she told Party Boy?

"She didn't say why, but she texted me an hour ago, before I went surfing. Said you hadn't been there in over ten days! It had the red inked capitalized URGENT written all over it!" He says the last words with emphasis and wags his finger at me to do as I have been told. Then he turns back and resumes paddling.

I walk in the shallow water, my eyes glancing about for my surfboard, thinking about Alice B. I will go see her after I find my board in this hot water.

Nowadays the water is always hot. And the air is hotter. The Santa Ana winds are blowing off shore, carrying the brown haze from the inland fires to the Pacific Ocean. It's the new moon and from nuclear waste, mutant viruses, and climate change, the dismantling of civilization is still in the works. The planet and the moon and the stars have sent the ocean tide to a record low, exposing vast quantities of reef that are drying in the heat. The steam from the salt water fills my nostrils, as does the odor from the dying

reefs and the stench of destruction surfacing throughout the world.

The cities and villages of the world have been falling like battered sand castles for three years, but it hasn't yet reached San Diego, so until then, "I surf."

I was surfing in the tube at Simmon's reef when that Clown took off in front of me. The Clown with no etiquette. Since the world conflagration, since the isolating of San Diego, more people populate the waters around here in an effort to cool down and obscure the future. A large collection of them are Clowns. Clowns are supposed to make you laugh. This one pisses me off.

Where can my board be? I know that it sliced into that boy's ankle, but it didn't stick, so it has to be here somewhere. It wasn't lying on the exposed reef when I swam in so the waves had to take it into the shore. I don't see it.

I don't see the Clown either. Maybe he left to put on a show for some six years old birthday party. Maybe he went up to Mitch's Surf Shop to see about getting some surf lessons. Doubtful. He seemed too cocky for that. Spanking brand new board that he bought out of the shop. New three-millimeter wetsuit that he bought out of the shop. New leash from the shop to tie his board to his ankle so that

when he wipes out he doesn't have to swim for his board. Not like me. Clown probably can't swim. For him, to swim is to paddle like a dog. Probably a Jack Russell dog. But not as quick and quiet, probably with terror and a lot of noise. Actually, not like a Jack Russell. I denigrate the breed by the comparison. Forget I thought it.

Maybe he went for a weapon. Knife. Pistol. Shot gun. AK-47. Everybody has them as they wait for the inevitable. East County boys grew up with armor. Maybe he wants to fire on me. Impending doom frees some people. Screw him. Weapons run in my family. We will deal with that when it happens. I won't be the first in my family to die from violence.

There it is! Thirty meters down the beach. Feet or meters, all the same. I ran track on the tenth grade team so those measurements run into one another. Everyone runs the same distance and the fastest one gets the prize. I get lots of prizes. Would have made the state meet if this . .

Forget about it. Don't waste time thinking about the future. Just live it as it comes my way.

I pick up my board. It's a six eight. Made it myself. Redwood stringer, tri fins. Double six-ounce glass to make it strong for the reefs. Ivory white color to let the sharks know it's not a seal ready for dinner. I don't need

a reef named after me cuz a White Pointer mistook me for a seal meal.

I inspect the front of my board and touch the broken fiberglass of the nose and notice a trace of red blood. They show no respect, I think, so they suffer the consequences. I walk south along the shoreline of the hot water, meandering between the steaming piled up kelp. Hez lucky it was me, not Party Boy. Party Boy would have drown him. Maybe.

I see a lot of people on the beach, but I see no drones in the air, only sea gulls, pelicans and *Hermes*. Almost three weeks he has been shadowing me, although he is mostly between the sun and me. An inverted shadow?

The flowing waves lap up the shoreline to the tide mark, leaving kelp bulbs, driftwood, and jetsam to bake in the steaming sand. I kick an empty plastic water bottle out of the way and glumly reminisce how two years ago I would have picked that up and put it in a trashcan. I wonder I have become jaded at so young an age, how the world has changed and then a brittle object strikes my right temple, breaking skin. I look to the side and see them and I look down to see an empty half-abalone shell lying in the sand. *Bastardos*, and I take off running past people south on the