

Requital

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Chapter One

Summer of 2022

Papa died last week. It was unexpected. It was a mystery the way it happened and we suspect we'll never understand it. Sheriff came to the house and said Papa's car engine gave out early morning when he was crossing the continental railroad tracks west of Gallup. Said he refused to exit his 1967 Cadillac when the Southwest Chief was churning down on him.

Soon as the Sheriff showed up with the County Coroner at our house and started talking their lies to Aunt Flo and Uncle Don; me and Myrrh had to walk away cuz their verbal stench made us wantta puke.

Sheriff said Papa flooded the car engine with too much gas, and then the engine died. Sheriff said he was working the ignition and his foot had the pedal to the metal, trying to clear out the carburetor, and then he died.

County Coroner said Papa had a deep needle mark on the inside of his left elbow and asked if he was an intravenous drug user.

"Of course not!" screamed Aunt Flo at such a suggestion. "Daniel never used drugs." She always used Papa's formal name when talking to people other than family about him.

County Coroner said Papa was low some pints of blood. Like he was a car low on oil or something. Again Flo screamed at the coroner,

"Do your job. Find out where it went 'cuz his red blood count has always been in the fives."

He couldn't explain where Papa's blood went. He did say, "Army is out there looking around."

I do know that the Sheriff is a born Idiot and the County Coroner a practiced Liar. I did ask them one question though, and that was what time did this happen?

"5:30 AM" this morning, and I knew the sheriff didn't lie about the time because that's when I woke up from my dream about Papa and me shooting skeet in the lower twenty acres of Aunt Flo's ranch. I was all in a hot sweat and agitated that something was not right with my world and I couldn't go back to sleep. My sister Myrrh came into my room crying, "Luke," - that's my name; "something bad has happened but I don't know what." So we got into our street clothes and went out on the porch and just waited, waiting for another shoe to drop. First there was Mama who flat out left our family and took a train off to LA, then there was our dog, Bara, who disappeared into the

New Mexico mountains on our excursion with Papa. So there was only Papa left and I knew it had to be bad. Myrrh was quiet. She's always the quiet one. The patience of Job. But I will speak about that later, if there is a later.

They said they didn't find any witnesses and the body was at the morgue for viewing. Soon as the Sheriff and his Idiot Friend left, we had Uncle Don drive us out to the site of the car wreck. There are no houses out there. Not even cell phone towers. County people seemed to have already done all their work at the site so they were gone. They had dragged the burnt-out shell of the 67 Caddy off the track and left it there. But as we drove up, there were three men dressed in army fatigues searching around the wreckage for something, I know not what. I told Don to drive on past and we would come back when they were gone. He drove past about two miles and stopped at a liquor store where he picked up a companion bottle for his buddy Jack Daniels, who always rode shotgun wherever he drove.

The Army was gone when we came back. Don stayed in his car with his buddy Jack while we searched around and finally found some homeless man who lives in the bush half mile up from the accident. Had some trouble breaking his silence until I got one of Uncle Don's half empty bottles of Jack and then he opened up like a flower after a spring rain.

Said he woke up at the sound of the crash and before it came to a stop the train took the Caddy up beside his camp. He saw the car collapsed against the front of the Chief, stopped on the track. His camp was close, maybe forty yards north of the track. Said he likes to sleep close to the track because the clanging of train wheels lulls him to sleep. Said he saw something that looked like a man, all dressed in black strutting around like a crow, walk up to the car. He said . . .

He said, to Myrrh, "Girl or Tom Boy or whatever you are, get me more Jack before I talk more."

We went back to Don to get some more Jack and about ten minutes later he said this Crow climbed in the car and began searching all around inside for something, he couldn't tell what. After several minutes of searching inside the car, the Crow fellow went outside and walked all around the car and up and down the tracks, still searching. He didn't find it. Then this black bird climbed back in the car and searched Papa again, but didn't find anything. He leaned real close like to Papa. Like he was going to bring him back to life. Or maybe kiss him. He couldn't tell which. But he claimed he saw some small bolts of electricity jumping around in the car and the Crow was always searching for something. After a minute or so this Crow pulled out a black bag and repeatedly grasped toward something in the

air. He said the Crow had hands, not wings, and it could never get hold of anything and finally quit and put away his bag.

Then the homeless man held out the empty bottle and said,

"No more. I ain't saying no more. As God is my witness I say no more."

Then he dropped the bottle and cried,

"Now ya git outta here whatever you are and wherever you git you better carry a cross with ya!"

I went over to the track where there was still debris and looked at it real close. No blood anywhere. I found the ivory knob for the Caddy stick shift further up the track where the Army missed it and took it with me. Papa and Don had converted the transmission from automatic to manual around the turn of the century.

Myrrh asked him if the Sheriff or anybody talked to him about this and he shook his head and pushed his arm hard in the direction we were to leave him.

And that was that.

No witnesses Mr. Sheriff?

"You incompetent piece of horse turd!" I shout to the all-knowing railroad tracks and I pick up a large rock from the ground and step into a baseball pitch, hurling the rock, with a green tracer following behind it, against an aluminum railroad shed just off the track, causing shovels and track spikes and

sledge hammers to jump high in the air before they crash back to the ground.

I hadn't done that since the incident at Cocoa Beach the year before. Lot of force. Too bad I was aiming at the signal sign fifteen feet past the destructed railroad shed. Myrrh just showed her all-knowing smile.

I told Aunt Flo what had transpired at the railroad tracks with the homeless man and the Army and she nodded and said, "You've done good. This was not an accident. I don't know what it was, but I know this is not an accident. And I don't like the fact that the federal government's got it's people out there. It's just all too strange."

She had the Cadillac shell put into a spare garage on her property and after the funeral she had Papa cremated and brought the ashes home. Ten days later we got an invitation in the US Mail that Mama was getting married at some place along the Pacific Ocean in Malibu California. The invite must have got lost in the mail because the wedding date was set five days away. And get this, she was marrying Murnau!

"You kids," said Aunt Flo. "You go and see your mother is being taken care of. Don will drive you. Take some of your father's ash to scatter in the Pacific Ocean and take his St. Christopher necklace."

I nodded. The St. Christopher was the one he had made in Kayenta when marrying Mama before shipping out to the Middle East Theater. His Marine buddies all got tattoos on their last leave before shipping out, while he had the medallion made and wore it for the duration. He survived intact. Most of the others perished in somebody's home in Fallujah and came back in a body bag. We will put his ashes in the Pacific and he can join them.

Chapter Two

2021 - Cocoa Beach

Once upon a time I was just like you.

It was the summer of 2021 and we were living in Florida and I remember feeling so secure with my life, when everything was going great, when one good day followed another good day, when the arrows were flying into the bullseye, when the ocean water was warm and my twin-sister Myrrh and me would ride our mats in the waves and build sandcastles all day. At dusk the sun would set red in the west with a backdrop of white cumulus clouds and blue sky and we would fall asleep and have nice dreams and everything seemed pretty swell.

You remember that?

I do.

And of course there were some minor incidents which set us back for a day or two, like when the cat had a grand litter and two of the runts died because they couldn't get enough nipple, and only four of the living got adopted, so mama, without telling us, placed the other three in a sack and threw them in the Banana river; or when the coyotes traveled south from around Jacksonville, and the chickens quit laying golden eggs, and one

morning after a large midnight squabble, we found only red feathers in the hen house.

But then the good days pushed back and started to repeat themselves, and life was happy again, a comedy where everyone was laughing - most of the time.

We'd been living in Cocoa Beach, Florida since 2018 when my father's employer gave him a raise and told him to move his wife and ten-year old twins from the Southern California beach village of La Jolla to this mid-Florida coastal town. He was working at Cape Canaveral. His employer was General Dynamo and they played a major role in the development of guided missiles for the Military and private companies launching spacecraft for exploration and satellites.

Papa was real smart. A Berkeley graduate with undergraduate and graduate degrees in electrical engineering. He was a skilled computer programmer and had several job offers in Silicon Valley. But when he graduated University in the mid '90s, in following his father's footsteps, he enlisted in the Marine Corps. When he finished boot camp in San Diego he was offered the opportunity to go to OCS in Quantico. He took the offer. After OCS he took Marine Corps schooling as an electrician. He had been working with electronics and computers since he was twelve years of age and so he figured to get some formal training in these fields. He got the training and they were so

impressed with his skills that he revised and updated some of the textbooks.

From growing up in New Mexico and doing schooling in San Diego, he was fluent in Spanish. At the request of the DEA, he brought his skills to participate for three years in drug destruction in Colombia in the late 1990s. He got out of active service just before 911, joining the Marine Reserves in San Diego where he got a job working for General Dynamics. He started out as a computer design specialist for missile tracking systems and his brilliance easily moved him up the ladder. Marines called him back to active duty in Iraq in 2006 and 2007, and when he finished that, he retired as a Major.

He had been commuting solo between San Diego and White Sands, New Mexico and Florida since 2012. When the company came up with the coin, he rented a house just north of Patrick Air Force Base, on a small bluff overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. This is where we had our beach parties. Our front yard looked north to the launching pads at the Cape. The sounds of the ocean lulled us to sleep at night; the regular blasts from the missiles woke us mornings.

A lot of foreigners worked at the Cape. Some for the Federal Government, some for the private contractors. Some Brits, French, Italians, and some descendants of the German rocketeers under Werner Von Braun. After World War 2 the Army

gave those German scientists a good washing as best they could, spending millions of American dollars trying to remove the Nazi blood from their hands and the Nazi treachery from their hearts. Good press in *Life Magazine* and the national newspapers glossed over their holocaust history where they killed "Gypsies and Jews and Faggots," and referred to them as "Patriots for the American way of life."

Papa worked with all these people at the Cape. Mama hated to leave La Jolla with its easy commute to LA and the film industry. She had always wanted to be a movie star. So she spent her time starring in the plays put on by the Cocoa Beach Theatre Group and doing small roles in TV shows and movies shot down south. It wasn't enough and she made it known to Papa that she wanted to go back to California.

There was an old German man named Murnau, who still lived in Cocoa Beach - he must have been pushing ninety. He came over to the US in the late forties with some of the German Engineers. Apparently he grew up in Peenemunde in the German rocket industry and he was acquainted with Von Braun. He married a niece of Von Braun and they had several children. He bought up a lot of real estate around the Cape in the 1950s and became wealthy as the space industry took off.

P.K. Murnau, the eccentric billionaire, is one of his grandchildren. They say he borrowed \$100 million from his

grandfather and then he made his fortune short selling some tech start-ups that had serious financial problems. He covered his short positions, made a couple billion, then purchased a small space satellite company called OSPREY and got the federal government to back it. His competitors cried, 'kick-backs,' but there were no whistleblowers to substantiate the claim. Then he built a large compound in Cape Canaveral where he launches satellites for governments and private companies.

Not to spread himself too thin - there are rumors that he only sleeps four hours a day - he went to Hollywood and made some Vampire films and raked in more dough. He's been involved in several lawsuits, but they say PK has a lawyer named Cohen who does all the transactions through encrypted Internet communications so nobody knows really anything about his private affairs.

Now PK's into Artificial Intelligence, and get this - he's the one Mama's going to marry in a few days in a very private Hollywood ceremony - go figure.

Anyways, you know how when you're having so much fun that time just flies past without you realizing it? Well, that's what happened that Tuesday afternoon in September 2018. To celebrate an afternoon OSPREY missile launch, and just to celebrate anything and everything with food and drink, there was a beach

party in front of our house. Papa didn't work for OSPREY, but that didn't stop the local scientist from partying.

Concurrently, there was a Championship Match for soccer bragging rights in Munich between a famous German club and the American team. The scientist and electrical engineers from Cape Canaveral had set up their home-made TV sets on the picnic tables along the beach - the engineers scorned mass produced entertainment products and made their own. The star-spangled banner was just finishing up, to be followed by the German anthem, and judging by the noise emerging from the television sets, the crowd in Munich was getting ready. Same for us in Florida and except for a few Germans, the scientists and technicians at the beach party stood at attention. Three miles to the north from our party were the Cape launching pads for the missiles. The OSPREY missile launch was set for later in the day, so everyone was eating and talking and intoxicating in anticipation of our double-header. The preparation for the launch had been completed that morning, so members of the OSPREY team were able to spectate from the beach party.

School had started again for me and Myrrh. After school was out, I'd spend the afternoons slamming balls on the dirt field or riding my mat in the Atlantic Ocean with the dolphins and hammer head sharks, while above me the gulls screamed like the planes from nearby Patrick Air Force Base.

Papa loved the American team, while for some unknown reason, Mama supported the Munich squad. It should've been a great time for our household as everybody had backed a winner in the run-up to the championship game. I remember that summer the fish fries with the Canaveral scientists and families under the hot sun as the dark closed in from the east. Stuffed with African Pompano and lemonade and burnt marsh mellow, my parents would usher me and Myrrh up to our bed rooms where the steady electrical hum of the ocean subsumed the laughter of the party and lulled us to sleep. Weekdays we woke to take the yellow bus to the Air Force base elementary school where I would stare out the open windows to the ocean sounds and day dream of the after-school sand and sea. Life was good, but . . .

The soccer tournament had been going on for ten day, and as it progressed, mom and dad began arguing more about the merits of their respective teams, which segued to the boredom of moving to a backwater town away from the Industry. Fortunately for the little town of Cocoa Beach, our house was bounded by the Atlantic Ocean on the east and the Banana River on the west, with bookend empty sand lots on the north and south.

Before the Americans won, my parents were sleeping in separate rooms. Their quiet voices concealed the rancor that had been spilling out doors. I heard the word 'divorce' spliced into every day conversations and I began to wonder about the future

of our little family. My father, a devout Catholic, said we would always be together.

The game was finishing up in regulation with no goals scored, and everyone was getting anxious. It was a large beach party with adults barbecuing steaks and pork and fish on the grill and taking digital photos of one another. I remember one of the Germans taking a photograph of Mama and me and Myrrh which he showed us and then she left for her theater group as she apparently had a bad feeling about the match. Between sips of German beer from the bottle and Cuban rum from paper cups, the men kicked balls around and played a pick-up game on the sandy beach, widened by a low tide. The beach game started low-key but as the day wore on and the drinks poured, there were some minor scuffles between some Europeans and Americans. The German scientists mostly refereed and watched in amusement. They would blow their loud whistles and shout with their thick English accents, enjoying the comradery and victuals - if it seems that I use some big words, remember that Aunt Flo was a librarian before she retired and she used to play scrabble games with us all the time so as to increase our vocabularies.

The sounds of the television sets were blasting away. There were a lot of transistor radios blaring. Cubans kept parking on the bluff and refilling the liquor and food and everybody was waiting for the volcano to explode.

The televised game moved into penalty kicks. The waves were small and I could hear the announcers from the radios carried by the men along the shoreline. I lay on my mat and kicked my feet hard under the sea level, trying to catch a three-footer. An older boy paddled next to me on a surfboard and then stood up with his right foot forward on the board. A goofy footer. He was a rather goofy acting boy. Liked to laugh a lot. Made jokes all the time. Not afraid to try something difficult and fail at it with great success. His name was Jack and I called him,

“Jack the Ripper.”

He was a very good surfer on a small six-foot board that his father had shaped and glassed from leftover space material. His father was Johann, an Austrian Olympic skier for the 2002 games set in Salt Lake City. I called him “Mr. Ripper.” He was a mechanical engineer and he met a Spanish woman at the games and decided to marry her and move to the United States. He became a US Citizen and moved to the Cape when he was offered a job as an operations manager. His wife Monica made me and Jack bright yellow polyester shirts to keep us from getting burned in the water by the mid-day sun and to make me visible in case I got washed out to sea!

He taught Jack all his tricks: massive off the lips, three sixties, flips and somersaults. Tricks that were impossible to do on a nine-foot long heavy Old School surfboard. He'd catch

the wave and I would ride behind him and watch him carve a sweeping left turn to generate speed and power. Then his legs would thrust his board into the wave while he twisted himself backward, almost parallel to the surface water as his board jumped back at him. Then he would then turn hard back to his left and his body would straighten up and he would stand tall down the face of the wave, maneuvering slightly up and down the moving shoulder with imperceptible shifts in his weight, his back slightly arched, his arms casually dangling at his sides. I'd ride behind and hoot and we laughed together. In the water, life was always good. Myrrh was wading in the shallows and looking at sand dollars. I saw my father holding a transistor radio, standing along the shore as Ripper kicked out of the wave, his surfboard flying into the air with a little help from the southern wind that ran along the coast. I continued my ride until I stopped against the sand. Papa never carried a cell phone unless it was absolutely necessary. He didn't trust the tracking devices. He said if somebody wanted to find him, they had to track him the old fashion way. Drones? He could easily shoot those down.

When I stood up, a round old man in a long dark coat was searching for something in the sand. He would slowly turn around with his body stooped and his eyes scrutinizing each pebble.

"What are you looking for, Mister?" I asked.

He wasn't startled by my voice. It seemed like he was expecting me. He looked up and raised his ring finger and said, "I seem to have lost my ring." His hands were wrinkled and spotted from age. He had a thick German accent. He was from the beach party and his upper lip still held some foam from the glass of lager that he was carrying in his free hand. Those steins appeared melded into the hands of some of those engineers, they carried them about so frequently.

"Ocean nice?" I knew he was one of the old Von Braun people at the Cape, because he looked ancient and still had that heavy accent, but I had never met him. He must have been eating the fresh pig at the picnic, because he had that smell. He wore a clean panama hat above a chubby red withered-face sitting on a wrinkled neck, dark sun glasses wrapped round his eyes, and a freshly pressed black silk shirt with the red lettered words, *Xanadú Mansion Golf Course*, stitched over the left breast pocket. That was one of the casinos in Batista's Cuba that the Cape people use to fly down to in American air force planes taking off from Patrick. That was last century, before Castro overthrew the island. This German man was old!

I remember his starched tan lederhosen revealing white hair on his chubby calves that disappeared into strange black rubber boots wrapped tightly over his feet. He stood just out of the

reach of the lapping sea and a muscular German Shepherd dog stood still next to him. I wondered if Bara would like this dog.

"Kinda small, but fun," I replied.

He scrutinized my face for many moments, and I felt like I was being inspected for some purpose, and then he said, "Sie haben sehr blue eyes."

"What?"

He seemed to catch himself and said, "Nichts." I knew that meant nothing and he continued, "I don't see your Vater kicking the ball around? Is he out in the Wasser?" I'd gotten use to the Germans use of "V" for the "F" and I knew the German word for 'water.'

"He's over there." The man's glance followed my pointing to Papa who was now walking with his radio toward us from about a quarter mile to the north.

"Gut. This reminds me so much of Peenemünde. You need him to swim in the Wasser with you," said the man. "Is your sister out there?"

"Who are you?" Beads of sweat broke out on the man's wrinkled face and he removed his sun glasses to wipe his brow. His eyes were as blue as mine and Myrrh. He looked away from me and I saw the whites were streaked with crimson and the cheeks and nose of his face were contorted with blue blood vessels.

He replied, "I am from the Overcast Group." He may have expected a response from me but I gave him none, and then he said, "This beach is so much like Karlschagen." He spread his arms out and took in the beach and slid a boot in the sand," and looked back at me. "I enjoy the beach parties. Ich liebe the calm Atlantic Ocean."

"Are you for Munich?"

"Vas?"

Something inside of me sprung up like a cold well of water and I replied, "Never mind."

He looked from Papa to the sand, and he did a little search, and then looked up toward something now further away from me, which I now know was the launching area for the OSPREY, and said, "Du have a nice swim. I need to find my ring now." He walked away and I moved thirty yards toward my father and looked down at my mat and saw the reflection of gold. I reached down and picked up a gold ring and studied it for several moments and then looked to see the German now at the keg of beer. I put it on my finger and decided I would tell him about it later in the day. I ran down the beach, mat in hand, to coax my father into the water. He demurred, saying,

"You play with Myrrh. I want to listen to the game. OSPREY time coming up and the missile should launch now."

I ran pell mell into the water past Myrrh, who didn't look up. I watched the missile lift off from the Cape and paddled out next to Jack.

I don't remember most of what happened next and can only relate here from discussions with my father and sister. The missile lifted off, seeming to run from the white tail of smoke trailing it. Jack caught a four-foot high wave which he immediately started ripping. I got the next wave and a dolphin rode beside me, chattering like a proficient gossiper. I touched the dolphin as I tried to keep up, but of course I couldn't, and I fell out of the wave while the OSPREY turned slowly in the sky, moving lazily in our direction.

Unusual, Papa thought. It should be climbing, not turning. Too soon for that.

Papa remembered the dolphin leaping out of the water behind me and that Ripper was already outside where he caught another wave and started into his usual flip in the air, five-feet above the sea, his hands grabbing both rails of the board. The crowd on the beach erupted in noise that was quickly washed over by the tremendous explosion and ferocious sizzling sound, like thousands of eggs frying on a colossal griddle.

Papa shouted, "Luke!" - and I think I remember his scream, "Get out of the water!" Myrrh was in the shallows next to the sand and started to run onto the dry beach. I started to back-

peddle through the waist high water and I turned to shore and lifted my knees high against the water and stumbled and picked myself up and began again as Papa, about a hundred yards distant, ran toward me.

Papa saw the ocean water evaporating around the sinking OSPREY and smelled the hot waves pushing toward the beach. I do remember horizontal sea drops thrown from the crash burning my eyes and looking back to the land and seeing my father standing away from the water, throwing away his radio and screaming sounds dwarfed by the missile blast. Ripper finished up his flip before being knocked down by a torrent of ocean water and then he was gone. I remember Myrrh in water just over her toes with her mouth open and no sound.

I do remember this surreal current of electricity and energy and mass that went through me and something alive struck me violently as I closed my eyes and saw black and white rainbows and then I knew no more.

Papa related to me that it all became in slow motion, even the explosion of the missile in the sea. Running on the beach toward me. Me stumbling toward him. The sizzling sounds of missile sinking into water like the Titanic with the following explosion that seemed to blast me with waves of radiating energy from the sea water shooting into me with the concomitant lifting into the air by the flying body of the dolphin.

I dreamt the song of myself even before I first read Whitman the next year in New Mexico: spirit floating in blue over my body, whether water or the atmosphere or some other dimension, I could not tell. No difficulty breathing, so maybe it was sky. No one else around as I watched my body below entangled with the dolphin with a wide burn marking its skin. I move and it turns its head toward me and gives me that dolphin smile and then wiggles in the shallow water and swims away, leaving my father to come out to my body. My body has a large laceration on my back and the blood flows freely. The gold ring branded around my finger and then fell off in the water. Papa is crying and picking me up and pressing his palm to stop the blood and carrying me and I float higher up in the blue so that I can see the old German standing and drinking beer from a keg and looking toward us. My father's arms encircle me and his hand stanches the flow, like the Dutch boy with the dike. I am at peace in a world of red. Surrounded by love and acceptance and it is a place where I could spend the rest of my life. Eleven years old and my thoughts were oneness with all things and it was love. Love evolved from a sea of turmoil and hate. Myrrh is running beside father, tears streaming down her face and the other party-goers are clearing a path for Papa to go up the hillside. One of them picks up Myrrh and runs beside Papa with her in his arms and her red burned feet glowing.

From above, watching an ambulance from the air force base skid to a halt on the cliff as my father places me on the stretcher and they replace his hand with theirs to stop the blood and I hear an attendant say, "his heart has stopped."

I felt good. I felt in the presence of a Lord. I couldn't identify which one but I knew he was not of an organized religion. He was too relaxed. Too accepting. No demands. No conditions. I wondered if I could become bored here. I wondered if there were things to occupy my time. Would I be able to physically move or would I live the life of my mind, my thoughts, my imagination, my spirit? Did I really need a heart anyway? I felt satiated. That this is the way that it could be.

Forever.

I speed above the ambulance with its lights flashing and horn blaring and it is waved through the guard house at Patrick Air Force Base with nary a decrease in speed. They rush the body, my body, I feel a detachment from it, into the Emergency Rooms and several doctors and nurses start working on me with the words,

"No pulse. No heart beat for the past seven minutes."

Some tend to my torn body and they clean it and rinse it. They hook me up to lines and call for units of blood. They speak calmly, probably for the benefit of my father and there is a powerful man, built like a football player, thumping his hand

against my chest. Then a nurse begins to give me mouth to mouth resuscitation, as if I were a drowning victim. Then there are other victims of the OSPREY brought in by ambulance that begin to fill the beds in the small rooms and the doctors and nurses spread out to care for them.

The nurse quit kissing me and looked at my father and went to help someone else. The burly man, eyes now closed, keeps his rhythmical thumping of my chest and he seems afraid to look at my father.

I float outside the operating theater and see a Seminole Indian dressed in native garb bring 2 pints of herbal oils that he hands to a nurse who brings it into the room and nods to my father and leaves. I watch the Seminole walk toward the exit of the hospital as he slowly vanishes into a spirit, but not before he looks up at me with twinkling eyes.

"Twenty minutes and thirty-one seconds," says an orderly with a quiet, detached voice who then walks away and over to another filled bed. The football player looks at my father's face and says,

"Sorry," and follows the orderly to another room, pulling the drape behind him so that Papa can mourn me in solace.

I decide to go within my body to see what it feels like to be dead. It feels cold, and a sadness shrouds over me, an awareness of an incomplete life. Like a game of chess stopped

after the pawns have been moved and the Queens are ready to work, or the seventh game of the series being cancelled forever and ever and ever. A life stuck in anticipation, unfulfilled. Nothing grand, except maybe a hyperbolic obituary magnifying my prospects because of my genetic constitution.

Son of a rocket engineer and a movie actress. Brains with latent beauty to develop from this boy that loved the sea and all things of Nature'

. . . and then Bara bounds over my legs and my mother is there and her and father open the Seminole vials and place their hands on me and swab my temples with the essential oils. I feel the warmth of red and black peppers and olive oil and hemp oil mixed in water and dropped into my mouth. In several seconds I feel the harrowing heat burn into my skin and down my esophagus and into my stomach and I see the fire rage through my vessels and into my organs and my heart broaches a beat, then two, then jumps tachycardia from which it slowly diminishes to maybe one hundred twenty beats per minute as oxygen and nutrients pulse to my cells and carbon dioxide and waste is pushed out of those cells.

Nice, I think, always leave it to Mama and I pass out to escape the heat and decide where I should go next.

Twenty-eight people were in the water at that time. Only I lived. Several hundred sea-creatures, including hammer head

sharks, kingfish, corbina, pompano, joined the roster of the dead. No dolphins. The Emergency Room pronounced me dead.

Then I heard a small cry from somewhere outside of myself and it got louder and it sounded familiar and I realized it was my father. But he was not crying. He was whispering something. There was urgency in his voice and it was sporadically muffled by the sound of silence. The voice was coming at me from several directions and it cancelled itself out in different parts of the words. I could hear 'uu' and then nothing and then from another direction there was 'rrr' and then I heard nothing and I wondered why he was speaking letters to me.

And then the word, 'naa,' broke into me.

Then it was silent and it started to repeat itself with the 'uuu' and rolling 'rrrr's' like a Spaniard or a Russian and then the full one-syllable word, 'done' slipped through.

I thought what does this mean but I could think of no answer and then suddenly there was a slamming through the barrier of the word, 'NOT.'

Then the chant came through from a long distance with the volume and proximity closing in, like a bird flying directly at me with the litany, *You are not done*. I wondered, have I become a turkey that is being cooked for someone or something and not yet finished and what does this all mean and then the word *here* pushed through the barrier and I knew the chant was,

You are not done here.

I knew the board was awaiting the moves of the Queen and my time would come and then I knew no more.

The pain was pervasive. I felt it climb under my skin where I imagined the black and blue colors had replaced my Florida tan. I felt it in the soles of my feet as if I walked on flaming coals. The muscles in my thighs burnt with a fire that I found unbearable and I opened my mouth to scream but heard nothing. Only felt the ache within my body and then liquid being spread along my temples and my feet, and hands across my body and the odor from my sister's name, Myrrh. Myrrh being spread along my body and I knew that Papa and Mama were always there. I had brought them together with my pain. I felt happy and I fell away to Oneness.

I had brain waves, but I was in a coma. My parents said every prayer to God that they ever learned and made up a bunch of new ones for the occasion.

The medical staff wanted to begin treatment but my parents refused and locked the doors on them. Somebody from the Cape made some phone calls and from then on my parents were left alone with me. They slept next to me in old Army cots. They laid their hands on me with massages and concoctions from mixing essential oils. Myrrh came in with bandaged feet and slept beside us. Then I woke up and the doctors did a battery of tests

and they couldn't find anything wrong. I went back to our home on the bluff overlooking the shore about a week after the event. After two days in the house, Papa stuffed us with hot dogs smothered in mustard and onions and relish, and allowed me, Myrrh and Bara to revisit the scene. Mama wasn't there, she was with the theater group practicing a play to keep her thoughts away from all things bad about the Cape. It was dusk and the beach was low tide and empty except for us. Myrrh was bandaged on crutches. I finished my hotdog and Myrrh gave Bara the remains of hers and Bara greedily took it down in one gulp. Something drew me into the water and Bara walked against my leg and we saw a gray fin break the surface several yards in front. Bara made no sounds so I felt no danger and I saw it had a wide burn mark surrounding its body and I knew this was the dolphin from the day of the OSPREY. We met in three feet of water and watched one another for maybe thirty, forty seconds. Myrrh shuffled into the water to be with us and she turned on the flashlight from her cellphone. Bara was completely still as my words finally spilled out,

“Thank you.”

Then: “Excuse me while I cry.” The tears rolled down my cheeks and dropped to my shoulders to embed in the white cotton T-shirt I was wearing. The dolphin rolled over onto it's back and flipped its tail out of the water and wagged it at me. I

knelt down and stroked it and Bara licked the dolphin's skin with her tongue. Myrrh knelt down and petted it and whispered, "thank you for my brother." This lasted for several minutes then it rolled on its belly and something gold in the shallow water reflected from the light of Myrrh's cell phone. I picked it up and it was a gold ring and on the inside was the lettering, 'Murnau.' Then the dolphin turned and slowly swam away and Bara began to growl under her breath and I thought she was sad to see the dolphin leave when a sickness swept over me and I turned to the words,

"Was ist hier?"

to see the old German who spoke to me at the OSPREY killings standing beside us with one of those metal detectors. He was with his same German Shepherd dog. But now I knew his name. He was Murnau, he was the grandfather of the billionaire. He was twisting a ring less finger.

I held out the gold ring to him. "Is this your ring?" I said.

Myrrh had turned off her light so he must not have seen me because he jerked his head around and said, "Wer ist hier." He grabbed the outstretched ring from my hand and greedily put it on his finger. Strange. I did not feel him touch my hand?

Bara snarled with her teeth vibrating and the man pulled out a pistol from his waist. I recognized it as a German Luger and stood up and faced his profile.

"Schweinhund," he growled back at Bara and started to take aim and I quietly said, "No," as his dog took up his growl.

He swept his pistol around and past my location, doing a 180 degree turn, his eyes wide open and shouted, "Ver sind Sie?"

He stopped his pivot when he was facing our home on the cliff and I repeated, "No."

He whirled around, his eyes passing over me and Myrrh, and said to Bara, "Devil Dog! Sie sprechen nicht."

My head was the height of Murnau's ribs and I slammed my fist into his groin and he screamed and doubled-up and Bara tore the Luger from his hand, taking parts of his fingers in her teeth.

The German did a low groan as he dropped to his knees and watched Bara run off fifty yards along the shoreline where she stopped and dropped the Luger and stood silent, returning his gaze. He covered his mangled hand in his coat pocket and stood up and said to his dog, "Gehst du!" The shepherd dog ran pell-mell at Bara who met it halfway and crashed into it with such force that the shepherd dog broke into medium pieces of rubber and plastic and fur. Springs bounced from its severed paws and

there were electrical wires all over its body. A medium-sized battery lay with the debris that was a dog, a robot dog!

Murnau frowned and his body convulsed. I stood five feet away from him and he had no idea I was present or that Myrrh was still standing in the sea. I couldn't figure it out. He began to walk toward Bara, who started running pell-mell at him and then he turned and started running away. I ran with Murnau and then ahead of him where I pushed a five-foot long piece of driftwood in his way and he fell over it onto the sand. He muttered something in German but never saw me stepping on the edge of the driftwood. He got up and Bara was all over him, taking him down to the sand while her teeth shred through his trousers and lacerated the fat on his ass.

"Bara!" I cried and she let go and the man rolled over to leave a dark imprint on the sand. Probably blood. He slowly got up and stared at the dog and backed away for twenty, thirty feet, not sure what to expect. Bara watched him, waiting, waiting for any furtive movement. But he only wobbled as a beaten old man and she allowed him to leave in defeat.

I walked back to the Luger and kneeled down to it. One of the serrated fingers had a beautiful smooth gold ring loose around it. I used an empty seashell to slide it away and then inspected it. It was the one he took from me. I slipped it over my branded finger and it fit perfectly over the scar. I took it

off and threw the ring thirty feet up the beach and its alacrity left a small electrical trail behind it. The same electrical trail that I spoke of earlier in my story, the one along the railroad tracks where my father died. Bara looked at me quizzically. Myrrh stood up and crutched back to dry sand, her eyes intent upon me. I ran to the ring and picked it up and repeated the throw with the same trail.

"How is this?"

I picked a small stone from the sand and dusted off the particles. I wound up like a star pitcher and threw it off into the dark and the electrical trail followed and quickly dissipated like lightning from a storm. Lightning without thunder or any noise whatsoever.

I found another stone, this time larger, and did another throw. Same soundless trail. I walked over to the thrown stone and knelt down to the large crater it was buried into. The stone was warm, the crater was hot.

A weird, weird night.

Myrrh leaned down from her crutches and picked up a sea shell and tossed it underhand. Nothing special. She tried it again overhand and again there was no trail of anything. Didn't dent the sand, didn't do nothing. She shrugged and dug her heel into the sand and scraped a half circle and raised her hand to

speak. Her half circle opened up and she nearly fell into the crevice that it left.

"Jeez," she said. "This is what my burnt feet get me?" She moved her hand in the opposite direction and the crevice sealed up as if it had never been there. We exchanged glances and I said, "let's see you do it again."

This time she dug an irregular line with her heel for about fifteen feet and then she walked back to me. We watched as she motioned her hand and the sand broke apart into a cleft.

I began to tremble, violently, and I became cold and wrapped my arms tight across my body and couldn't think. Myrrh walked over and looked in to her creation and said calmly, "this one's about six feet deep." She sealed it up with another hand movement and moved slowly to me with the Luger in hand and said, "this is a strange night. A strange and awful night." I nodded. She kept Luger in her hand and then Bara ran up and had the ring in her teeth. Myrrh took the ring and stuffed it into a small pocket in the collar that Bara wore around her neck.

We took the magazine out of the Luger chamber and about ten minutes later we walked up the small cliff with Bara to our house and spoke no more. We took our time, as Myrrh was in pain and I wasn't strong enough to carry her. We mentioned the ring to no one.

Jack's father, Johann, was at the house. He was grieving the loss of his son and sharing some stories and beer with Papa. Papa asked how the beach was and we told about Murnau's father trying to shoot Bara and how Bara attacked him and obliterated the robot dog.

"What the hell is wrong with that man," said Papa. "What is he doing in front of our house trying to shoot our dog?" No one had an answer. "And a robot dog? What are these Germans up to?"

We didn't tell them the man couldn't see us nor about the ring and the powerful throws and deep trenches. Myrrh gave Papa the Luger and magazine and after he studied them he gave them to Mr. Ripper.

"Don't like this," said Mr. Ripper after many moments of turning it over in his hands. "From what you tell me, the old man wanted you in the water when the missile went down." Papa drank his beer, nodded and listened, "somebody wanted you dead." Papa sat up straight.

Mr. Ripper continued, "Couple months ago, over at Port Canaveral, where the Germans have their compound, I was trying to locate some liquid rubber, experimenting with wetsuits and new boards."

They drank some more and Papa pointed to the kitchen and said to us, "there's some chips and dip and lemonade in there

for you." We knew he didn't want us to hear the conversation, so naturally we walked slow.

"Some of the German scientists were outside. They were bartering with some Cuban fishermen about purchasing some caged sharks that were caught that morning. They had already bought several sharks and they had the Cubans cut them open with the organs still extant and the Germans were examining the living organs." We got our lemonade from the frig and hung inside the kitchen door jam. "When I went inside to see if they had the material I was looking for, I walked past a half-open door and saw the billionaire Murnau sketching something on paper."

"Hitler Youth," murmured Papa as he drank some beer and looked at bottle. "Germans do make good beer, though."

Mr. Ripper continued, "I don't know. He had that tall African assistant with him. The one they call 'the Masai.' They were doing something with costumes and crafts and electrical wiring. They had some dogs in there that didn't move a bit. Probably robots like your kids said. And some of those mannequins looked alive. I thought they were for that theatre group in town, the one your wife stars in."

Papa groaned. "They don't act. B-movie posers with no life. "I went to Russia summer of 1991. My mom's village in Sakhalin. Chekov Theater Group was there. Put on *The Seagull*. Those were actors."

Ripper said, "this was more than that. But I don't understand it." He paused and then continued, "my wife went back to Spain two days ago."

"Really?" said Papa.

"Yeah. "When the grandpa showed up and saw me he closed the door and got me some rubber and I left." Mr. Ripper handed the weapon back to Papa and said, "I really miss Jack." We went into our bedrooms because we didn't need a good cry and went to sleep.

The following weekend our family took a trip to Miami Beach and when we came back to the house we could see that it had been searched, thoroughly. Most everything was put back the way it was when we left, but some of my clothes and the clothes of Myrrh were folded in a different way than normal. The Luger was safe in a hiding place in our sandy garage. Papa and Mama thought that it was very strange, the search and all. We never reported it to the authorities, but a couple of days later some Army officers with a lot of brass on their uniforms came to the house and I saw Papa give them the Luger. There was no mention of the ring. I guess they didn't ask Bara about it, and I doubt she would've volunteered that information.

Ten days later a Cocoa Beach police officer found the badly eaten body of old Murnau along the shore. Everybody knew who it was because he was such a fixture and property owner in the

town. He was identified by partially amputated fingers as Heinrich Murnau. The Army took over the investigation and ruled it death by shark. Conjectured that he was swimming in the sea at dusk and was attacked. The other Germans concurred, said he used to swim in the Baltic at Peenemunde all the time for exercise and everybody knew he continued that habit here in Florida.

Everyone said it was a tragedy. A real tragedy and they held a large funeral that several hundred people attended at the son's large estate at the Cape. His kids and grandkids and great grandkids were all there to celebrate his life. I was told that the billionaire orchestrated it like a medieval passion play - whatever that is. Mama insisted we attend. Ripper's family declined. The ceremony was rather dull with too much talking, in English and German, so I can understand why Ripper's family didn't show up. There was food after the ceremony and I walked up to Mama when she was talking to a man, not dressed in black, but white linen over a white cotton shirt and sailboat loafers. He had real blonde hair and a bit of an accent in Spanish, for that was the language he and Mama were speaking. She presented me to him, I didn't understand his name, but I remember him staring at me for many seconds and searching about me with his head moving around. It was in the afternoon and it was a sunny Florida day and most of the people, including him, were wearing

sunglasses. So I don't know the color of his eyes and what he was actually looking at when he met me. I can't recall right now what they were talking about, but I know I understood them.

I heard that it took several days for the younger Murnau to gather his things and then he left for Hollywood for some film he was producing.

A week later three German scientists were at a beach party near Patrick Air Force Base. An unseasonably warm autumn day with Hofbrau beer drunk and beer hall music sung and large breasted Madchens dancing with the fellows. They went out for a swim. An eye witness described them as suddenly being surrounded by hammer head sharks who ushered them out to sea. Shredded clothes were all that was found by the military police investigators. The eye witness was Jack Ripper's father. He left for Spain the day after.

One month later our family moved to New Mexico for Papa to continue his work at the White Sands. The westward movement got Mama thinking more about Hollywood and she shortly slipped away from us on a Union Pacific train headed out to Pasadena. Papa refused her request for a divorce. He talked about the Pope and 'against his religion' and such stuff.

Weird, huh? After such a wonderful summer, it seemed like one bad day followed another bad day and my nice dreams turned

into nightmares and I started wondering about the course of my
life - that maybe I was meant to live a tragedy.

Chapter Three

On the Road with Uncle Don

My thoughts hurl the *Bad F-Word* out the side window of our speeding car and it is immediately thrown back past me by the rushing wind, pushing it along the vehicle's interior, where it silently echoes into oblivion. I know that Papa is not oblivious to our sojourn, that he is with us in spirit and ash.

We're on the road to Mama's wedding in Los Angeles. Today's Tuesday and it is to happen this Sunday. No idea she even had a sweetheart until she telephoned several days after Papa's death with condolences and then that tardy wedding invitation.

And Murnau the son, no less!

I love my Mama dearly and miss her, but I don't want no other father in my life. I expect we will meet him, give them best wishes, trip down to La Jolla to see some old friends and then head back to New Mexico or live in La Jolla..

We look more like mother than Papa. She has those deep blue eyes and brown hair cut short the last time I saw her. Her name is Rachel. Now I'm a twelve-year-old half-orphan, little over five feet four inches tall and pushing close to one hundred ten

pounds. Myrrh is my Tomboy fraternal twin - neither of us have had those hormones kick into play so nobody, even close family, except for Flo and Papa, could tell us apart except with close scrutiny - now only Flo. Myrrh was named by Mama from some theatrical production that Mama played while she attended a summer session when she was fifteen at UCLA. My full name is Luke. Luke *Blank*. I don't have a last name anymore. My mother took back her maiden name and I don't want that. I certainly don't want the name of any stepfather. My father had a well-known last name that I don't need people to tag me with as a result of his strange death. Grandparents on both sides steeped in their Christianity devised Luke as a present to the *Baby Jesus*. It means 'healer.'

Grandparents were all religious and now all of them have gone on to the other side to whatever worship they might find. Me? I don't mind going to church with all the singing and eating and very rarely a good sermon, but most of the time those preachers talk too loud and too long and I don't appreciate those people always sticking that plate in your face and asking for money. Myrrh feels the same.

Please contact the author for the remainder of the story. 320 pages.