

TREE OF LIFE

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TREE TRILOGY – BOOK ONE

CHRIS LOVEWAY

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For Celie and Steph

ONE

MAY 28-JUNE 21, AD 33

THE HOLY LAND

ON THE SIXTIETH DAY, shortly before dawn, three men rushed up the hill and took the cross: James, son of Alphaeus; Thaddaeus, called Jude; and Simon the Zealot—three disciples of the Son of Man, whom his followers called The Christ.

They didn't stop running until the sun had fully risen. They ran silently, not out of fear, but out of expediency. The carefully memorized route was parallel to, yet far enough from, the road to Damascus; they traveled unseen, leaving no tracks.

Alexander, barely fourteen years old, ran close behind. His job was to make certain that no one else was following them. And, if someone were, to lead that person away from the men and their burden. Much was at stake. He spent most of the journey looking over his shoulder.

THANKFULLY, THEY ARRIVED at the meeting place without incident. Alexander joined the men under the outcropping of rock, bathing in the coolness of the shade.

They prayed.

Bartholomew and Joseph, the Joseph they called Barsabbas came next. Throughout the day, more people came, some alone, some in groups.

Alexander stared at the path and waited.

Finally, his father was there, stretching out his arms for a hug that would be soft and gentle even though his arms were thick and powerful. Alexander ran to him; he was proud of his father—Simon of Cyrene had carried the crossbar through Jerusalem for the Son of Man. Many who had stood and watched on either side had wept. Some were among the daughters and wives who now made their way to this secret gap—a steady procession, including donkeys. One of the women was pregnant.

The donkeys brayed in relief when their riders relinquished them. The children took this as a signal to let loose their own brand of cacophony they had obediently suppressed throughout the journey.

As the pandemonium grew, Alexander's father gave him a telling look and motioned toward the top of the rock with his head. Alexander scurried up the promontory where he commanded a 360-degree view from the summit. This time, there was no pretence as he watched for unexpected intruders.

Here, the noise was not as loud as in the rock basin below. Most of the people were savoring the shade under the stone shelf upon which he stood. Down below, the rock reverberated as a natural amphitheater.

The massive wooden horror lay in the center of the bowl-like arena; blood side up again. The sun, now directly overhead, glinted off each drop of blood, the reflected brilliance casting rays in all directions. Alexander was reminded of the first time he had seen a faceted gemstone hanging outside a shop in Jerusalem. Now, as it had been then, a wonderful flash occurred—all the refracted beams of light focused along his line of sight, and the brightness was too much to bear, forcing him to look away.

He averted his eyes to the path, and saw a large man breach the horizon. By the width of the man's shoulders and length of his stride, Alexander immediately identified him: "Philip," he mouthed silently.

Alexander saw his father gazing up at him; a nod acknowledged that he understood their *de facto* leader had arrived.

His father hushed the rest of the group, and when Philip entered the clearing everyone was quiet, even the animals. The babies and children, too, seemed to comprehend that this was a solemn moment.

Philip was the last of the men to arrive. Surveying the scene with calm assurance, he turned to the people and spoke at length. Perched above, Alexander did not have to strain to hear; even Philip's softest whispers prevailed over the souging wind and rustling brush. When the Apostle finished, the boy knew that the plan had been carried out exactly as Philip and his father had devised it. Furthermore, it was all because of a dream his father had had on Passover—a dream of great armies in century-long wars, fighting and dying because of the thing lying in the natural theater. He glanced again at the blood-soaked timber on the ground in front of him.

The charged air seemed to dissipate, and the disciples gathered to wrap the beams with bolts of cloth the women had brought. Alexander wondered how they could be so cheerful—he had once seen a body being wrapped in a burial shroud; the scene before his eyes was disturbingly similar, and he could almost smell the scent of myrrh. When they finished, they prayed.

Everyone was now standing in the light, and he took this opportunity to count the group. Thirty-three: seven couples and nineteen children, some too young to walk. He saw Philip smile in a way that seemed to say “so far, so good.”

Alexander climbed down to join the others.

They ate a meal and prayed again. Excitement grew as the sun moved closer to the horizon.

Philip talked quietly with the men while the women prepared the children for the journey. Now and then, someone glanced in the direction of the sun as if doing so would hasten the group's departure.

PHILIP PRODUCED THREE slings from a hiding place under the rocks. Alexander remembered helping the older men prepare them.

They had started with three ropes, each the diameter of his wrist and twice as long as he was tall. “Do you see how the strands are braided together to make the rope?” Thaddaeus had asked.

Alexander did.

Bartholomew and the two Simons—Simon of Cyrene and Simon the Zealot—had stretched a sheepskin nearby. One by one, Thaddaeus and Alexander brought each rope to them and placed it on top of the stretched sheepskin. Two of the men pulled the central cords in opposite directions while the other two held the knotted ends fast.

“Trace the open part of the rope onto the sheepskin,” Thaddaeus said to Alexander. “Use a piece of limestone.”

Thaddaeus cut out the shape from the leather, making it slightly larger, just enough to allow it to be folded back around the inner cords. Then they sewed the edges to the insides of the fish-shape, the seam forming a channel enclosing a cord on either side.

“We will oil the exposed parts of the cords, and seal their ends with wax, but be careful with the knots—we’ll need to be able to grip those without slipping.”

Now, as they laid out all the pieces on the ground, Alexander understood the purpose of the slings they had constructed.

When the last rays of light disappeared, Philip motioned to Bartholomew and Simon of Cyrene. They slid the leather part of one of the slings under the thickly wrapped base beam, each picking up a knotted stub of rope. Thaddaeus and Barsabbas did the same with another sling at one end of the crossbar; James and Simon the Zealot copied their actions at the other.

On Philip’s signal, the men crouched and, grasping the bulky ropes by the knots, placed them over their shoulders. They stood, distributing the weight of their burden between them.

The others gathered around. Besides the adults, there were eleven donkeys, seven for the wives and infants, four for provisions. The younger girls and boys walked next to their mothers. The older boys led the donkeys or positioned themselves on either side of the small, mule-drawn wagons.

They traveled by night for secrecy; they slept through the days. Besides concealment, temperature was an added incentive: the

night breezes made the sand cool enough to walk upon with bare feet.

None of them knew where they were going, although Philip led the way, and he was led by God.

A short distance behind Philip, Simon of Cyrene and Bartholomew carried the main sling supporting the base beam, facing forward. The two men chatted in low voices with Alexander, who walked proudly beside his father.

Periodically, Philip glanced over his shoulder. Whenever he did this, Alexander ran ahead to walk beside him. They would talk for a while, and then the boy would prance back to the group, darting from person to person, relaying Philip's message.



ON THE ELEVENTH NIGHT, the caravan crossed the Euphrates River. Four days later, they camped on the banks of the Tigris. Then the band headed northwest, crossing the river as soon as they were able.

Philip stopped at sunrise on the eighteenth day. A tributary joined the racing Tigris, directly in their path, and he signaled that they would sleep at this junction.

As the women readied the tents, the children played in the shallows at the spot where the two rushing currents collided. Whirling eddies spun around their feet, and they giggled from the tickling bubbles; their giggles mixed with the low roar of the turbulent rivers.

Philip stared at the intersection in front of him, struck by the thought of faraway Jerusalem. It seemed only yesterday that they had all been together in an upstairs room at Mark's house.

Barsabbas and Simon of Cyrene joined him. They talked well into the morning. Too excited to sleep, Philip stayed awake long after the others.

When the group reassembled at sundown, Philip announced that they would be leaving the path along the Tigris and following the tributary into the wilderness. No one questioned his instructions.

Their route began to climb. Two nights later, they came to the tributary's apparent source, a sizable pool in front of a vertical wall of rock. Strewn on both of its banks where the pool abutted the wall, were piles of boulders, all bigger than a man. The rocks extended in either direction to the horizon, blurring endlessly skyward, casting sharp reflections in the stillness of the pond.

The travelers set up camp, exhausted from their climb, perplexed at the dead end, but trusting nonetheless.

The sun rose while they prepared to sleep, prompting Philip to study the wall of rock across the pond. What had appeared to be a sheer cliff in the dark looked all the more impenetrable at dawn.

Lord, where do we go from here?

He struggled to fall asleep, staring across the water, watching the play of light reflected onto the rock. Although the water of the pool did not seem to be moving, the reflections of the sun danced on the wall of rock in an ever-changing embroidery of light. The sunbeams combined with the vertical stripes of the off-white granite to produce a dazzling, radiant design.

The moment the lower rim of the sun cleared the horizon, the diagonal rays of sunlight appeared to straighten out, aligning with the grain of the rock. This happened quickly and with a unique visual effect: two-thirds of the wall to the left appeared to suddenly melt into one shade of chalk white, smooth and polished, no longer reflecting the water. At the same time, the rest of the wall appeared to drop backward as its shadows became more pronounced and the color darkened. The illusion of melting crossed the wall from left to right, making it appear as if the patterns of the light interplaying with the grain of rock were sliding—transferring all their roughness over to the stone wall behind. It was all the more breathtaking because the right-hand third of the wall was offset a dozen feet behind the front barrier. The cumulative result was that anyone present perceived a curtain being pulled open from left to right, and a section of rock dropping back as if a door were opening.

Philip jumped up and waded through the water to peer around the vertical barrier. He discovered the beginning of a chasm through which the stream continued, easily wide enough for the group to pass through, even carrying their burden. Looking skyward, he saw bushes sheared apart on either side of the gorge, as

if the rift had been created recently. *Well, maybe it had.* Earthquakes were common in this region. As the thought crossed his mind, he flushed with shame; *this was no coincidence.*

He rushed back to the camp, but everyone was sleeping. He decided to tell them of his discovery when they awoke that evening. There would be plenty of time to explore. After all, it was the longest day of the year—the summer solstice.

THE FIRST WEEK

“I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 18:18)

TWO

MONDAY, JUNE 20, PRESENT DAY

TURKEY

STUART WATCHED HIS FRIEND push a large pile of Turkish lire across the ticket counter at the Ankara bus station. “You said we were going to find Noah’s Ark.”

“I know I did, but check out the map,” Roger said as he handed Stuart his ticket. “We can’t just pass *by* the town of Batman without doing some exploring.” He drew out the word “by” and traced a semicircle in the air with his finger, as if it were taking a detour around something.

“Look.” Roger’s finger landed on the map of Turkey, audibly crinkling the paper. “Here’s Mount Ararat, and here’s Batman.” He jabbed his thumb down, then lifted his hand while maintaining the distance between his thumb and index finger. “We’re this close! And I have a *feeling* about it.”

Stuart shook his head at Roger’s latest crazy plan. He drew in an exaggerated sniff. “Why do I suddenly smell bulls?”

Last summer, after their freshman year at college, Stuart and Roger had traveled throughout Spain and Portugal, the first trip to Europe for both of them. They began in Barcelona at Christopher Columbus’ ship, and then explored a good deal of art nouveau architecture by Antonio Gaudi. Roger discovered the local bull-

fighting stadium. After a few days watching bullfights—rooting for the bull—Roger said, “You know, Stuart, every day so far we’ve only been *looking* at things; as if we’re tourists or something.”

“We *are* tourists,” Stuart had replied warily.

“I want to *do* things... You know, immersive reality.”

The next day they heard about the annual bull run in Pamplona. They traveled there immediately; Roger had insisted. And he made sure that they *did it*, instead of just watching it.

After donning red scarves and nearly being trampled by stampeding bulls, Roger had taken out his withered map of the world. That’s when they had decided to spend this summer searching for Noah’s Ark. Stuart was all for it. An archeology student, the quest for ancient relics was in his blood; however, this expedition could quench a vital thirst for something else he’d been seeking his whole life: faith.

“But,” Roger had announced with great confidence, “we’re not just going to *look* for Noah’s Ark. We’re going to *find* it! I have a *feeling* about it.”

Later, on the flight home from Europe, Stuart had met Meredith Montgomery. The chance encounter seemed so long ago; hard to believe it was a mere ten months. Ever the tease, her first words were, “Sorry, I tried to get two seats, but they wouldn’t let me make a reservation for hair.” He did a double take. *Had she said “hair” or “her”?* She’d deliberately mispronounced the word. Stuart laughed when he saw her expression. He was already tangled up in it: the longest, most voluminous, and most beautiful hair he had ever seen. Yes, Meredith’s hair could have filled a separate seat.

As they chatted through the flight, they discovered they were the same age and attending the same university. By October, they were a “couple”—his first real girlfriend—and by the end of the academic year, the only times they weren’t together were when they were in class or sleeping. Even then, he dreamt of her at night, and daydreamed of her during class. Meredith had bid them *bon voyage* at the airport less than a week ago. He already missed her.

STUART FOCUSED on the map of Turkey. Sure enough, there was a town called Batman on the way to Mount Ararat. He remembered how he and Roger had played super-heroes as chil-

dren. Roger was always Batman; he was always Batman's sidekick, Robin. In grade school, their nicknames were Batman and Robin. At college, they had new nicknames: "War and Peace," from Roger Warren and Stuart Pierce. It suited their personalities much better.

"See these rivers?" Roger pointed at the map again. "The Tigris and the Euphrates—these are the rivers that watered the Garden of Eden."

"But what about Mount Ararat?" Stuart had spent the past few weeks reading everything he could find about the ancient Ark's purported landing place, their destination.

"We have plenty of time for this side trip," Roger said. "Tomorrow is the longest day of the year."

"I know. It's the summer solstice. I'm the one who got an 'A' in astronomy, don't forget." Stuart studied the map, adding the kilometers and converting them to miles. "OK. Let's check out Batman, but don't call me Robin—that's ancient history."



ON THE BUS RIDE to Batman, Stuart and Roger joked in Turkish accents. The ticket agent had pronounced the name of the city "Baht-mahn." Now, Roger was "Baht-mahn"; Stuart, of course, was "Raw-bean." They reminisced while they gazed out the windows, trying to incorporate the passing scenes into their fantasy.

Stuart saw dismal poverty alternating with shiny, ultra-modern developments, and then, vast expanses of uninhabited plateau reaching toward stunning mountains in the distance. After this pattern repeated several times, he realized that the poverty wasn't so dismal, nor the developments so ultra-modern; they appeared that way only because they were displayed in stark contrast to each other, as if the new and modern had been purposely placed next to the old and ancient with the intention of emphasizing their disparity. He recalled Ankara, where he had been fascinated by farmers on donkeys obliviously stopping beside shining, late-model automobiles, both waiting for the traffic signals to turn green.

Outside the window, the heat waves distorted the distant mountains and reminded Stuart that he was hot—hotter than he could remember ever having been in Southern California.

“Hey. These windows don’t open.”

“Because of the air conditioner... Duh!”

“But it’s not on.” Stuart felt a drop of sweat roll down his forehead. He smelled the perspiration glistening on the neck of the bus-driver; they were seated directly behind him.

“Did you get a whiff of this?” Roger held up the bowl of lemon toilet water the attendant had passed to them.

“It reeks.”

“Not as much as the tobacco. Haven’t they heard of second-hand smoke?”

The two nauseating smells competed for Stuart’s air space. Then he smelled the people—women who probably couldn’t remember the last time they had bathed and men wearing sweaters in the summer for some unfathomable reason, sweaters drenched in sweat. In a moment of panic, he couldn’t breathe.

He snapped back to reality at the slight movement of air produced when his companion opened the map of Turkey again with a flourish. Roger took out the tiny pocket Bible he always carried. For luck, he said.

Stuart knew that under Roger’s shirt hung a gold crucifix. He had asked him about it once.

“It’s to be sure I’ll receive the last rites if I’m in an accident and don’t regain consciousness.”

“No, really.”

“Well, you know, the cross is still working in the world.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“No idea. Father Romero used to say that.”

THE LAST TIME STUART had accompanied Roger to Mass, Father Romero’s sermon had focused on Golgotha, the Hebrew name for the hill where Jesus had been crucified between two criminals. Right before they died, one of the criminals made it clear that he believed Jesus to be the Son of God, even as the other continued to mock him. Jesus promised that the believer would be together with him in Heaven that very day. Father Romero had tied the story into choices people make in life—right versus wrong. The part that stuck in Stuart’s mind was the priest pointing out the window, directing the congregation’s attention to the three

antennae towers atop a small hill known affectionately around campus as “Marconi Mountain.” Although the satellite dish on the right was huge, the central microwave tower dwarfed both it and the aging A.M. radio mast. The bald-pated priest compared the technological tableau to the three crosses, noting that the antiquated radio tower was like the criminal who refused to change, refused to make the right choice; the satellite dish represented the one who decided to repent. Stuart suspected that the good father was unaware that the satellite dish was part of Professor Bryce Brinkman’s non-optical imaging project, and that, although better known for being a “hottie,” she was an outspoken agnostic. Nor would Father Romero have been aware that the elderly caretaker of the ancient A.M. radio antenna sat several pews away in the chapel, not looking very happy with the analogy.

Come to think of it, he recalled another occasion when Father Romero had projected a photograph and used a similar analogy. The photo had been of three single-crossbar telephone poles stark against the setting sun, and yes, the image had been striking.

Both times, Father Romero had led the parishioners in prayer following the homily, and both times, he’d closed the prayer with a moment of “personal reflection.” The first time, Stuart hadn’t realized protocol insisted he keep his head bowed and eyes closed during that part too; the second time he’d sneaked a peek out of curiosity; both times he’d glimpsed the Reverend taking a moistened towelette from behind the pulpit and furiously washing his hands while mumbling what appeared to be another prayer.

ROGER FOUND the page he had been searching for and started reading.

“A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold... The name of the second river is the Gihon... the third river is the Tigris... And the fourth river is the Euphrates. (Genesis 2:10-14)

“According to this, four warrior angels are bound in the Euphrates River. They will be released at the end of time to kill one third of the people on the planet,” Roger added matter-of-factly, then grinned.

Stuart envied Roger's religious upbringing. His own parents were confirmed agnostics. Thus, church and Sunday school hadn't been part of his life. His father was firm in his beliefs. "Religion is a crutch for weak people," Brad Pierce bellowed whenever the topic arose. He intended that to end any discussion on the matter. As far as Stuart could remember, it had.

Until his parents separated, that is.

Stuart's parents had been fighting more and more each week. He would lie in bed at night, listening to the escalating "discussions" they'd postponed until after he was asleep in a vain attempt to spare him. Then, there had been that time he was caught shoplifting with some kids from shantytown; to confound things, it was during school hours and they were playing hooky. That night, he overheard his mother accuse his father of not having raised him with proper morals. The next day, his father went away on a "business trip." He was gone five months. Even as a boy of twelve, Stuart suspected all was not as he was being led to believe—his father showed up regularly for a change of clothes and more fighting. His parents no longer saved their battles for "after the children were asleep." Stuart heard the word "divorce," and realized they were separated; the so-called "business trip" was a cover story.

With the horror of his parent's impending divorce pounding in his brain, Stuart imagined the whole separation was his fault—that his brush with the law had somehow caused it. He prayed a child's prayer to God, begging that the Lord would bring his parents back together; that somehow they would reconcile. Shortly thereafter, they did, and things appeared to be growing better between them. Nevertheless, Stuart was left with questions about God: *Had God done that in answer to his prayer? Was he under an obligation to God now? Should he go to church? Why would God patch up his parents marriage when his father continued to proclaim that religion was a crutch for weak people? Was the shoplifting incident going to count against him in Heaven...if there was a Heaven? Was God going to do anything else in his life?* Of course, none of this mattered if there were no God.

Yet, when these questions arose, Stuart often heard a rustling, sometimes in the wind, sometimes in the waves at the beach. It seemed to answer *Yes*, and urge *Come to me*, or *Come and see*. He

couldn't make it out. At other times: *Some to be...Someone he...From one three...From one tree...?* No way to make sense of it. Often, he thought the voice was saying many things at once; the exact words were just below the threshold of audibility.

He'd even asked Roger whether it was possible that God would have deemed to answer his prayer, "being as I'm not properly church-going and all."

Roger replied, "Father Romero says God hears all prayers. I guess he hears those from heathens like you, too. Of course, you *should* learn the Rosary, and it helps to be named after one of the Apostles, which you aren't!"

Stuart knew how Roger's mother had planned for a large family, but her plans had been blotted out permanently that year she'd been so sick.

"Matthew and John: those would have been the names of my brothers," Roger often explained, "and Mary, Esther, and Ruth would have been the names of my sisters." He would then put on a solemn countenance and intone, "Now I'm the last of the line... Or the first of the new line, depending on how you choose to look at it."

WHILE THEY WERE growing up, Stuart attended Mass with Roger more than once, but the ritual had done nothing for him. He even checked out the CYO—the Catholic Youth Organization—at Roger's church, but there he discovered that Catholic teens were just like all the other kids from school. When he got to college, everyone in the dorm professed to have been "through that church thing." They immersed themselves in contemplating Buddhism, or meditating on their inner oneness, or communing with the "Goddess," whoever that was.

Stuart believed in God—at least he thought he did—but he didn't know what he should do about it. What was the next step?

Some Sunday mornings, he sneaked into the back of the university chapel and observed. It seemed like a club, and he wasn't a member. The songs were usually about Jesus.

Stuart knew he was seeking something, and that it had to do with God. Deep down, he also knew that Roger wasn't very pious,

but liked being around someone who was a paid up member of the club.

SEATTLE

Richard Roebuck funded researchers throughout the world. His projects included scientists on the *Gansu Kansu* mountains in central China, others in the heart of Africa—on the *Kotto River* in the Central African Republic, more in the ice caves of Antarctica, and an outpost on the smallest of the *Tarawa Islands* in the southern Pacific—so small it didn't have a name. His project in the South American rainforest gave him the most reason for optimism.

The group he had sent to the Amazon basin consisted of eight promising biotechnologists; among them several biochemists, a microbiologist, a cytologist, a geneticist, an immunologist, and two general botanists. There had been reports of seemingly miraculous cures by a certain shaman whose magic reportedly healed everything from the common cold to cancer. Further testing raised hopes that the people of the village in question might be immune to cancer—none of them ever “got skinny and died” like the natives of surrounding villages. This fact made that village very important to Richard.

Creativity, subterfuge, and an overwhelming desire to possess a pocket laser-pointer induced the village shaman to disclose his secret: one merely had to dig underneath a certain tree and gently coerce the presumed miracle elixir from the tips of its living roots without disturbing or severing the root system—a very delicate process. The shaman used eucalyptus oil to separate the organic compounds; hence, the strong smell of breath-mints. This, coupled with the tree's striking resemblance to a Boab, had prompted Richard to name it a *Boalyptus* tree.

His research team believed they had isolated the compound responsible for the “miraculous cures.” Soaking root-drippings in aromatic oils like the Shaman did was far too unpredictable to produce consistent results. After HPLC (High Performance Liquid Chromatography) and molecular modeling, they detected a substance with a chemical structure similar to Quinolone class antibiotics. Unfortunately, the medicine had a little “something

extra” that the FDA would surely balk at. There was a side-effect with the *mu*-opiate receptor—something that passed readily across the blood-brain barrier—a powerful heroin-like substance that could be used orally: no IVs, no skin-popping, smoking, or snorting required, and it was very stable.

At first, his team-leader had recommended cutting their losses and getting out of the rainforest. Richard expected no less from his scientists; they were good, ethical people. However, he also knew there were other people who needed the healing properties of this drug—people who didn’t care whether the FDA had approved it or not, and who didn’t care whether the side effects included euphoria. Richard had no need for the Boalyptus tree; what he needed was the chemical formula he’d paid his researchers to discover. Eventually, it might figure into his “retirement plan.”

AS HE DID WITH ALL his researchers, Richard kept a constant satellite link to the young scientists in South America. Further, the Global Positioning System they used in the field accessed his personal satellite network while transmitting real-time coordinates. The GPS technology allowed Richard to pinpoint their location with a precision measured in inches.

During one of their weekly reports the team leader signed off saying, “I’m expecting that we’ll have even better news next week.” As the link was shutting down, Richard thought he overheard one of the women say, “Do you think he believed you?”

Richard replayed the recording a dozen times until he was sure he had heard the words correctly. He remembered interviewing all eight researchers; he’d already spent millions on this project. They were more than a year into their research—nine months stateside and now four months in the field.

He replayed the past fifteen communications...in his mind. Richard had what scientists call an eidetic memory, and others, a photographic memory. At the age of twelve, he had memorized one hundred verses of the Bible to win two tickets to a baseball game. He heard some church-going kids discussing the contest and rightly deduced that his memory abilities would make the task a piece of cake. He rushed to his grandmother’s house and, opening her old Bible approximately to the center, read a hundred verses. As

quickly as he read them, he committed them to memory. The day he retrieved his baseball tickets was the first day he had set foot in church.

Justin Robinson, who had placed second in the contest, happily accepted Richard's invitation to attend the game, but when Richard told him how he'd won the tickets, Justin said, "You can't do that sort of thing with a church; you're going to end up in Hell. You're a cheater!"

Richard noticed Justin move several inches down the bench, so their coats wouldn't touch, as if such contact might condemn the boy to a similar fate. However, he knew that Justin had extraordinary peripheral vision; the boy regularly copied from Richard during examinations. In an instant, he understood the definition of a word they'd learned in school the previous week: hypocrisy. He vowed revenge.

Richard was patient. He stopped clipping the nail on his left index finger. Then, on the day of their final science exam, he carefully fashioned it into a sharp point. Fully aware that Justin was copying his answers, Richard answered everything incorrectly. Three minutes before the end of the exam, he picked his nose with the sharpened fingernail to provoke a nosebleed, the drippings of which rendered his answer sheet unreadable. With two minutes left to go, he approached the proctor, and displayed his blood-soaked page. He received a blank answer form, and made certain Justin was watching while he crumbled the original and dropped it in the circular file. He pointed to the clock, whispered something to the proctor, and was allowed to sit in the chair beside the teacher's desk. In less than 90 seconds Richard entered an 'X' in all the correct squares, duplicating the ones he'd written on the eidetic page inside his head—not the ones he'd allowed Justin to copy.

Justin's grades never recovered; his personality took a turn for the worse, and the episode marked the day his life began sliding downhill: he didn't get into college. While the outcome turned out to be much greater than Richard expected—merely an annoying blot on Justin's "permanent record"—Richard had no remorse regarding the event. He had manipulated the boy's beliefs to such a degree of blind faith that Justin hadn't even bothered to apply the "test of reasonableness" on a single one of the answers.

Richard's mantra had long been, *you get what you deserve*. And usually, the sword of retribution cut with a blade that could have more than two sharp edges. Gullible people deserved the consequences of their own stupidity.

THE PROGRESS of the South American research team seemed to be escalating; he had doubled their budget three weeks ago. Even so, the whispered, "Do you think he believed you?" echoed in his mind.

The thought made him very uncomfortable. "Do you think he believed you?"

Could they be milking him?

The thought became a taunt. "Do you think he believed you?"

He sighed the sigh his underlings hated, the one guaranteed to make them feel brainless, guaranteed to make them believe that their stupidity was the sole source of Richard's frustration, and that the "great man" had every right to laud over their sniveling insignificance—the sigh that sounded as though he were planning to spit.

After a sleepless night, Richard decided to fly to Brazil and check out the situation.

THREE

TURKEY

ROGER'S PRONOUNCEMENT WAS meant to be a caption to their situation: "The town of Batman is dead—deader than the 'Joker' after he was vanquished by Batman."

"Batman and Robin, you mean."

"You told me not to mention him..."

Touché.

"And that smell—" Stuart said.

"Yeah. I saw the oil refinery."

They didn't get off the bus until Batman was miles behind them and the odor had disappeared.

"We have at least seven hours of daylight left." Roger pointed to the sun. "And it *is* cooling down." The temperatures had been above 103 since their arrival in Turkey.

They hitched a ride to Cattakkopru with a farmer whose only compensation was the last of the licorice that Roger had bought when they changed planes in Amsterdam. It had seemed like a good arrangement, yet by the time they stepped off the wagon, the old man had given them far more rose-flavored Turkish delight—he called it *locum*—than the licorice he had received for his troubles.

While they sat in the back of the horse-drawn cart, two vegetable crates separated them from a half-dozen goats; Roger took photos of the farmer. “I’m going to sell these to National Geographic,” he said, “and we can use the money to finance our trip to Norway next year.”

Stuart’s ears perked up. Finances were customarily a taboo topic for them. Roger was, in a word, rich. His father was the chairman of the medieval something-or-other department at the university, but the job wasn’t necessary. Roger’s mother had inherited a fortune from her own mother, a sixties rock star who had died of vegetarianism and whose name was never mentioned. Stuart tried to pull his weight as best he could, but without Roger’s limitless credit card, this vacation and last year’s too, would have been considerably more rugged.

They shared another taboo topic: Stuart’s younger sister, Cindy; Roger had dated her in high school. Cindy was small for her age, with wavy hair framing her face, a constant dimpled smile, and beautiful, sparkling eyes. If she weren’t so cute, she might have appeared mousy. Eventually, Roger had broken Cindy’s heart, at least temporarily.

Leaning against the inside of the wagon, Roger strummed their three-stringed *baglama*. They had bought it in Ankara; Roger’s credit card had come in handy again.

Stuart gazed at his best friend. Their birthdays were only a week apart, yet their physical differences were striking—he had an average build and wispy brown hair, while Roger was tall and muscular, his curly hair coarse and almost blond. Roger exercised regularly—it showed—and Stuart knew that his friend considered him a wimp for not doing likewise. All the same, he believed that if the two of them ever came to blows, while Roger might inflict the most damage, Stuart would surely win by virtue of the strength of his convictions, for any conceivable disagreement would be rooted in a difference of principles.

Stuart’s reverie was broken by a crescendo of honking and hooting through which he could discern the Beach Boys tune, “I Get Around”—strangely incongruous in such a foreign land.

*I’m getting bugged driving up and down this same old strip.
I’m gonna find a new place where the kids are hip.*

He straightened, craning to see, as their driver pulled over to let the cars pass. The extra bumping caused Roger's camera to fall by his side.

They stared as the procession approached.

"Check out those cars."

"American antiques."

"Do you think they're shiny enough?"

Stuart recognized an ancient Chevy Impala and a Chrysler Le Baron. Both were polished to look as if they had left the showroom that very day.

"Those are taxis in the back, the beat-up ones with the yellow stripe."

"Older than you are."

"Yeah, but classic."

The motorcade decelerated to navigate the small edge of pavement between the archaic wagon and the sandy shoulder on the other side of the road.

The cars were overflowing with youths their age. The hooting stopped as the young Turks noticed the Americans—a meeting of two cultures, one caught exploring the other without the benefit of a guide. While they stared at the party on wheels, Stuart wondered what they must think of Roger holding the *baglama*. The Turks stared back. They seemed to be traveling in slow motion. The only thing continuing in real-time was the music of the Beach Boys, but even that played with their sense of time; they were stuck in the sixties—the seventies might never have reached this remote locale, much less the millennium.

The young people were dressed very sharply in American-style clothes which Stuart could tell at a glance were Taiwanese knock-offs. One young woman's entire face was covered with a red veil. Although Stuart couldn't see through the veil, he sensed her eyes locked onto his.

He wondered what was behind the red lace. Was she hiding childhood scars? She turned to follow his eyes and the gracefulness of her movements convinced him she was beautiful.

No one spoke. The montage etched itself into Stuart's mind with a focus sharper than any snapshot he might have taken.

After the cars squeezed by, the old man turned to the travelers and said, “Wedding.” They were accustomed to the farmer’s one-word sentences by now. The cart started moving again, and neither Stuart nor Roger spoke as they watched the wedding party disappear over the horizon.

A crunch of gravel accompanied by a sudden lurch brought Stuart back to reality. He looked forward, realizing that neither of them had any idea where the farmer was taking them, and the sun was falling lower by the minute.



THE GOAT FARMER dropped Stuart and Roger at the eastern bank of the Malabi Bridge. He gestured his willingness to take a picture of the two young men; Roger waved away the photo-op—his customary rebuff. From Roger’s perception, the most prominent feature on his face was a scar from a childhood injury; he had no desire to capture that memory again with a photograph.

The two companions continued beside the shore of a small lake; it had undoubtedly been the beginning of the Batman River in earlier times. The water narrowed north of Ormandisi and the young men were able to wade to the other side.

They stayed by the water until arriving at the village of Kulp. There, they bought some kebab from a roadside vendor who continued to turn his ancient spit with one hand while negotiating the sale with the other. The smell of coriander was intense.

Roger stretched out the map and studied it while they ate. He suddenly threw down his kebab stick. “See how these rivers start, right here around the Cotele Mountain?” He stabbed the map with his finger.

“Look at the name of the village closest to the top of the mountain. Look at it!”

Clearly, he wasn’t going to say another word until Stuart looked at the map and read the name aloud.

Stuart followed Roger’s finger. *Godis*. “Goh-deeze.”

“Yeah. Look at the spelling: *Godis*. GOD IS! Do you think that’s a coincidence?”

“Hmm...”

“And this stream must be the original source of the Batman River.”

He folded the map and started hiking. Stuart hastened to catch up.



THEY FOLLOWED the small brook to its apparent source: a pool nearly forty feet in diameter abutting a wall of smooth rock. Stuart wanted to camp there. He felt comfortable for the first time in days. The moss at the edge of the sparkling water was warm in the light of the setting sun. He played with the spongy vegetation where it met the water—the temperature had dropped to acceptable levels.

“I don’t think you want to spend the night here,” Roger said.

“Yes I do. This moss is softer than my air mattress.”

“Do you have any idea what happens at pools of water like this in the middle of the night?”

“I haven’t given it much thought.”

“Then let me tell you. Wild animals come to the pool for a drink of water. That’s what happens. Wolves, bears, jackals, and even leopards! And do you know what they do if they find a couple of juicy humans wrapped in sleeping bags next to their water hole?”

“I can imagine.”

“Anyway, we can’t climb here—the rocks are too smooth. We want to be farther north, where all those boulders are.”

“Climb?”

“Naturally. Don’t you want to see what’s up there?” Roger pointed to the top of the wall of rock.

“Of course I do.”

Stuart and Roger continued hiking and set up camp five hundred feet beyond the small oasis. This was just far enough away to prevent them from noticing Achmed bin Cyrene, descendant of Simon of Cyrene, bearer of the cross, when he and his eldest son, Matthias, approached the moss-rimmed pool less than six hours later, the morning after the shortest night of the year.

FOUR

TUESDAY, JUNE 21

DAWN

MATTHIAS AND HIS FATHER, Achmed, arrived at the pool, as they had every month for as long as Matthias could remember, and his memory reached back twenty years. Their cart, pulled by a strong workhorse, was laden with an apparently arbitrary array of items: bags of grain; dried cat food and dog food; a month's worth of newspapers and a dozen books; medical supplies; reams of paper, art materials, and photographic film; an assortment of wooden toys; and six cases full of large bottles of the latest carbonated iced-tea rage. They were three-hours from their home near Diyarbakir.

Matthias realized that the bottles would be quite warm by now.

Too bad they have no ice.

Because this was the longest day of the year, the secret crevice would be visible to anyone who happened to be near the pool at sunrise. Instead of proceeding directly through the hidden entrance of the gorge, the two men stopped at the water.

Matthias loved this spectacle as much as his father did. They rested quietly on the moss in anticipation while the sun rose. Deep indentations from Stuart and Roger's hiking boots marred the spongy ground cover, but the men were so engrossed in the wall of

rock on the other side of the pool, they did not notice. Instead they stared, transfixed by the annual occultation that never failed to blur the boundary between the real and the spiritual. That this peculiar solar anomaly happened only once each year made the experience even more precious.

“Beautiful!” Matthias exclaimed. Like his father, Matthias had the dark, swarthy, middle-eastern look indicative of a bloodline stretching back to the Patriarchs. Hair blanketed the exposed areas of his flesh. Both men had a keen sense of, and appreciation for, beauty.

His father smiled as he stood. “Let’s go.”

They led the horse and cart to a shady natural stable beside the entrance to the gorge. Apparently, the removal of one of the massive boulders had created the shady shelter. Matthias theorized that the selfsame boulder had formed the depression in the earth that became the pool, landing hard before bouncing, but so far, he had been unable to find the missing stone.

They uncovered the back of the wagon, and Achmed calculated the weight of its contents. He had not yet divulged his system to Matthias.

“Six trips,” said Achmed, referring to how many times they would have to pass through the ravine while transferring the wagon’s contents to its destination.

They each grabbed an end of the sturdy stick attached to the top of the largest sack of grain. As always, the heavy items were the first to be transported.



A MERE 150 YARDS to the northeast, Stuart and Roger were awakening. Or, more accurately, Roger was. Stuart heard a “Tsk, tsk,” opened one eye a sliver, focused, and saw that Roger had decided to let him continue to sleep.

Peeking again, Stuart saw Roger moving silently around the camp, packing delicately. Obviously, he planned to have as much ready as possible before *accidentally* making a noise loud enough to wake his friend. Then, Roger would be able to gloat while Stuart scurried around frantically getting his gear in shape. He’d been

through this before: groggy eyes, Roger standing over him, ready to go. Probably, he would go explore, looking for a climbing route while Stuart readied himself. Again, it was right in character.

Stuart knew that his friend wasn't being particularly malicious; they really were best friends. Roger treated everyone like that.

Roger craned his neck to study the giant rocks that towered over their camp. He walked toward the east, then returned with a determined look, continuing west in the direction of the pool. He still didn't suspect that Stuart was merely pretending to sleep. Fifty feet from their campsite, Stuart heard him let out a cry and he came running back, hooting the whole way.

If Stuart hadn't been awake by now, Roger's racket would have roused him.

"Hey, slacker," Roger said smugly. "Get a move on."

Stuart stared at him fuzzily. "Did you make coffee?"

"I forgot." Roger put on his most penitent face, and then changed the subject. "I did some scouting around while you were asleep." Roger paused for effect. "I found the perfect path."

"Perfect path?"

"Hurry up! *I'm* already packed and ready to go."

Stuart glared and gathered his things as quickly as possible. "Ready," he said five minutes later.

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

"Huh?"

Roger gave him a spacious grin, and the rising sun reflected off his pearly white teeth. They were perfect, without a single cavity, and he reminded Stuart of that fact whenever he had an opportunity.

"OK. OK." Stuart opened his knapsack and took out his toothbrush.



ACHMED AND MATTHIAS stepped behind the rock baffle for the third time that day. Matthias heard a whooping sound. He stopped, turned back, and peered around the corner of the baffle. A large bird was flying off; he could hear the beating of its wings.

The two men hadn't spoken much during the first two trips, but Matthias knew his father expected him to break the silence when they returned to transport the lighter, but bulkier packages. Family tradition was powerful about the day of the solstice: the younger of the Cyrenes would recite the story of the crater settlement while they traversed from one end of the ravine to the other. The recitation ensured that Matthias would be able to pass on the story to his own son when it became necessary.

As the two of them waded through the pool for the fifth time and Matthias began, "On the sixtieth day, shortly before dawn, three men rushed up the hill and took the cross..."

His father's eyes lit up.

Achmed studied the sides of the gorge while his son recounted the history of the settlement. He tried to remember the times he had walked this route with his own father, his *baba*. He tried to recall which bushes had been where—or hadn't been—and how much they had grown. When they reached "the corner," a place where the gorge made a forty-five-degree turn, he focused.

Matthias was precisely at the spot in his narrative where he should be at the bend in the stream: *Philip didn't know that the hidden entrance to the gorge was visible only on one day of the year, the summer solstice, and only in the first three hours of the morning sun. But God did.*

The young man felt his father reach around and give his shoulder a hug.



MATTHIAS STOPPED his recitation to marvel at the curving of the stream around the corner. His thoughts clouded as he contemplated the settlers whose actions 2,000 years ago had so irrevocably set the course of his own life. In a flash, a seed of doubt ripened into full-blown uncertainty. He hesitated as images of other places; other lives—the might-have-beens—erupted before his mind's eye. As quickly as this apprehension had swept over him, it subsided, replaced by a strong, purposeful sense of duty.

He continued intoning the ancient Aramaic words of the bin Cyrene oral tradition: *Philip bade everyone line up in the late*

afternoon. They would travel singly or in pairs through the gorge, wading through the rushing waters, where required.

A full two hours did it take to traverse the ravine. Wet and tired, they quickly moved to one side of the stream and gazed upon the sight before them.

What they saw resembled a large bowl, one with a flat bottom roughly 7,000 cubits [2 miles] in diameter and over 600 cubits deep [900 feet]. The stream flowed from the north of the valley. To the east was a grove of orange trees; across the stream, a large field of wheat. Sheep grazed on the grass-covered northern half of the valley.

The thirty-three weary pilgrims did not question whether this was the destination God had planned for them. They knelt and prayed.

With two hours of daylight left, the men carried the cross to the source of the stream, a small bubbling spring close to the far northern wall of the crater.

Philip and the other six men talked at length.

Soon they had unwrapped and planted the cross in the soil beyond the spring—a monument to the greatest act of sacrifice since the beginning of the universe.

Beneath the earth and unbeknownst to all, rivulets of the blood of Jesus on the base of the cross sprouted roots and reached outward.

“Friends,” said Philip. “Eighty-one days ago, our Lord was nailed to that tree. When Simon of Cyrene came to me with this idea two months ago, I confess I was perplexed. Yet, Simon carried the cross for Jesus on that final day, and God had given him a vision of what needed to be done—a vision of wars that would be fought over the cross if it stayed where it lay.

“When we embarked on this journey three weeks ago, our destination was unclear to me. I trusted the Lord to lead us, and you trusted me. Now, I believe that we have arrived where the Lord would have us stay. In His infinite grace and generosity, He provides a safe refuge for us.

“People, let us all thank the Lord from our hearts, and praise Him with our souls. For He alone is holy.

“In the blessed name of Jesus Christ.”

“Amen,” they said, as one.

Then they heard a loud voice exhort, “You have done a great thing. For whatever is loosed on earth is loosed in Heaven, and

whatever is bound on earth is bound in Heaven. What you have done has been done in Heaven. For though this place is here, it is also in Heaven. This sanctuary is but a copy and shadow of what is in Heaven.

“Philip, James, Bartholomew, Thaddaeus, Simon, and Barsabbas, You and your families and descendants are blessed—blessed that you do not have to return to the world but can live out your days here. This is a great honor. The Lord is well pleased. You have been placed under the protection of the Lamb of God. You have nothing to fear. No evil will befall you. The King of Kings has need of this place when He returns.”

For the second time this day, Matthias sensed the seeds of uncertainty stirring within. He wondered what his father would say if he suddenly announced that he wanted out. That he wanted to travel, to explore the rest of the world, to go to America, to have a *real* life—something more than this month-after-month journey from Diyarbakir to the settlement, this so-called “blessing.”

Nonetheless, he persevered with the Heavenly pronouncement: *“Simon of Cyrene, you who took upon the burden of the Son of Man in His final hour, you and your family and descendants are blessed. You are blessed that you can come and go from this place to minister to the needs of those who remain. This is a great honor. The Lord is well pleased. You have been placed under the protection of the Lamb of God. You have nothing to fear. No evil will befall you. The King of Kings has need of this place when He returns.*

“Hail King Jesus. Righteous is the Son of Man. Worthy is the Lamb of God. Holy is the Lord of Hosts.”

AGAIN, A FAMILIAR IDEA raced through Matthias’ mind. His own ancestor, Simon of Cyrene, had started this mess.

Matthias had lost count of the number of times he had heard the family legend: When Simon of Cyrene carried the cross for Jesus on the Via Dolorosa two thousand years ago, he had been filled with a revelation. As they neared Golgotha, God showed him a vision of what would happen if the cross were left there—the blood of Jesus was on it after all. God had wanted Simon to remove it and hide it.

With Philip's help, Simon refined the plan. Then, the remaining Apostles were brought in on the secret.

Now, two thousand years later, *I'm* locked into this life. Thanks a lot Grandpa.

Matthias and Achmed stepped forth from the ravine into the crater. The young man wondered how long it would be before his father became too frail to make this journey. After that, his lot in life would be fixed for good.

FIVE

LOS ANGELES

BRYCE BRINKMAN had come a long way from Harmony, Pennsylvania. The middle girl between an older and younger sister, and an older and younger brother, Bryce had grown up with the opinion that she had to do something very special for anyone around her to take notice.

A word of advice from her grandmother, “The squeaky wheel gets the grease,” once grasped, quickly became one of the central principles in her personal philosophy. Bryce tested this theory on all manner of things, in and around the house—anything that managed to attract attention by making a reasonable facsimile of a squeaking sound.

Bryce surmised that nearly everyone’s perception was limited to the edges of things. People would look at the outside of something—a house—for hours without giving a moment’s thought to what was inside. They were looking at the house’s edges. Merely looking through the windows of a house wasn’t enough. That only provided more edges to ponder. However, upon the detection of life—a shout, someone practicing piano—a person’s perception changed. They no longer were seeing only the edges.

She hypothesized that the only requirement for most people to jump the mental hurdle between looking at something’s edges, to perceiving it in three dimensions, was awareness of life inside.

FAMILIES WERE LIKE THAT, too. Sissy (the youngest) and Heather (the oldest) were the “edges” of her family. The boys, C.J. and Scott, were closer to those edges than to the center. She was in the middle, and that made it difficult to be noticed unless she took steps to go that extra distance.

It all tied into the way one perceived space.

She had learned much about the perception of space from her father. John Brinkman collected old fire engines. When Bryce had become old enough to appreciate this fact, having noticed that all of her friends collected manageable items like stamps, or dolls, or bottle caps, she asked her father why.

“Because I have the space,” he said.

They lived on a 300-acre farm. Her parents weren’t farmers, although they rented the fields out to honest-to-God farmers whose land abutted theirs. This arrangement left the Brinkmans with a couple of empty barns and nothing to put in them. Her father gradually filled the empty space with antique fire engines. Now fire engines were parked all around the barns as well.

Bryce deduced that the extent to which people’s thoughts, dreams, and aspirations reached out from their deep insides to the farthest boundaries of their imagination depended upon the amount of space they had in their own environment.

Later in her life, economists would apply her theories to national frontiers and construct complex models defining the outer limits of the global marketplace. At the age of fourteen, Bryce applied her theory to the allocation of bedrooms among her siblings.

Bryce was aware that her hypothesis about “edges” and her father’s notion of “space” had much in common. For her high school science project, she hoped to tie these two ideas together and confirm something for herself at the same time.

She borrowed Heather’s and her mother’s old dollhouses, and Sissy’s, too. Ten-year-old Sissy had agreed to this with great reluctance and made her sign a paper guaranteeing the safe return of her dollhouse. Bryce could tell she was genuinely worried; she had twiddled all eight of her braids while negotiating the contract. Adding Bryce’s own dollhouse, made four.

Bryce affixed the four houses to a large piece of plywood and began to work on the interiors.

Dollhouse number one didn't call for any alteration; she simply closed all of its curtains, making sure there was no way to determine its contents.

Dollhouse number two's curtains were completely open, the intricate miniature furniture inside displayed for all to see.

The third dollhouse had some curtains open, and other curtains closed. She placed a layer of wax paper behind the living room windows. Then she installed a light bulb in the tiny living room. Having laid flat a little old clock whose second hand still worked, Bryce attached cardboard cutouts resembling paper dolls to create a mechanism that gave the illusion of activity taking place in the house—silhouettes of people walking back and forth appeared periodically on the wax paper lining the living room windows.

Inside the fourth dollhouse, she placed her small cassette recorder and inserted a recording of herself practicing the piano. It started with exercises and scales and gradually advanced to works of Bach, Mozart, and Chopin, sometimes repeating a measure twenty times, as one would expect during practice.

The four houses could have been in the middle of a typical street anywhere in rural America.

Satisfied, she drafted a brief questionnaire aimed at finding out and quantifying what people perceived of the spaces inside the houses, between the edges.

When Bryce returned from the copy-center with three hundred copies of her questionnaire, she discovered that C.J. and Scott had painted a sidewalk and a road in front of her houses. C.J. had donated four of his model cars to the project, and each house now had a vehicle parked in front of it. Installed at one end of the street was a crudely-lettered sign proclaiming ENTERING BRYCEVILLE, POPULATION: 18. She was obliged to admit that their enhancements created a positive effect.

During the next two months, she took Bryceville, firmly fastened to an old red wagon, to various school and community activities where she entreated people to take part in her survey by filling in her questionnaire. "Have you visited Bryceville yet?" she asked passing strangers, as if she were a travel agent.

After tabulating all the data she collected, she entered the project, titled, “Spacious Thinking,” into her high school Science Fair.

She won easily—the judges had all visited Bryceville.

Her father had been very proud.

How she wished she had someone to be proud of her now, and hold her, calling her “Bry” as her father used to.

Bryce’s “Spacious Thinking” project had netted her the scholarship to Radcliff, from which she graduated *Summa Cum Laude*.

In her junior year, she made the leap from dollhouses and fire engines, to photography and satellites. Her senior thesis, “Inside the Edges—On the Superiority of Non-Optical Imaging,” had been published in the *Journal of Astronomical Research*. All this, from an attempt to rationalize her position as the middle child, or so she once reasoned during a moment of clarity brought on by a bottle of Pomerol wine.

Next came a full Carnegie fellowship for her doctorate at M.I.T. Then, post-doc, and her first RRR grant—Richard Roebuck Research, “Triple-R” as everyone called it.

The grant had prompted her to move to California. There, she received a second “Triple-R,” then another, and another, and another, until she lost count.

Three years ago, the university knocked out the walls of five adjacent classrooms in her building to make room for the lab adjoining her office.

My lab... She said to herself proudly.

Richard—by then she was on a first name basis with the CEO of Richard Roebuck Research—had donated a large endowment to the university the year they extended the lab. Through a complex series of circumstances, many deliberate, Bryce passed the first two years in her new lab unaware of that fact.

She owned her house in Pacific Palisades, had her own parking space on campus, and a brand new Lexus to park in it. She held a platinum membership to her health club. At 34, she had it all, and the looks to go with it. Moreover, as she was fond of reminding herself, she had never had to sleep with anyone to climb this ladder of success. So why did she feel so empty?