

THE RESIDENT GHOST

BY BRENT G. SPALDING

EDITED BY TIM GRAHL

The whole thing starts with me following a ghost. Not a literal ghost—the idea is absurd to me—but a man I spot purchasing a whipped mocha latte, Pete’s favorite, from a curbside coffee stand. He wears the same white jeans and gray and white sweater that Pete often sports, but what clinches my attention is the black face mask over his nose and mouth. Pete always wears one in public, even prior to the pandemic, cautious that his heart, enlarged from a birth defect, can’t handle illnesses most of us take for granted. That very defect took his life this morning, just minutes after I went to the cafeteria to get breakfast for his sister, Lisa, after several nights of sitting vigil with her at his bedside.

The crowds, thick for a rainy Thursday night, keep me from getting a clear look, but a certainty grows in me, hot and fierce, that I have to reach this man as he walks up Main. My lower back hurts, but I tighten the straps of my backpack and quicken my pace. I follow him for almost a mile, past the cafés and bars, until I’m jogging a hundred feet behind him. Rain pelts my head with ice-cold pellets, soaking my hair and running down my face in rivulets. My rational mind scolds me, but my obsession to see this man up close overwhelms it.

When I catch up with him, the man clearly is not Pete. He is too tall, the sweater actually yellow and blue

and a different pattern, his jeans a light gray. He stands in line to board a city bus and tosses his finished mocha latte to the sidewalk before boarding. As rain stings my eyes, I watch him through the windows until he takes a seat.

The rain stops as the bus rolls away. I pick up the discarded drink container and toss it into the woven metal trash container by the bus stop bench, grief aching in my chest.

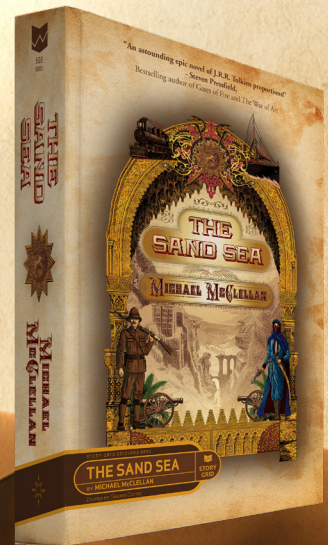
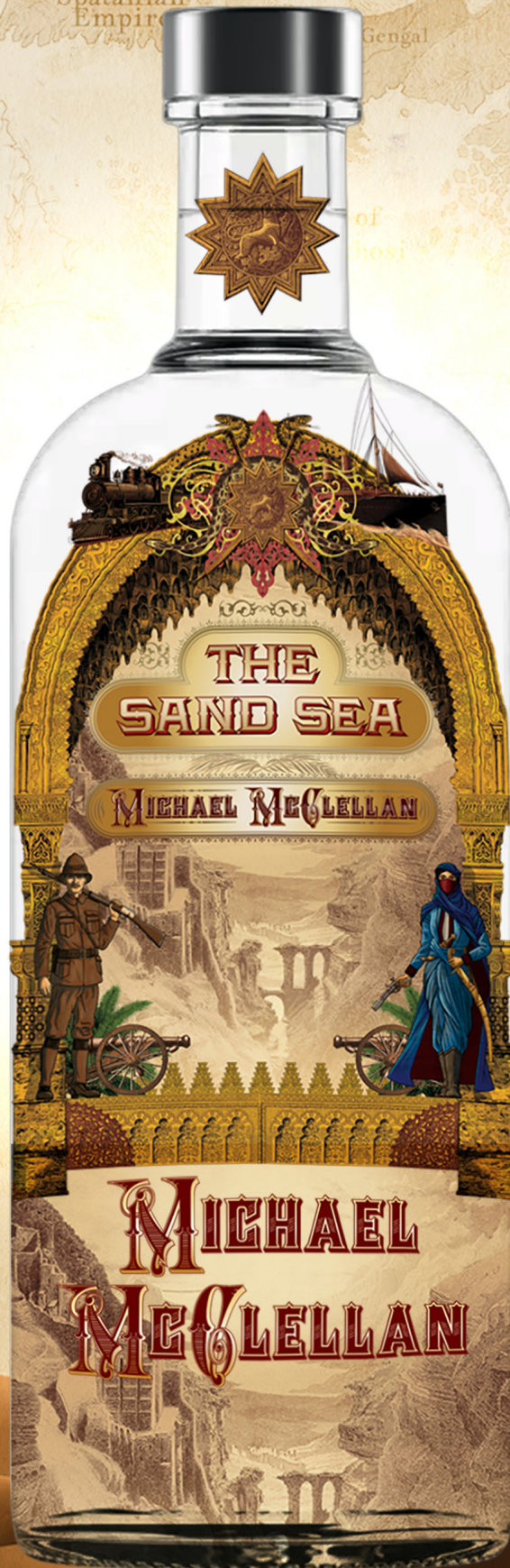
Mist rolls up from the river, thickening as it creeps across the street. The streetlights flicker and the stoplights flash with red. I catch the name of the four-floor condominiums looming overhead. Cliffport Estates. *Shit.*

I’m standing in front of the home of my ex-boyfriend, Tyler Baines. I recognize the facade, having bookmarked it on Google Earth soon after he dumped me for the wealthy Steven Belmonte three years ago.

A question nags at me. Did I follow “Pete” to Tyler’s doorstep on purpose from a subconscious desire to reconnect? When I left the hospital, I couldn’t bring myself to return to the one-bedroom bungalow I share with Pete. I didn’t even go back to get my phone charger or a change of clothes.

“An astounding novel of J.R.R. Tolkien proportions”

— Steven Pressfield, Bestselling author of *Gates of Fire* and *The War of Art*



ABSOLUTE ADVENTURE

I needed to be around people, or so I told myself, and spent the day wandering downtown near the Riverside District, and Cliffport Estates, with only my backpack and \$31.49 in cash. The patrons of the bistros and cafés kept me company, creating an illusion of normalcy to distract me from the calamity that had become my life. Now, I find myself at Tyler’s doorstep.

Without thinking, I glance at the second-floor balcony of the unit I know he shares with Steven. Someone stands on the balcony, a face illuminated in the glow of a cell phone. Tyler? A flash of panic flows through me. I can’t let him see me in this state, grieving and chasing ghosts.

My heart leaps as I turn to go and glance across the street. A man like the one I was following stands under a street lamp on the sidewalk along the river bank. But this man’s sweater really is gray and white in the familiar pattern I know so well. As he looks at me, he lifts his face mask to sip from a coffee container, allowing me a brief glimpse of his lower face before lowering the mask back down.

“Pete.” The name croaks out of my throat, frozen from the cold and damp. Mist shrouds him as he lifts his hand with the coffee cup, as if to send me cheers. Or farewell. An icy chill shivers down my spine, weakening my legs. Fearing I’ll lose him in the fog, I step into the street to cross over.

Light blinds me. The screaming bellow of a horn blasts and tires screech as a truck barrels from the mist straight at me.

Pain crushes through my shoulders as something pulls me backward from my backpack’s straps. The truck rattles past, the horn still blaring as it fades into the fog. I fall backward into cold, muddy water, the



backpack cushioning my impact on the flooded lawn of Cliffport Estates. I spit out the taste of dirt and grass.

Someone in a red shirt lies next to me in the mud. He sits up and kneels at my side. I try to sit up, but I am stuck on my back from the weight of the pack, squirming like a bug on a pin.

Then, a familiar voice emerges from a shadowed face framed with damp, blond hair. “Kurt?”

He reaches a hand down to me, and I grasp it. The streetlight catches his face, and I can see clearly it is



Tyler. In my stupor of shock over the near collision, I don't feel any actual surprise.

"Kurt," he says, taking my pack and looking me over with a smile. "I *thought* it was you coming up the street, but I couldn't believe it! I came down to see just as you... Well, thank God I was here."

A pain radiates from my hip down my right leg as I stumble forward. Tyler places a hand on my shoulder. "Are you okay?"

I start to shake my head, but the pain dissipates as I take a step. "Yes, just a cramp, but I'm fine."

He takes his hand off my shoulder and motions with his head. "Follow me."

He keeps my pack as I follow him inside to the second floor. We enter his unit through a door across from the elevator, stepping into a white marbled foyer next to a kitchen.

"Well, this is ruined," Tyler says, picking at his shirt, which is probably silk. He has come a long way since our days of thrift store wardrobes. He strips it off and throws it into the kitchen sink. "What the hell were you doing out there?"

I stare at him, unable to formulate an answer that would make sense.

"Oh, forget it," he says, waving his hand as he places my backpack near on the tile. "We can talk later. Right now, we need to clean up." He strips off his jeans and drops them to the tile floor before walking naked to a bathroom on the right. His body hasn't changed in the years since I last saw him, still trim and muscular. I involuntarily suck in my gut. He comes back wearing a white bathrobe and holding another in his hand. "I can't give this to you covered in all that mud. Take off your clothes."

I remove my jacket and shirt, dropping each to the tile, and then slide off my shoes and soaked socks. My hands hesitate as I unbuckle my belt. I look up at Tyler. "Some privacy, please?"

"Oh, for chrissake," Tyler says. "It isn't like you can show me anything I haven't seen before." He lets out an exaggerated sigh of exasperation. "Oh, alright, I'll avert my gaze."

He turns around and I remove my jeans and underwear before stepping behind him and into the bathroom. He hands me the white bathrobe with one hand, the other covering his eyes.

“Use the shower,” he says. Slightly parting his fingers, he adds with a sly smile, “You filthy thing.”

Tyler has a tendency to “queen-it-up” (his term) when he is nervous, an exaggerated femininity of gesture and voice. It helps me feel better. He’s as baffled as I am by our sudden circumstances.

I shut the door, twist the lock, and then hang the bathrobe from a hook.

The shower feels glorious. I let the warm water flow over me, lathering up a body gel from a dispenser built into the shower wall. I haven’t showered since Pete went into the hospital, and days’ worth of dirt flow off me as the warm water eases the aches in my muscles. The doctors intubated Pete at the hospital three days ago so he could breathe past the fluid in his lungs. Fluid, meaning blood from a leaking heart valve. Then, sixteen hours ago, his organs began shutting down.

I press another button on the shower wall to dispense shampoo and rub it through my gritty hair. As I rinse in the warmth, I feel the gold chain around my neck. My fingers play along the jagged edge of the pendant, a gift from Pete that I haven’t taken off since he gave it to me. I lean my head against the shower tile and let the warm water run down my face. I wasn’t even with him when it mattered most, holding his hand as he drew his last breath. And what would he think of me showering at Tyler’s home just hours later?

I twist the lever to stop the water and towel off, steam swirling in tendrils through the bathroom air as I step onto a fluffy white bathmat. I put on the bathrobe

and swipe the mirror with its puffy sleeve. My face is drawn and pale with dark lines under my eyes from lack of sleep. No wonder I was stalking strangers and hallucinating a phantom Pete.

I hear a trickling sound behind me, and a shadow moves behind the misted glass door of the shower. I wrap the robe tighter as a chill breeze brushes past me. *Someone is in the shower.* Had Tyler come in while I was distracted by my reflection in the mirror? I think of the man I saw across the road and shiver.

I jolt when I hear a banging at the door. “You still alive in there?” Tyler.

“I’m done,” I say. The shadow is gone, and the room returns to its humid warmth. I look back at myself in the mirror, noticing for the first time the robe has red scripted letters on the right breast spelling *Tyler*.

Tyler opens the bathroom door and steps in. He looks at me and frowns. “You still look like hell.”

“Thanks,” I say, glancing at the shower for evidence of the shadow. All I see is the fogged glass and movement of dissipating steam.

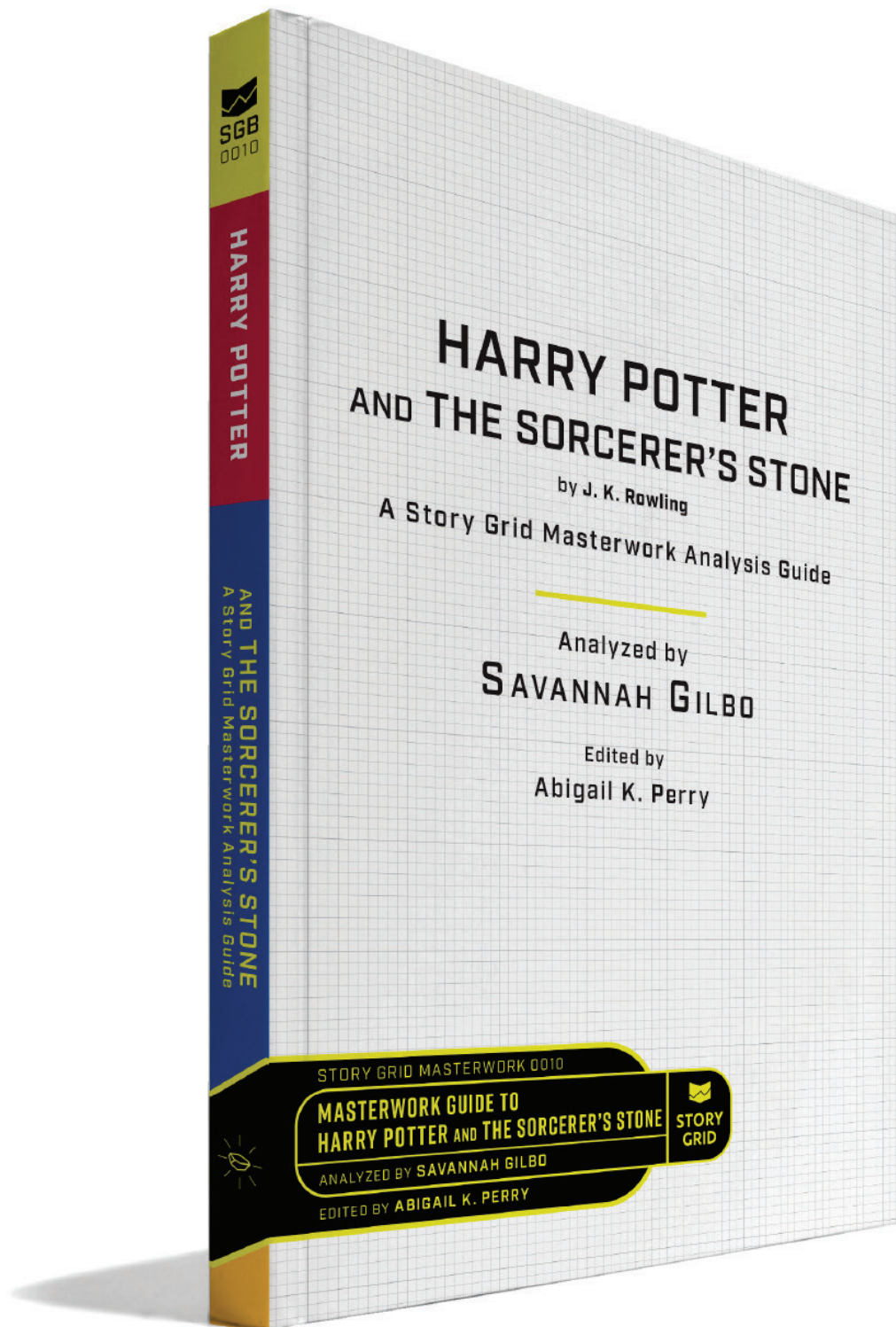
Tyler reaches down and fingers the pendant around my neck. I flinch as he squints his eyes, looking at the inscription.

“What’s this say... ‘*Watch me and thee we are absent another.*’ What does that mean?”

“It’s part of a Bible quote.” I can’t bring myself to mention Pete has the other half. Or had. It vanished amid the chaos of doctors and nurses rushing him from the ER to intensive care.

Tyler cringes and releases the pendant before flicking off the bathroom light. He walks over to another door and swings it open. “You can sleep in here tonight.”

MAGIC, METHODICALLY



DISCOVER THE CRAFT THAT CASTS THE SPELL.

A shaft of light spills into the darkness. Paintings line the walls, and two canvases on separate easels sit in the middle of the floor, each with subjects I can't make out in the dark. The paint smells faint, like it dried long ago. At the far end of the room is a metal-framed day bed.

"Your studio?" I step inside, but Tyler yanks me back by the shoulder and slams the door shut. I glare at him, but he turns toward the living room.

"I made you something to eat." His eyes glint as he motions toward a glass coffee table with two filled wineglasses and a plate with a sandwich.

I follow him to the table where the wine glistens dark red in the flickering glow of a gas fireplace. A white wall clock with chrome Roman numerals reads nine thirty-one. The air feels still, not warm and not cool, and translucent white curtains filter the city lights coming from the bay windows facing the river. I peek out and see only darkness, thick fog moving past in deep gray tendrils.

Tyler sits down on the sofa. "Sit," he says, motioning to a matching chair across from him. He points toward the sandwich as I sit down, his piercing green eyes following me. "Your favorite, I recall. Tuna salad on rye."

I sit down and stare at the sandwich.

"Your clothes are in the washer," he says. "Eat."

He watches me until I pick up the sandwich. My mouth waters at the aroma, but I think of the twenty pounds I gained since I last saw Tyler, and again I'm comparing myself with his still-perfect physique. My stomach tightens with nausea, ashamed to be thinking like this under my circumstances.

I force a smile. "This looks great, but I'm not very hungry."

"Just take a bite," he says. "Then we can dish about what brings you to my decadent part of town."

I nibble at the corner of the sandwich. My stomach growls at the flavor, and the nausea gives way to a ravenous hunger. I finish the sandwich quickly, washing it down with the wine.

Tyler smirks. "Not hungry, huh?"

"Guess I was," I say and then point to the embroidered name "Steven" on his bathrobe. "So, is he around?" I consider how awkward it would be if Steven came in the front door to see the two of us in their robes drinking wine.

"He's not here." Tyler picks up the wine bottle and refills my glass. "How about you? What brings you here on this ghastly night? Trouble in paradise?"

He met Pete once, just after we moved in together, when he and Steven ran into us at a gallery exhibit a few years back. Tyler referred to us as Batman and Robin because we wore face masks months after the pandemic mandates had expired. Pete laughed politely at that, but on the bus ride home wondered aloud what a classy (and hot, he observed, for a man pushing forty) man like Steven Belmonte saw in that "bitch diva" Tyler.

"It's a long story." My fingers twitch as I drink more wine. "You sell any of your work?"

Tyler's shoulders stiffen at the question. "I'm mostly just keeping in practice, trying to hone my skills. You?"

"I haven't had anything worth selling yet either, but I keep up the practice." My voice drops off, my

mind shifting to the sketches I made of Pete intubated in the hospital.

Tyler leans forward. “Hey, why don’t you sketch me? Let me see how you’ve improved.”

I fidget my bare feet against the soft rug. “Let me see some of your recent work first.”

A thin smile forms on Tyler’s face. “There will be time for that later.”

He stands up and opens a cabinet by the fireplace. He pulls out a new sketching pad and container with pencils, placing them in my lap. Panic rises in my chest. What if he wants me to do a nude, like the first time we...

“More wine, please,” I say.

Tyler sighs and hands me the bottle. I pour what is left of it, hoping in the delay he will forget his request. I sip while Tyler stands up and walks across the room. My eyes follow him as he opens the door to his studio and steps inside. I feel myself relax. My head swims gently as wine flows down my throat. The day’s events begin to feel distant, almost like a dream.

Tyler emerges from the studio, closing the door with a sharp click. “Okay,” he says, “you’ve had more wine. Now, earn your room and board and sketch me.” He stands before me and pulls off his bathrobe before reclining on the sofa. “Just like when we took Art 101—The Human Nude.”

There is no avoiding it. As when I saw him strip earlier, I’m struck by how beautiful he still looks, his body a golden tan and perfectly sculpted. My face grows warm as I fumble with the pencils on the coffee table.

“That was at least Art 201,” I say and almost add, *And our model wasn’t even half as easy on the eyes*, but

refrain. I pick a pencil that looks best for the job and then flip open a blank page.

I feel my shoulders relax at the familiarity of holding a pencil. My head swims a bit from the wine as I swipe the pencil tip on the paper. Tyler holds his pose, his eyes intent upon me. I sketch in silence, the lines and shadows forming on the page bringing me a gentle peace over the agonies of the past few days. I feel I have a purpose again.

Tyler starts humming. I ignore it at first and then realize he is humming “My Heart Will Go On.” I start to laugh but then stop sketching and glare at him. “Oh, you *stop* that!” I say it with a lighthearted flourish, the word “stop” coming out as “*st-hop*.”

Then he shouts, “Rose! *Jack!* Rose! *Jack!*” in alternating baritone and falsetto.

I crumple the napkin my sandwich had been on and throw it at him.

“Now, *there’s* my little Kurt!” Tyler’s face beams.

I wave him off, examining my almost finished sketch and note that Tyler’s serious expression looks pretentious. I consider altering it, maybe giving him a bit of a Mona Lisa smirk, but decide against it. I sign and date the drawing. “Here.” I hold out the sketching pad to him.

Tyler stretches out his arm and takes it. He looks at the sketch, his eyes narrowing as he nods. “This is good. It really captures my attributes.”

I wonder if he’s being sarcastic. “Thanks, but it isn’t as good as I can do.”

Tyler shrugs and sets the pad down on the coffee table open to the sketch. “I’ll go check on your clothes.” He shimmies his shoulders as he puts the robe back

over them. As he tightens the cloth belt, I notice that the embroidered name on the chest isn't "Steven," but "*Steven's.*"

I look at the red embroidery on the robe I am wearing. Sure enough, "*Tyler's.*" They wear each other's name. I chuckle at its possessiveness. I'm sure it was Tyler's idea.

As Tyler disappears into a small hallway, I stand up, my head swimming from the wine. I feel the weight of the pendant against my chest, and an image of Pete at the hospital flickers in my mind, the nurses unhooking his still form from the machines that had failed to keep him alive.

What am I doing here? Guilt weighs on my shoulders as I realize Tyler is the first person I have sketched since Pete at the hospital. An overwhelming need to see those last sketches flows through me, and I look toward the kitchen for my backpack. It leans against a metal garbage can on the tile, a pool of water underneath.

I gasp, stumbling over to it and grabbing the top handle. Horror sparks through me as I hear a thick sloshing. I unzip the main compartment. The sketch pad is soaked in muddied water, my set of pencils soiled in the muck. I pull out the pad, trying to open the pages, but they are stuck together and start falling apart. Water flows from the paper, staining my hands with gray rivulets of bleeding graphite. I groan, the pad sloshing as I drop it back into the pack. A reflective smiley face Pete had sewn onto the blue fabric gleams in the light, mocking my discovery.

I struggle to breathe. All of Pete's last hours, lost. My head throbs as I struggle to keep my composure. I'm not ready to talk to Tyler about this. I

can't bear his sympathies over my catastrophic life next to his flight in the high life.

My hands shake, and tears blur my vision when a sound in the kitchen kills the escaping grief. I look up, but it isn't Tyler in the kitchen. A shadow, like the one in the bathroom, stands near the dark kitchen over a small bar. I hear glass clinking with ice and the slosh of liquid pouring. The figure is featureless and dark, a three-dimensional shadow with movements from its arms like they are shaking or stirring something. Just like Pete would, while mixing us Friday night martinis.

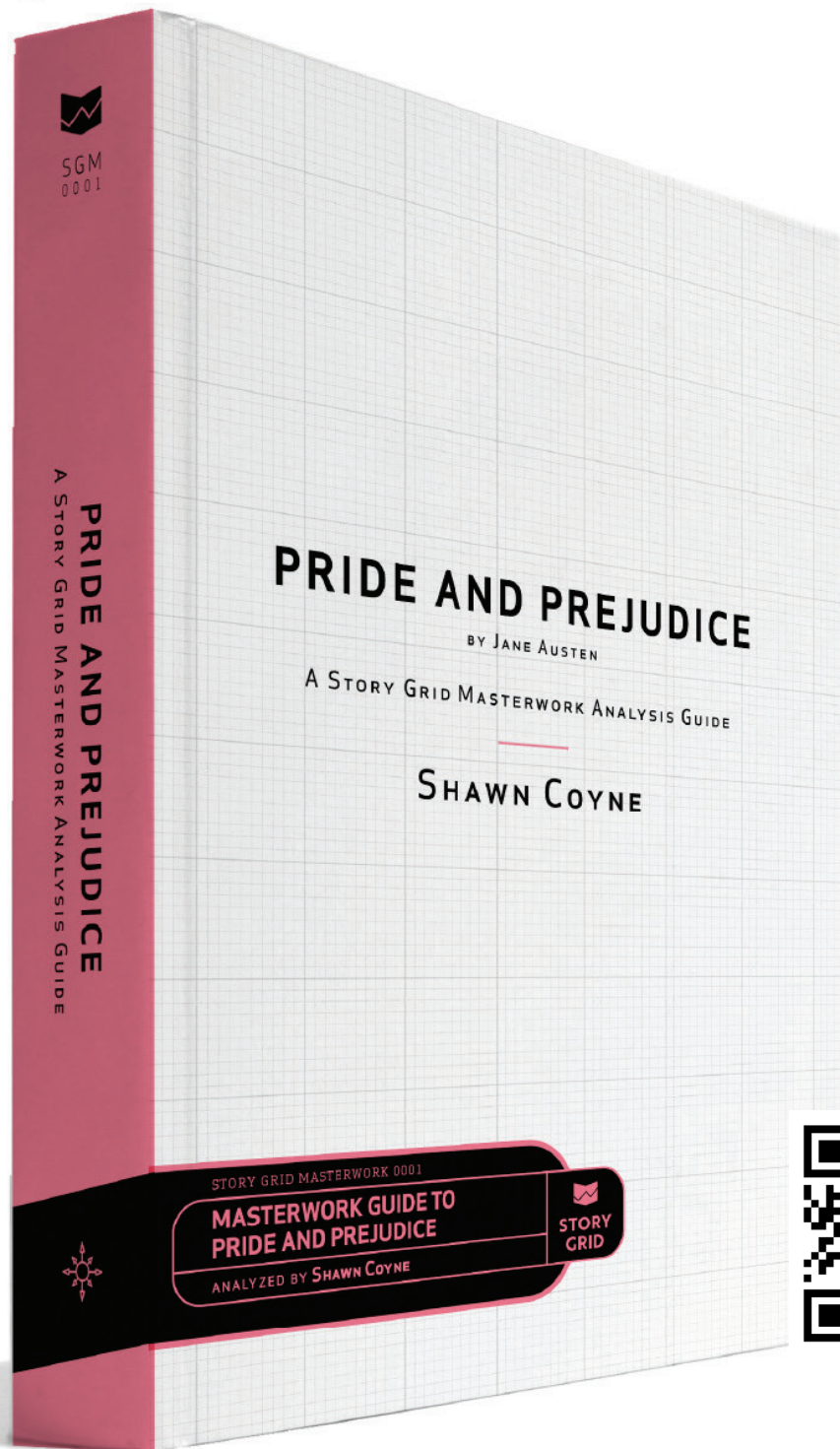
I try to stand up, crying out as a sharp pain cascades up my right leg to my hip. I sit back down, the pain abating, but the muscles in my chest and arms begin twitching, a sensation like hands grabbing my body and pushing me down to the floor. I try rolling over, my thrashing arms meeting nothing but air.

Then it is gone. I sit up, glancing through the kitchen. The space in front of the small bar is empty, a single bulb flickering above it. I tighten the robe around my body, shaking my head to clear my thoughts as my head swims. The wine on a near-empty stomach is affecting me. The shadow, the touches, just illusions from a mind drowning in grief, the pain in my leg, a muscle cramp from the hard landing outside when I almost got hit by a truck.

I decide it's time to leave. I head into the small hallway to find Tyler. It is dark and I can't find a switch for light. The wall curves to the right, so I turn in that direction.

The smells hit me first. Cigarette smoke, sweat, and alcohol. My head swims as a vibration buzzes the air, a throbbing that shakes the floor at my feet and the bones in my chest. Shadows move around me, I

LOVE, ANALYTICALLY



DISCOVER THE ARCHITECTURE OF COMMITMENT THAT LASTS.

dark against dark. But instead of panic, I feel relaxed, a familiarity of the scene calming me. It is like a night at the clubs, Tyler and me dancing together and with strangers under the deafening, throbbing beats of music.

The cool metal of the pendant weighs against my chest, and I reach for it, holding it in my hand and tracing the smooth zigzag of the dividing edge against my thumb. A flush of shame falls upon me, like I'm cheating on Pete.

A flash of light bursts around me and the sensations stop. I stand near a washer and dryer that softly hums as clothes tumble inside. A painting of shirtless dancing men hangs on the wall. I recognize it as The Crush Tavern, where Tyler and I spent countless nights.

"Hey."

I jump and turn around. Tyler stands with his hand on the light switch, leaning against the doorjamb. In the other hand, he holds a fresh glass of dark wine.

I can still smell it on me. The smoke. The sweat. Confused by a mingling desire and repulsion, I turn to the dryer, looking for the switch to shut it off. "I want my clothes."

Tyler sets his glass down on a small table and pulls me back.

My head aches as I try to keep tears from bubbling up. I can't bring myself to tell him what just happened. "I want to go home."

"Don't leave."

"What about Steven? He might not appreciate the two of us together in nothing but your monogrammed bathrobes."

"Kurt, listen to me." Tyler's eyes narrow. "Steven is...gone. Like, forever."

My mouth drops open, but I can't find any words to say.

"About a year ago," Tyler says, toying with the tie on his robe. "He...well, it was quick and unexpected, an accident..." Then he takes in a deep breath as tears glint in his eyes. "But he's still around, you know. Like he's stuck here." He picks up his wineglass and drinks half the contents.

"You're saying he's a *ghost*?" A shiver runs through me. *That shadow.*

He looks up for a moment, his eyes on the painting. Then he looks me in the eye and nods. "My very own resident ghost. I've read that love ending in such tragedy can do that. A spirit bound to a living beloved."

The image of Pete an hour ago flashes in my mind, standing on the other side of the road, embraced by mist.

A wave of shame and grief rolls through me. What am I doing here? What am I thinking? I rip open the dryer door, the clothes spilling out. I grab my jeans and shirt and pull off the robe.

Tyler pulls at the clothes. "Hey, Kurt, stop."

I yank myself backward, holding the wet clothes close to me. "I shouldn't be here," I say, walking down the hall. I turn a corner and then another. I expect to enter the main living area, but the hall continues on past two more corners. Confused, I stop and shake my head. I turn to go back the way I came and go around the corner, only to find myself facing a white wall, my previous path gone.

“Tyler!” My voice echoes, the light flickering.

“What the fuck? Tyler!”

The hall grows dark, and I push my back against the wall, grasping the damp bundle of clothes to my shivering body. A dim, bluish light pulses at the other end, around the corner I had just come. I edge along the wall, heading toward the light and calling Tyler’s name.

As I turn the corner, a vibration again pulses through the walls, pounding through my chest. A paneled white door opens slightly ahead of me, the light and bass synth beat radiating from the other side. The door swings open as I approach.

I find myself at the threshold of Tyler’s studio. I step inside, engulfed with the skunky sweet odor of reefer and cigarette smoke, sweat and alcohol, and the pinching, acrid odor of poppers. A half dozen easels stand in the room, figures on each canvas swaying and writhing to the beat.

A glow like red embers blazes around me and the room grows warm.

Behind me, Tyler’s voice whispers like black velvet, “Stay.”

I turn. He stands naked, a golden statue of chiseled flesh. Tyler gently tugs at my bundled clothes, and I let them go. He tosses them aside, and they vanish into the shadows. He takes my hands and pulls me toward him.

“It will be like it was,” he whispers.

My body has changed, once again lean with the muscular chest and defined abs from years ago. I feel light and giddy as around me the paintings glow, displaying images from our days together as starving

artists, our cement block studio with a large metal door that opens to the lower downtown streets.

I am back there, those streets of grease and broken glass, the acrid stench of overflowing garbage cans and skeletal remains of cars on streets that become seasonally dotted with the bursting colors of tents for the homeless, like forgotten flowers growing in the cracks of an alley. Images of ourselves nude and asleep on a bare mattress on a stained concrete floor, amid the aromas of paint, oils, acrylic, paper and glue, our canvases, bursting with colors, lining the walls with sensual landscapes. Our future together still lay ahead. We are going to make it. We are going to *be something*. I realize then I am smiling at the memory, smiling for the first time since Pete went under intubation three days ago.

A hand reaches from a canvas, dripping with oil and acrylic, and grasps my arm. A young man emerges, his naked muscles glistening with sweat and his eyes flashing in the ruby light. More figures emerge from the paintings, the room coming alive with blaring with music and glimmering lights, eager bodies coaxing me to dance.

“It can be like this forever,” Tyler says, his fingers running down my neck to pull at the chain of my necklace.

The pendant dances against my chest, bringing a familiar aroma of coffee and chocolate. A soft hug and warm eyes. *Pete*.

Images flood my mind. *Pete yawning with a smile next to me. Pete making us dinner. Pete watching me paint. Pete holding my hand in a dark movie theater. His gentle kiss on my neck. His hand caressing my cheek.* Images of cozy domesticity, of trust and comfort. Of home. A fresh wave of yearning overwhelms me.

I pull back and shake my head. “No, Tyler.”

Hands from the men around us run down my back and chest, fingers reaching for my chain. Tyler steps forward, his hand on my chin, lifting my head to look into the luster of his green eyes. “But it was the best times of our lives, little Kurt. We should never have given it up, and now we’re both grieving in widowhood. Why not let all that go and let it be like before?”

I pull my arms away, shaking my head. “Wait... What?” I never told him about Pete.

Tyler straightens his posture and looks down at me. “Hell, Kurt, you reek of the grief. I smelled it a mile away.” His voice softens as his lips part, ready to kiss me. The figures dancing around us gather closer, pushing him toward me. “It opened doors and brought you back to me,” he whispers, his fingers caressing my pendant. “Just let go and it will be like it was.”

I clasp my hand around the pendant, its metal warm against my palm. “Get away!” I jerk my body around, twisting out of the groping hands and away from Tyler.

The room crackles and brightens, falling to silence. I stand alone with Tyler, the walls and easels with paintings of silent oil and acrylic, depicting the dancing men and scenes that a moment ago immersed us. Lights flicker red and blue from the windows facing the river. The air cools and flows into gentle motion.

Tyler grabs my wrist, his face red with anger. “Look what you did! It was almost done!”

I pull away and turn, but Tyler grabs me by the shoulders and steers me back to him. Except Tyler isn’t there any longer. Pete stands in his place, reaching his arms to embrace me.

“I can be him if you want,” he says, but the voice is still Tyler’s. “Or anyone you want. Just stay.”

I shut my eyes, unable to look at Pete with that voice, when a realization hits me like a brick. “You... you were who I saw across the street?”

When I open my eyes, Tyler has returned to his own form. “Kurt, I know you always loved me more than him. Why else come to me on the night he died?”

I push away from him with a grunt and leave the studio, heading toward the sound of the clock ticking in the living room. The clock reads nine forty-nine, barely twenty minutes from when I arrived, yet I had to have been here for over an hour.

I turn to the foyer, but Tyler steps in front of me, his voice bellowing, “You can’t leave, Kurt. It’s too late!”

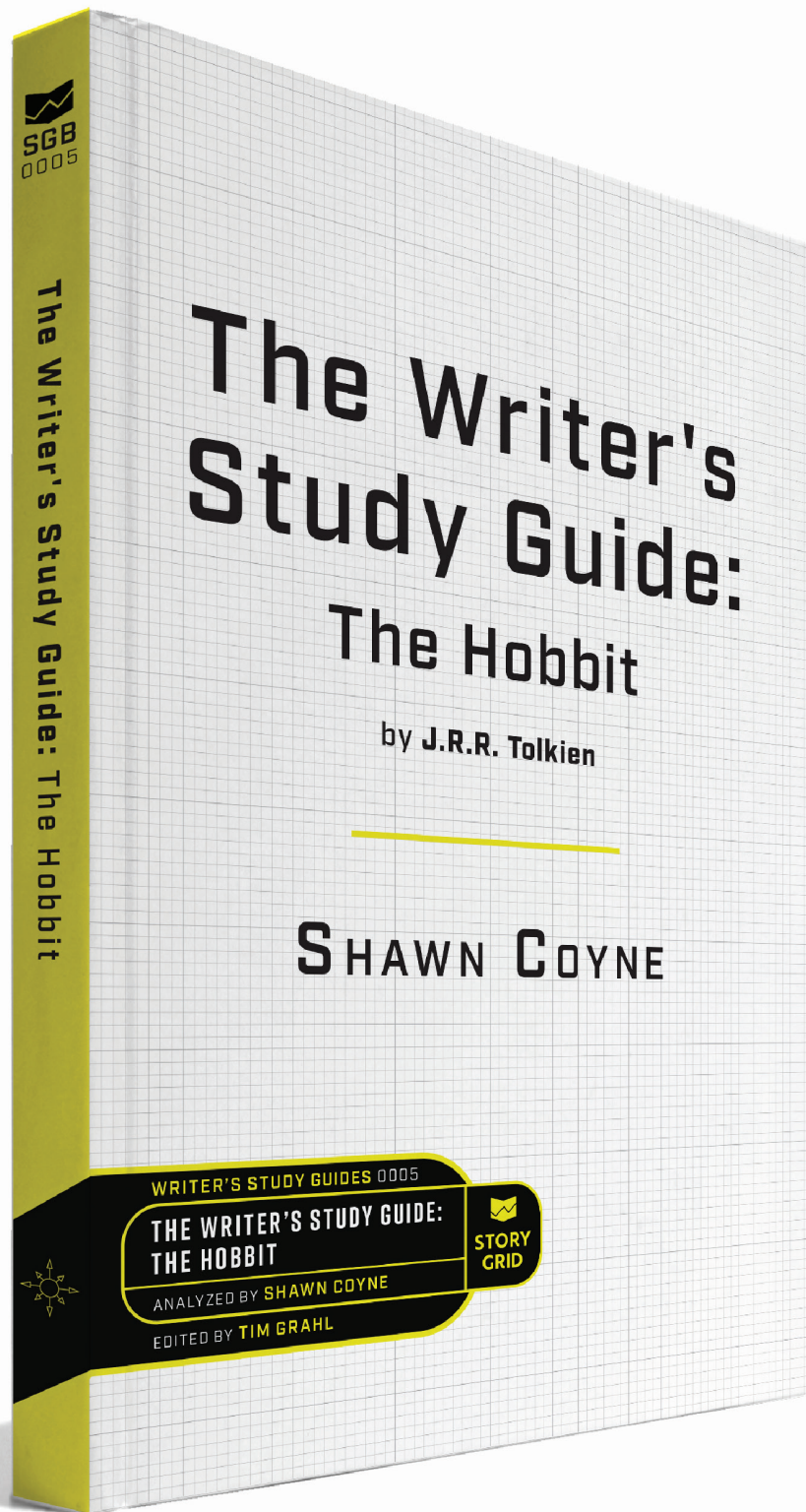
Something in the living room flashes by me. The shadow. It moves toward the bay windows and glass door to the balcony. Blue and red lights flash against the white translucent curtains, punctuated by the brief whoop of a siren. The shadow passes through to the outside.

Tyler laughs, a choked, guttural sound. “Go ahead. Follow it. See for yourself. You can’t go back.”

I open the sliding door and step out onto the balcony. The fog has lifted. Below on the street, two yellow paramedic trucks sit at an angle on Riverview Drive along with half a dozen police cruisers. A large four-by-four truck has skidded into the lawn in front of the building, and the driver is standing on the lawn surrounded by several officers. Crowds gather along the sidewalk. Several road flares flicker bright and red, spilling white ash onto the asphalt around the scene.

Papers ruffle on the street, stuck in the damp ground with edges fluttering in a cold breeze that

COURAGE, PRECISELY



DISCOVER THE CRUCIBLE THAT TRANSFORMS THE TIMID.

vaults up from the swollen river. A blue backpack lies in the road, one with a yellow smiley face that faces me, glowing from the surrounding vehicles' lights. I suck in a lungful of cold, wet air. *My backpack.*

A group of paramedics surround a man crumpled on the street below. A sharp pain shoots up from my leg, coursing through my pelvis and up to my chest.

"You see, Kurt. It's over." Tyler stands in the open doorway. "Come back inside with me."

I lean against the balcony rail, nausea building in my stomach as my leg shakes with pain. "What is going on?"

Tyler leans over me and touches my chin, lifting my head to look at him. "I can take it all away."

The pain and nausea vanish. The chill breeze halts as the lights below stop their flicker, frozen at a burst of red while the noise silences.

The shadow figure is standing next to me at the rail. But it isn't a shadow any longer. I can see features emerge of a head with dark hair, an arm holding a whiskey glass, and a white robe. Steven Belmonte. He is still as a statue, looking down at the scene below.

I follow his gaze. Everything has stopped moving, frozen like an image on a canvas. But I know who the man on the street is. I turn to Tyler. "*You* led me into traffic! So *that* would happen?"

Tyler's smile is sharp. "So we could be together again, like you wanted." Tyler grabs my hand. "Just stay here a few more moments, and the pain will never

come back. It will be just you and me, the way it always should have been."

I glance at Steven Belmonte, who wears a robe just like I had earlier. A robe inscribed over the heart with scripted red letters. *Tyler's*. The cool weight of the pendant flutters against my chest.

I pull my hand away from Tyler. "No."

The air around us comes alive with voices from below. The red and blue lights flicker from the emergency vehicles, the sound of chatter over radios and urgent cries from the paramedics. "Losing him," a deep female voice shouts.

**“THINGS ARE NOT
AS COMPREHENSIBLE AND
EXPRESSIBLE AS PEOPLE
USUALLY BELIEVE;
WORKS OF ART ESPECIALLY
LIVE IN A REALM BEYOND OUR
CONFIDENT WORDS.”**

— **RAINER MARIA RILKE**

"Don't do this to me, Kurt!" Tyler cries. His fingers grasp for the chain around my neck.

I can't get around him. I hop onto the balcony rail, my feet slipping on the cold steel. Tyler grabs my arm, and I pull away fast, losing my balance before I fall backward.

My last sight of the balcony is of Steven Belmonte looking at me and Tyler, his face pale and mouth agape, punctuated by a sharp shattering trill as he drops his glass.

I fall, expecting a hard crack as my body meets the ground below. But that doesn't happen. Instead, I fall gently onto the grass, as if I was a weightless feather. I stand up and try to ignore the wails of Tyler above, begging my return.

I walk to the scene in the street. No one notices me as I walk, naked, past the observing crowds and

into the thick of emergency personnel. A group of men and women surround my body. My cut-off clothes lie in a mangled pile where they had thrown them, and my body lies naked and bloodied on the road. My right leg is twisted, like a fleshy swizzle stick, and my pelvis is angled unnaturally to the left from my upper torso. My form on the road still wears my half of the Mizpah pendant Pete gave me, its gold shimmering against the harsh white lights placed around the scene. *Watch me and thee, we are absent another.* I kneel beside my body and take my own hand.

“He’s in fib! AED, stat,” someone shouts. A medic reaches to my body’s pendant and tears it away. A medic places pads from a red and white case on my chest, shouts for everyone to back off and yells, “Clear!”

My body’s chest rises and falls, my entire form shivering from the electric current. I feel it run up my arm and through me as my vision fades. Above, I can still hear Tyler wailing for me, his voice melding with my own as I lie on the asphalt, my world a cacophony of pain and screaming.

“He’s awake!” someone cries out. I feel a prick in my arm and fall into darkness.

I don’t know how many days I fade in and out at the hospital. Waking involves rhythms of pain assaulting my right side, from my toes up to my chest. If I say anything intelligible, I don’t recall it. Just a lot of groaning and crying. At one point a doctor, a man with thinning gray hair and black-rimmed glasses tells me that landing on my stuffed backpack was all that saved my head from cracking against the asphalt like an egg and spilling my brains, not to mention sparing my spine. I have a cracked pelvis and badly damaged right

leg, its shattered bone hooked back together with pins and wires, suspended above the bed for traction with metal rods inserted through the bones around my knee.

Lisa came by while I was sleeping. She found Pete’s half of the Mizpah coin and left it for me. When I see it, I have the nurse hang it from the sling around my leg. Both our halves are together again.

Steven Belmonte visits me after my third week. He holds a drawing pad open to a sketch of Tyler. The very sketch I had drawn, signed and dated on the night I ended up in the hospital.

“I don’t know how this is possible,” he says, “but I found this on the coffee table after...” He pauses, his eyes roving over my suspended leg. “After I saw you that night on the balcony. With him.”

“Yeah, I don’t understand it, either.” I look him in the eye, making an effort not to look at the sketch.

“When I saw the accident below, I thought of him. I thought that was why I saw him that night.” He looks at the sketching pad. “But this I couldn’t figure out.”

I ask him to sit on the chair next to my bed and then ponder if I want to know the answer to a question that has been on my mind since that night. The words spill out before I can stop them. “Tell me what happened to him.”

“I asked him to leave,” he says, looking at the floor. “A year ago. Not to get into the details, but he was hooking up with guys behind my back.”

I nod. “He used to tell me, ‘Variety is the spice of life.’”

Steven scoffs. “Yeah, I heard that at least once. I told him his looks wouldn’t serve him forever, and he had a nasty attitude after that. Pretty much just

leeching off me while painting idealized versions of his past. He didn't even try to sell anything after a few prospects I set up turned him down. I wanted him gone." He flinches. "But not like this."

He pauses, looks at the sketch again, and then turns it face-down in his lap. "I had the locks changed when he was away, probably out hooking up again. He screamed at me from the lawn and, as I was watching him from the balcony, got this weird smile and walked into traffic. Gone instantly."

"Shit." That was dramatic even for Tyler, and I wonder if I ever really knew him. I look into Steven's pained face. "You didn't deserve that."

He looks at the floor. "Yeah, well..." His voice drifts off.

"Let me tell you about the night I made that sketch." He looks at me and, after a brief pause, nods. I tell him my story of that night at the condo, every detail I can remember.

When I finish, he leans back in the chair. "I sometimes see him standing in the shadows, just for a moment, feeling his anger and bitterness, and I get this onslaught of *guilt*. I dismissed it as my grief acting up, but it's so vivid. Feeling responsible for him, more than once I considered ending things for myself."

"Yeah," I say. "He has that way about him. *Had*, I mean."

"No, *has* is right." He holds up the sketch I made

of Tyler. This time, I don't look away. The drawing's face has changed, holding a smirk, a mischievous sneer, just a hair more sinister than the Mona Lisa smile I considered drawing on him that night. "It changes, sometimes," Steven says. "Today, the smile is just like the one he had when he walked in front of that bus."

"Burn it." A razor of animosity cuts through my voice, and it feels good. "Then burn all his paintings, everything. No good can come from them."

Steven closes the sketch pad and, after wishing me well, leaves with it. I hope he listens to me

and does what I asked.

Part of me feels badly for Tyler, but I push it away. My leg is in painful pieces because of him, my body altered forever. It will be months of rehabilitation before I'll be able to walk again, and even then, I will probably have a permanent limp. Beyond the physical hardship, I have no insurance and will be paying for my recovery all my life. I begin to cry, which hurts because it shakes my suspended leg.

But at least you have a life. I imagine Pete's voice is saying it to me. The gold Mizpah coin shimmers as the halves jingle from where they hang. *May the Lord watch between me and thee while we are absent one from the other.* I'm not a religious person, but I appreciate the sentiment. I memorized the entire phrase ages ago, and in my mind, I often hear it whispered to me in Pete's voice. He was with me that night. I choose to believe he still is.

**"NOTHING IN THIS WORLD
IS HARDER THAN
TELLING THE TRUTH,
AND NOTHING EASIER THAN
FLATTERY; YET ONLY TRUTH
LETS A HUMAN BEING
STAND UPRIGHT IN REALITY."**

— FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY
