

THE CRYSTAL SKULL: *DESTINY'S COURIER*

BY

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I reach to hold you
In a half way sleep
Embracing fears stars shed
Replete
A blended seam
Of parts once lost
A stream of charts
Forms dreamed so deep

I know your pain because I
Bleed your grief
From years alone
Enforced deceit
Form what you are
Not what you've been
Together meld
Break chains
Begin

All I've wanted
Is a custom love
The kind that fits me
Like a tender
Glove
Without defenses
Or a will to bend
Without betrayal
As the focused
End

To reach together
And become it all
Entwined inside
Just like
Before the fall

I.W. Riney

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EDDIE'S PROLOGUE

If I had never met Cash Wilson, I would still be living in a five bedroom split level on two acres by a lake north of Dallas. If not for Cash Wilson, I'd be driving my Mercedes and sailing around the Virgin Islands for my customary two weeks every year. If it hadn't been for Cash Wilson, I would still have a loving wife and my own nationally televised show.

As it is, I'm presently in the middle of a South American jungle with canvas for a roof, a trench for a lavatory, a twenty year old army Jeep and two changes of clothing. My only companions, other than a sixteen year old boy, consist of several semi-literate natives who come down the mountain and out of the jungle village five days a week to hear me talk.

I hadn't even known that Cash had a pencil. But then, as I read his notes, I discovered that there was a lot I hadn't known about Cash Wilson.

CASH WILSON'S OBSERVATIONS

I want to say all of this up front, right now at the beginning, so you don't get the idea that I'm some sort of religious freak who believes that a vindictive God crouches out there waiting for me to make a mistake so he can pounce and damn me to an eternal hell full of mind monsters and sulfurous vapors. Most of the people around here will tell you that I'm amoral, savage and totally without values or morals. I think that I met God once, fifteen years ago, halfway around the world, in a place that resembled the hell described by the Biblical prophets. He stretched out beside me, stomach down, on damp, decaying vegetation and watched the straw village burn. In slow motion, He looked through my stinging eyes and identified the headless, shell-bruised body on my left as my brother, Chet. With me, He heard the anguished cries and bubbly death gasps from the settlement. Through my nose, He sniffed the combined odors of burning grain and searing flesh. He shook His head in disbelief and turned to me.

"This is worse than I had thought," He had toned. "How could you allow this to happen?"

I had stutteringly denied my part in it all, trying to explain about draft and containing communism.

"No," He had thundered. "Everyone is responsible. Now and always!"

The lady psychiatrist at the stateside Veteran's Hospital helped me to understand that my "hallucination" had been induced by the combined traumas of seeing Chet blown to pieces and being forced to destroy a village populated by women and children. She told me that my feelings of guilt and responsibility had led me to project that particular image. Most of me even believed her until a couple of weeks ago.

Two weeks ago, I met Edward. At that time, I heard about the crystal skull. That was when my life changed.

Edward Stevenson III is a third generation evangelist, born in an orange canvas circus tent and raised on a steady diet of *amens* and *praise the lords*. He cut his teeth on a brass offering plate and learned to walk by stumbling from one folding chair to the next.

Edward grew up on tales of the miracle that took place and changed his grandfather from a drunken wife- and child-abuser to one of God's chosen spokesmen. It seems that, one cold winter night, Old Ed the First stumbled into an icy Kansas pond and, on his third gulp for air, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, warned him of his wicked ways and extracted from Ed a promise to spread the good word. The combination of cold water coupled with his first sobriety in years compelled Edward Stevenson to change his life. The very next day, he began construction on God's Church of Kansas, a shed-like

structure with tree limbs, shrubs and vines for a roof. His son, Edward Stevenson Jr., changed the name to God's Church of America and, with his portable revival tent still smelling of cotton candy and popcorn, broadened the scope of the old man's message. In the three years since his graduation from college, Edward the Third has spread, through the media of television, the message of God's Church of the World to seventy-one countries other than the United States of America.

The present Edward, I'll call him Eddie for convenience, knows his God better than anyone with whom I've ever been acquainted. I suppose that's what makes it so difficult for him to understand the things that have happened in the last few weeks.

I understand. Regardless of what that fool lady shrink told me, I met God.

"I have come to help you prepare for the hereafter."

I felt a chuckle die in my stomach. Resembling a choirboy off a nineteenth century Christmas card, he drifted into my cell and I imagined the smell of cedar and cinnamon clinging to his fashionable clothing. Behind his thick-rimmed glasses, his serious young eyes held hope, optimism, compassion. Edward Stevenson III knew God and he was determined to give me a personal introduction.

Maybe he felt that I presented the ultimate in challenges. With the same intentness and concern that he conveyed to his followers every Sunday morning at half past ten, he set about leading me to Jesus Christ. What could show more proof of his life achievements than to clear the way for the worst of sinners to be born again?

"Do you know who I am?"

He raised his voice as if I might be hard of hearing. I had quit talking a couple of years ago, mainly for the purpose of avoiding people such as this, so I merely nodded my head. The guys here occasionally bring me a newspaper and, since Warden Hogan came here two years ago, every prisoner has had an opportunity to watch the religious shows on Sunday mornings. I pointed at the nine-inch black and white television above his head, in the corner of my cell, far out of my reach.

His smile, full of relief, warmed me. He might be nuts, he most probably was a zealot or a fanatic, but he was sincere. Curiosity incited me to motion for him to take a seat on the oak chair that the guard had brought in from outside. This man had some kind of influence or political pull. Otherwise, how could he have managed to get in here to teach me Sunday School lessons?

He had come to the right place, okay. Death Row. And he had chosen the worst kind of criminal. Me, Cash Wilson. A man kept eight years in solitary confinement because of administrative fear that one of his fellow prisoners might kill him. A murderer who had publicly proclaimed his lack of remorse for his heinous crimes.

For an hour, Eddie reiterated all of the miracles and tales of wonder I had heard during my childhood in Mississippi. Actually, Eddie and Brother Mason knew the same God. I found myself wondering if that little white frame church south of Jackson still existed and if Brother Mason still lived. He must have been in his seventies when I dropped out of my third year of college and, with my brother Chet, left for Vietnam.

"You need only to place your burden on Christ's shoulders and you will be free."

I had been counting pits in the concrete wall to the right of Eddie's head. Now my eyes slipped down past his neatly combed blonde hair to his round pink face. He truly believed what he was saying. I shook my head.

"Christ has suffered for your sins."

Again, I shook my head.

He cocked his own head a little to the right, squinted his blue eyes and stared at me thoughtfully.

"Which is it?" he questioned. "Christ didn't suffer? Or you have no sins?"

Up to this point, I had been sitting on my concrete bed, my folded arms resting on my upraised knees. Now, I merely turned over on my side, closed my eyes and left my back to him.

"Cash Wilson, are you ignoring me? Don't you want to know how much God loves you?"

I didn't move. After a few moments of silence, I opened my eyes and quietly turned my head. Kneeling by the chair, Edward Stevenson III prayed silently.

"Hey," I said. My rusty voice must have startled him. Guiltily, he jumped to his feet.

"They told me not to do that," he said. His voice held a pleading note. "Don't tell them that I turned my back on you. They won't let me come anymore. And I *have* to return. I'm not sure why, but I *have* to."

Since Vietnam, nothing's surprised me very much. I'll have to admit, however, that I was almost startled to look past the bars in my cell the next morning and see

Edward Stevenson III. I added persistence to the list of his attributes I had mentally compiled in my head.

He had traded his well-tailored three piece suit for a pair of navy slacks and baby blue polo shirt. The exotic scent of his aftershave disguised the stale smell of my cell. Yesterday, he had been armed with a tape recorder and King James Bible; today, he was empty-handed. He smiled at me sheepishly, winningly, as the guard opened my door and let him in to see me.

After a cursory glance, I returned my attention to the paperback bestseller I had been reading. Eddie dragged the oak chair behind him and placed it next to my bed.

"Who brings you the books?"

I pointed to the uniformed back in the hall.

"They let you read anything you want?"

I shrugged before I nodded.

"You can talk," he accused. "You said something to me yesterday."

I continued reading. Past experience told me that if I ignored him long enough, he would leave. The cover of the book clung to my sweaty hands. He didn't leave.

"Look, Cash," he began, after a while. "I prayed for you last night."

I snorted and pretended to read page thirty-five.

"I prayed for me, too."

It was becoming harder to ignore him. He reminded me of a pesky mosquito buzzing around my ear.

"You want to know why?"

I took a deep breath, closed my book, placed it on the floor and then turned over, leaving him again to talk to my back. I heard the oak chair creak when he sat on it. I waited for what seemed an infinite time, hoping to hear the creaking sound again as he left. Silence. As the minutes passed, I developed a resentment for this arrogant, pious young disciple of the Lord. What gave him the right to invade my privacy and squander my precious time? If he must redeem his soul, let him do it on his own time.

"I've read your history. I know everything about you. I know exactly how you must feel."

I don't know why, after two years of self-imposed silence, I let him get to me. Struggling with a vinegary taste in my mouth, I actually let him goad me to speech.

"How could you?" I grated, anger making my words coarse. My ears had forgotten the sound of my own voice. I sat up on the bed and glared at him. Twenty-four years old, at the most, innocence vibrating from his very core.

"Thank you, Cash," he said, gratitude in his voice. "God told me I would find a way to make you talk."

"Okay, Eddie..."

"My grandfather called me Eddie," he interrupted. "Nobody has called me Eddie since he died."

"I really don't give a damn, Eddie, what he called you. I don't want to hear anything else from you!"

"I know," he said, standing up in his eagerness. "*You* want to talk!"

How could anyone be so obtuse? So completely and exasperatingly single-minded?

“I don’t want to talk, Eddie. I don’t want to hear you talk. I want you to go away and leave me alone.”

“I know how you feel...”

“No, you don’t, Eddie. You may have read a couple of case histories and prayed a lot. But, until you’ve walked in my shoes, you don’t have any conception of my thoughts and my feelings.”

With every word, my voice had gained in intensity. Eddie had backed away from me and seemed less confident. He bumped against the oak chair and the sound of wood grating on concrete made goose pimples on the back of my neck.

“Go away, Eddie. Let me have my last few hours in peace.”

“That’s it, isn’t it? You have only eight days left. You’re looking at your own mortality and you’re scared.”

He waited for me to comment. When I said nothing, he took my silence as agreement and continued.

“That brings me to the reason why I’m here. God sent me to help you!”

“Look, kid,” I told him. “Do you realize that I can’t possibly be punished any more for still another murder? They’ve given me the maximum. If you don’t get off my back and get out of here, I promise you that I’m going to kill you.”

“You’re tired,” he said. “I’ll go.”

I didn’t want the time to think or to sleep. During my eight years on Death Row, I’d had more time than I needed for both. I had grown to cherish my aloneness; I

resented any kind of intrusion. And especially from a Goody-Two-Shoes who had the gall to insinuate that he understood me.

Not a day passed that I didn't travel back to that blood-splattered kitchen in south Texas. It is still a nightmare and the part I can remember never changes. It is always the same. I can never back up my dream enough to recall anything that happened before I fired the shot from the deer rifle that separated my youngest brother's chest and head from his legs. With a clarity greater than life, I watch his body, looking as if it had been folded in the middle, slam backward into the cupboard door, a lifeless arm trailing a bloody smear over the yellow wallpaper. His left leg twitches and the toe of his shoe nudges Emmy's severed hand. The smell of sulfur and blood lingers in my nostrils.

Later, they would ask me hundreds, even thousands of times, why I did it. Morbid curiosity would propel them to question why I chose to try and fit the mangled bodies back together like pieces of a surrealistic jigsaw puzzle before I called the police. Amid speculations that I had suffered a flashback due to stress in Vietnam, one prominent psychiatrist suggested that I had grotesquely dismembered my sister-in-law and two nieces because I was homosexual and the act of mutilation was a last ditch effort to deny my true sexual inclinations.

"Damn, man," my court appointed attorney told me over and over, banging his fist on the table that separated us. "I can get you off with an insanity plea. You're not only a decorated veteran, but you're black. It's 1975. We're in the United States of America. The average white jury feels guilt about their forefather's treatment of blacks. If you don't use that guilt, man, you're crazy!"

Crazy if you do, crazy if you don't. I wouldn't let him plead insanity for me. I refused to let him bring in a psychiatrist to testify as to my prior "Mental State" upon my return from Vietnam. And, then, he suggested that they bring Calvin to court. Calvin, my baby nephew. Calvin, whose life will be forever scarred because of my actions. Calvin, who will remember me when he paints with vermillion.

"He's a five year old baby," I protested. "He was in another room, asleep until I fired the gun. No way, man. I won't let you do it. I want him to forget me. I want him to forget what happened."

A year ago, one of the guards brought me a copy of a supermarket pulp scandal magazine. A recent issue, it still bore the tang of cheap ink. Underneath headlines revealing details of a Hollywood star's private life, a picture of a young black boy stared at me. Calvin Wilson, the blurb read, survivor of a Texas massacre. They found him at his Grandmother's home in Mississippi. When asked by the interviewer how he felt about his uncle's impending death, he said, "I suppose if he murdered my whole family that he deserves to die." The inquisitive reporter had then asked Calvin if he had actually witnessed the murders and Calvin had replied, "I saw him kill my daddy. I'll remember it forever."

And so will I. I wake up many nights, sweat making a cold film on my body. I see Emmy's hand, her engagement diamond sparkling pinkly. Fingers curved inward toward the palm, it is all alone in a pool of blood by the refrigerator. I never did find eight-year-old Lucia's right foot.

The guard awakened me the next morning with a tray smelling of hot grain. There's something almost barbaric about feeding a man you're going to kill in a few days. It's a sin to waste the food. I've seen pictures of skeleton-like babies in Ethiopia and some days, it's hard to swallow. Eddie had touched a tender spot yesterday. I had only a few hours left and I needed them. Not to talk about what had happened, but to reconcile my feelings about those deaths ten years ago.

Despite my stubbornness and lack of cooperation, the trial appeared to be going in my favor and my lawyer, in his best performance ever, had even convinced the press that I could be innocent. Rewards were posted for a mysterious drifter who had been seen around the rural Texas countryside a day or so before the murders.

It's strange how, after being isolated from everyday sensory bombardment, you become attuned to certain sounds. I recognized the sound of Eddie Stevenson's footsteps on the concrete floor before his round pink face ever appeared at the small window in my cell door. If God had planned my initiation to hell, He had picked a merciless disciple in the form of Eddie Stevenson.

"Did you think of anything we need to talk about today?" His tone was almost too cheerful. Perhaps this social project was wearing as thin on him as it was on me.

"I told you, Eddie. I don't want to talk."

"But, surely, you realize that you have to repent and accept Christ as your savior?"

"Why, Eddie?"

His eyes widened. For a moment, he hesitated.

"Uh," he stuttered. "In order to enter the Kingdom of God."

Satisfied with his reply, he pulled the oak chair nearer my bed, sat down and smugly folded his arms across his white and black ski sweater. He seemed determined to sit there until he converted me.

“What do I need to do to please your God, Eddie?”

“*Your* God, too, Cash,” he chided.

I leaned back on my bed, propping my back against the coolness of the concrete wall. Through narrowed eyes, I watched him squirm. And then a plan presented itself to me.

“What do I need to do?” I repeated. “You’ve read all about me. You know all of my sins and guilts. What do *you* suggest that I do to pave my way to heaven?”

The horizontal lines that had developed across Eddie’s forehead began to fade. His eyes brightened and he scooted forward in his chair. I flinched at the sound.

“You need to ask for forgiveness.”

“Don’t you think that I’ve done that every moment of my existence for the past ten years?”

“But, at the trial, you denied any guilt or regret.”

Through the years, the words of the short, heavy-set prosecutor’s tirade had etched themselves in my mind: *Do you feel any remorse for brutally murdering your sister-in-law and your two nieces?* I had struggled with the question, knowing that the eager jury would determine my guilt or innocence according to the way that I answered this one crucial question.

“Read your trial transcript again, Eddie. The man asked if I felt any remorse for murdering them; he didn’t ask if I felt guilt or regret that they were murdered.”

“So you *didn't* kill them,” he said, excitement raising his voice to a higher key. “Somebody else did and you’ve been covering for them all of these years. I thought so. I just knew you had to be innocent! Was it the sister-in-law, Della? You were going to marry her, weren’t you?”

“Stop this, Eddie,” my voice harshened as I scolded him. “Be rational. Think of it this way. Suppose that you and your wife have a cookie jar full of money. Each of you is equally responsible for it. Now suppose that each took an equal amount of money from the cache and your wife spent hers on new shoes. But you, thinking in terms of using the money wisely, went to the bank to deposit your share in a savings account. However, on your way, someone robbed you and took the money. Both of you feel regret and remorse that all of the money is gone. But, which of you, under ordinary circumstances, would feel guilt for squandering the money?”

“I am my brother’s keeper. Is that what you’re telling me, Cash? That you didn’t kill them but you feel a certain amount of responsibility that the act occurred?”

“I don’t know, Eddie. I don’t know if I killed Emmy and the girls. I can’t remember. I do feel regret that it happened, but I can’t suffer remorse for committing an act that I can’t remember.”

Eddie’s face grew solemn. The pink faded from his cheeks and fine worry lines spread from the corners of his eyes out toward his hairline. He hunched forward as if something heavy had been placed on his back.

“I’m going to find out, Cash. For you and me. If you didn’t do it, we’ll get you a new trial. If you did, I’ll help you remember. And then, you can take it to Jesus.”

I don't imagine that it would have made any difference to Eddie whether or not I wanted another trial. In all truthfulness, I just wanted it to be over. The first few times I had been granted last minute reprieves, the after effect had been devastating. I had found that there is, within the spirit, a will to keep the human body breathing, to continue living. Facing certain death forces the spirit to deny that will of the flesh. When the moment for which the body has prepared passes and that termination does not occur, the spirit then has to stop the artificial denial and build momentum in the opposite direction. Each time, it takes longer to regain that will to live.

After the first sentence, I resigned myself to the fact that death is inevitable. I had faced it daily in Vietnam. I had even caused death for others. If I had possessed some reason to want to live, my concession would have been difficult. But, there was nothing left for life to offer me. If there was a hell and I was destined to go there, I was sure I'd already had plenty of experience with any situation that might arise. On the other hand, if there was no afterlife and I was looking at total nothingness, then I would welcome that break from the furor of thoughts that had kept my mind raw for years.

No, I didn't want Eddie to look for or find anything that would postpone, delay, or cancel that date. I was looking forward to the warmth of death.

Wednesday arrived and, even though my idea had sent Eddie out searching for proof of my innocence or confirmation of my guilt, I caught myself listening all morning for the sharp staccato of his footsteps. Thursday passed and still no Eddie. Maybe he had given up on this cause. Perhaps he was embarrassed to return with his failure.

On Friday morning, right after my breakfast, he appeared just outside my door. I put down the book I'd been reading and stared at him. He wore an impeccable three piece suit, his shoes were freshly shined and his shirt newly laundered. But the unsteady hand which nervously stroked his lightly stubbled chin revealed his lack of sleep as much as the shadows underneath his troubled blue eyes. The idealistic young evangelist I'd first met six days ago had disappeared and left, in his place, a man who had discovered more about pain in two days than in his whole life up to this point. Edward Stevenson III had learned a hard lesson.

"I thought I had found some help, Cash. I thought I was going to be able to prove your innocence."

I sighed. Not out of any kind of relief, but out of frustration. Why now? I was so close.

"I tried to talk to your nephew," he began.

"Calvin?" I cried. "You went to Mississippi? You had no right..."

"Cash, please. Let me tell you why I had to do it. Let me tell you what has happened to me. I've come to know you well enough during the last six days to know that you will not attempt to judge me. Just give me a chance."

"Go ahead," I told him and shrugged my shoulders. "Have a seat. I don't think we'll be interrupted."

"I know that you've researched me," he began. "Just as I studied you. During the past few days, I've discovered that you've lived a multi-faceted life and the articles I read could only describe the superficial level. But, you've always had the advantage because

my life has been as uncomplicated and shallow as a cheap novel. Until three weeks ago, you could have looked in a newspaper and read everything of any importance that has ever happened to me.”

“What happened three weeks ago?” I asked when he paused for breath.

“I realize now that I’ve always been a two-dimensional paper doll,” he continued, ignoring my question. “I can see now that I never wanted for anything in life. I had money, an ideal family life, the best possible education and a ready-made position in my father’s corporation – so to speak.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Eddie,” I said. I didn’t like the hint of hysteria in his voice. I had seen the results of battle fatigue. For some reason, Eddie was fighting a battle within himself and he was running low on ammunition.

“I *have* to rake myself over the coals,” he cried. “Nobody ever helped me do it and I didn’t know enough about life to realize that it had to be done.”

“You’re talking in riddles,” I said.

“No!” he shouted. The guard outside the door stopped pacing and turned to peer through the small window in my door. Eddie dismissed him with a wave and an artificial smile.

“See, Cash, when I went to your hometown, I found out things about you that never made the newspapers. As a six year old in Mississippi, you had already been through more pain and torment than I had in all of my twenty-four years. You had lost both your mother and your father within a year, you had no home, and there was no one to feed you.”

“My brother got food for us,” I said defensively. “Chet found jobs.”

“I’m not trying to put down you or your family, Cash. I’m just attempting to lay some comparative groundwork for what I need to say later. You have to understand that, because I was born white and well-to-do, I have never experienced the hopelessness and despair that go along with being poor and black.”

“You still don’t,” I said, more sharply than I had intended.

“That’s part of my point, Cash. I’ll *never* be able to experience that particular hopelessness because I am who I am. Therefore, I’m being forced to experience another kind of hopelessness just as fitting.”

“And what is that?”

“Cash,” he began. “God has...” His voice broke. “God has deserted me. I can’t find him anywhere.”

This bed I sleep on is not bad; I’ve slept on worse. Although not appetizing, the prison food is nourishing. Somebody always brings me reading material. I have television ten hours a week and I haven’t been chilled to the bone or suffocatingly hot for longer than I can remember. I’ve often wondered why the state has chosen to pamper me when, for all these years, I’ve been destined to die by its mighty hand.

Whether they did it consciously or not, society had denied me the one right that I seemed to crave more than anything else. Not freedom from confinement. But a greater right than any man can determine. The right to vindicate myself by helping my fellow man. My Last Supper had arrived, in a sense, in the form of Edward Stevenson III. Finally, I might be able to provide some form of restitution to humanity.

He sat on the oak chair beside my bed and cried silently, tears rushing down his pale cheeks and shuddering sobs bucking his body. For some reason, at that moment, I felt strangely protective toward him.

“Eddie,” I began gently. “God never deserts anyone. You can’t see Him because you’ve put up some sort of spiritual smokescreen around yourself. He’s here.”

“How can you say that?” he sobbed. “Don’t you feel that God has abandoned you?”

“The thought never crossed my mind,” I said calmly, realizing that, even though my words were meant to console Eddie, I really believed them. “I might have lost God a couple of times, but I know that He never misplaced me.”

“My wife, Selene...” Again, his voice broke. I watched his throat work. “I met Selene when I was in college and we were married four months later. My parents had been so sure that I was going to marry a girl I’d grown up with – someone whose background and beliefs were identical to mine. They were disappointed with my choice. Although they accepted her, Selene is the product of a very liberal family and they were not comfortable with her. Marrying Selene was the only decision I’d ever made alone and that singular act was the only thing that ever caused me any sort of complications or conflicts.

“They love her now. But, who wouldn’t? Selene is just wonderful. You can feel angry or tired or sick and she can soothe you. Just being around her makes you feel better. It’s as if she is a sponge that absorbs negativity.”

“Don’t you think that Selene can help you more at this time than I can?”

The eyes that turned to me knew desolation. They had seen and experienced hopelessness and despair.

“Is this what you’ve lived with all of your life?” he asked. “Knowing that inequities exist and crimes have been committed and feeling the guilt for each one? Knowing that, at some point in the development of every act, you could have stopped it if you had only said or done something differently? Knowing that, once it’s done, you’re going to have to live with that guilt?”

I had no answer for him. Perhaps I had done just that all my life. I had never fully analyzed why I felt as deeply as I did about things. I know that I had never seen a human being change as much as Eddie Stevenson had in forty-eight hours. What had brought all of this on?

“It was Sunday, three weeks ago, at the television studio. I had given my Sunday sermon and the auditorium had cleared. Even the technicians had left and I was all alone in the big room. You’ll have to pardon me if my story resembles the introduction to one of the *Twilight Zone* reruns, but I heard a noise in the shadows toward the back of the hall. Turning my head, I had to shield my eyes from a light that shone with an intensity greater than any I’d ever experienced. A dark vertical line appeared near the center of the light and moved toward me. As it grew closer, it began to take on the general body shape of a human being. Eventually, the light faded and, from the diminished circle, a woman walked toward me. Sure, it can probably be explained with advanced video technology and spotlight angles, but the *feeling* that this event generated in me was that I had experienced my first genuine supernatural event. To me, this woman represented a messenger from God.

“I have trouble now distinguishing my real perceptions from the Christian symbolism that I attached to the happening. I’ll just tell it the way my brain synthesized it and my memory retains it. Out of that blinding light appeared a woman dressed in black. Although I know that she walked, she seemed to float on one of the rays. When she moved closer, I saw the white streaks in her black hair, the wrinkles in her face, the middle-aged sag of her neck. Part of me told me that, if she were an angel, she would be ageless and wearing white. Even an emissary from Satan wouldn’t have such humanly attributes.

“*Are you Edward Stevenson III?*” she asked me. Her voice had a trace of an accent. English, I think.”

“And then what happened?” I probed.

“She didn’t wait for me to answer and confirm my identity,” Eddie said. “I wish now that I had listened more carefully, but I was so shaken that I only remember the points that she emphasized over and over.”

He paused, loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top button of his pale green shirt. I said nothing, knowing that he was collecting his thoughts in an effort to make his next words credible.

“Bear in mind that, subconsciously, I saw her as a direct pipeline from God. The words she spoke were colored by my Christian interpretation.”

Eddie’s attempt to be totally objective in his self-analysis amazed me. Could this be the same Eddie who, six days previously, had come to forcibly carry me to the bosom of Christ?

“All of my life, I’ve heard the things the woman told me – in general terms, that is, never specifics with myself named as being one of the people assigned to save the world. Frankly, I had always figured that there would be a lot more people to help – and also to share the burden if things went wrong. Now I have an inkling of what Moses must have felt.”

“It’s easier to share the glory,” I pointed out. “Than to assume total liability for failure.”

Eddie’s face wore an expression of regret. He nodded and continued.

“She told me that God is weary of the sin and corruption in the world. Because certain areas of our earth such as the United States, Russia, China, the Middle East and Northern Europe have scorned God and now worship power and technology, He is going to destroy those areas.”

“Did she say how God is going to do this?” I asked. My head buzzed. I had this crazy feeling of *déjà vu* as if I had already heard this in another variation and had asked the same question before. “And what about the people in those areas who are innocent?”

“They will be led away,” Eddie said. “They will migrate to areas such as Africa, South America, Australia and Antarctica where they will use their knowledge of technology for the benefit of mankind.”

“Are they going to follow a star?” I asked, watching his face threaten to crumble. “Or were *you* directed to build an ark?”

“I know that you are being facetious, Cash, but you’re not far from right. She told me that I have been chosen to find the man who will show us how to accomplish this migration.”

“Why *you*?” I asked. When I saw his eyes blink quickly to hold back tears, I attempted to soften my exclamation. “I mean, you’re so young. Surely there are men of God who are older and more experienced.”

“She explained that. She told me that, in my other life, I had a chance and messed it up because I became too attached to the temporal world.”

“Other life?”

“Before I was saved, Cash. *That* other life. Now, as a born-again Christian, I have this duty and she made me see it clearly.”

“How clearly?” I asked. “She must have told you about the man you must find. Obviously, he would be a very holy man. He must be intelligent, compassionate, loving and spiritually unaffected by having lived in this world.”

“You’re so right,” Eddie said. “That’s the reason I came here. She gave me an old newspaper, Cash, with a story about your trial. *This is the prophet who will enable you to find and help the innocents.*”

If Eddie’s previous religious stance had puzzled me, this new angle mystified me. Why would anyone go to this much trouble to perpetrate this elaborate hoax on Edward Stevenson III?

“Eddie, someone is playing games with you. *Me*? Can you think of anyone who might wish to destroy your credibility and undermine your church?”

“Cash, it’s real. I didn’t dream it and there aren’t any tricks involved. Give me credit for initial skepticism. Actually, I threw the newspaper away as soon as she left. Like you, I first saw it as a bad joke or, at the worst, someone determined to trick me, hoping to show me as a fake.”

“What changed your mind?”

“I kept seeing her, this woman. At the church, in the grocery store, on the tennis court. One morning, I was having breakfast with my father and she sat down right at the table with us!”

“Did she say anything?”

“No. She just sat there and looked at me with accusing eyes.”

“What did your father do? What did he say?”

“He didn’t see her, Cash. Even though she sat down right across the table from him, he didn’t see her!”

“And yet your father is a very religious man.”

“I know, Cash. I thought the same thing. If God was looking for someone to carry out such an important mission, why would he choose me when the most logical choice, my father, was so readily accessible?”

“So, naturally, your thoughts turned to the other extreme.”

“I have never been so frightened,” Eddie said, nodding. “My thoughts raced around in my head. Who could be a more fitting recruit for the Anti-Christ than an evangelist of my caliber?”

“And what more fitting utensil for your indoctrination than someone as immoral, sadistic and inhuman as myself?”

Eddie had the grace to blush. He smiled – an old/young, half-abashed smile.

“You’ll have to admit,” he began, “that it made more sense than the first proposal. After all, you could hardly be considered a prophet!”

“So, politically speaking, you moved mountains to arrange this time with me. You thought that, by converting me, you could rescue your own soul!”

“It was not as selfish as you make it sound, Cash. I would have saved *your* soul, also.”

“*Would* have?”

“As I told you earlier, Cash, God has deserted me. Now both our souls are damned to eternal hell.”

“Eddie, come on. You don’t believe that.”

“Yes, I do. I committed a mortal sin and God has punished me in this way. I’ve prayed for His forgiveness but He has simply chosen to ignore me.”

“Tell me what happened, Eddie. With my crimes behind me, how could I possibly judge or condemn you?”

“I know,” he said, squirming in the chair. “It’s just that I’ve always thought of myself as a notch above the ordinary human. Not that I considered myself any better than they, I just thought that my morals and standards were higher. How else could I explain the fact that I had never experienced any of the baser desires such as greed, hate, fear, deception and so forth? I figured that I must be above these things and that it was my duty to show everyone else how much closer they would be to salvation if they would deny those hateful attributes and experience higher values.”

“So, because you had a different set of standards, you secretly considered yourself a better person than most other people that you know.”

“I suppose so.” He shifted in the chair and pulled the underneath seam of his shirtsleeve, revealing a darker green semi-circle where his arm rested against his chest.

“And yet, having never been exposed to those so-called ‘base desires,’ you really didn’t know how you would react, given a set of circumstances other than the ones that were familiar to you.”

“I had only my own experiences, Cash. I had never hated anyone. Throughout my life, I had been courageous and happy. I had never subjected Selene to any kind of sexual perversion, my only interest in the act had been for procreation.”

“In effect, Eddie, you removed yourself from the possibility of learning anything that life might teach you. You made an arbitrary scale for each of the ten commandments. Thou Shalt Not Kill, for instance. You rated it with the worst type of killing being the one in which the killer feels no guilt; he kills solely for pleasure. The least offensive type of killing then, would be the type in which a person has been victimized and he kills, not to save his own life, but to save the life of another. What about the *thought* of killing someone, Eddie? Where does that fall on your scale? Or, do you just turn off the thought and never experience the growth?”

“Why do I keep thinking that I’ve heard this before and that you were the one who told me?”

I had experienced the thought myself as I had chastised him for his hypocrisy. For a fleeting second when I had mentioned the thought of killing, I had looked at the woven white garment on my body and felt nostalgia. Then I had blinked my eyes and the white robe had been replaced by my familiar denim clad legs. Eddie looked at me strangely before he continued.

“When I left here almost three days ago, I was determined to prove your innocence in that mass murder crime. I drove down to San Antonio and found Della

Murphy. She believes you innocent, Cash. She says that there is no way that you could have stabbed those little girls and her sister. And, even if you had, she knows it would have been impossible for you to then have mutilated them.”

I sat stiffly, clenching my teeth. I hadn’t seen Della since before those murders ten years ago. Not once had she appeared during the off and on two year period of the trial. Surprisingly, she still remained Murphy. Della would have made someone a good wife. We had argued about that the day she left. Being shortsighted, I had thought that I couldn’t take on both the directorship of a new agency and the responsibilities of husbandhood simultaneously.

“She told me if I was really serious about finding proof of your innocence, I should go to your hometown in Mississippi and talk to Roscoe Mason. Della intimated that Brother Mason knew something that would prove the whole trial a farce.”

“Go on,” I said. My cheek muscles ached.

“I called Selene and told her what I was going to do. She was all for it. See, she spends a lot of her time working with little children who have cerebral palsy and she knows how good helping someone can make you feel. Anyway, she told me that she would go up and spend the rest of the week with her mother in New Mexico. Selene’s mother, Pat, had finally sold the family home in Los Angeles and she had several boxes of papers and books shipped back home to Santa Fe. Selene had never seen them because her mother had packed them up before they moved to Santa Fe fifteen years ago and she wanted to go through her father’s mementos. Her mother had told her that she could have anything that she might want.

“I drove all night. As soon as I reached the outskirts of Jackson, I found a motel room and slept for a couple of hours. I was becoming obsessed with the idea of saving you. If I saved you, my mind reasoned, then I had defeated the Anti-Christ and, in turn, I would experience salvation. Don’t roll your eyes like that, Cash. I’m not saying I still feel that way; I’m just setting the stage for what comes later.

“It was simple finding your hometown, Cash. No distance at all from the motel where I stayed. I’m sure if it had possessed any industrial or economic incentives, Jackson would already have engulfed it. As it is, the town epitomized a turn-of-the-century village in which time had slowed down. Like the good old days. I liked the little streams that flowed beside the quaint dirt road. From one house to the next, people chatted and laughed through open windows. Old people sat on porches, fanning themselves slowly with folded newspapers or booklets. In the yards, toddlers, naked as the day they were born, played. It seemed such an idyllic existence.”

“Until you realized that the picturesque streams were open sewers,” I interrupted. “Until you discovered that the windows in the houses were open because they were the only source of ventilation and cooling for the cardboard ovens that an absentee landlord calls rental property. Until you realized that the toddlers played naked and barefoot because their parents had no money to clothe them. Until you realized that the old folks fanned slowly because they were weak from hunger or illness.”

“You’re absolutely right, Cash. I had no idea that conditions such as that could possibly exist in a nation as prosperous as ours.”

“*That* makes it even more shameful,” I said.

“Has it always been like that?” Eddie asked.

“As long as I can remember. I was born in that little town in 1949 and spent my first six years in one of those houses you saw on that street. When my mother died, Chet, the oldest, was only twelve. Since there was no one of working age in the family, our Chicago landlord sent notice of our eviction through the county sheriff.”

“What about agencies? Couldn’t the government have done something to help three orphans?”

“You have to be human to qualify for help from the government. You have forgotten that it was Deep South, 1955. Although we had been freed from slavery by the Emancipation Proclamation almost one hundred years prior to that, Negroes had few rights. Most people of the white race considered us just a little more advanced than apes. We could talk rather than simply grunt. Brother Mason, the Baptist preacher, took us in and Chet paid for our cots and food by cleaning the church. I’ll never know how Brother Mason managed to feed his family of six plus the three of us. The only money he ever received was the amount left in the offering plate after all other expenses had been taken out.”

“Matilda Garland,” Eddie said, a tight smile playing around his mouth.

“Who?”

“Miss Mattie Garland. A quite wealthy lady from Portland, Oregon. She visited Mississippi and Brother Mason’s church in late 1955. You probably met her and didn’t remember her but, while she was there, she set up an escrow at a bank in Jackson. The money was intended to take care of the three of you and to send at least one of you to college at a nearby state-supported school.”

“She was quite the visionary,” I said. “At that time, not a single black had ever been admitted to the University of Mississippi.”

“Maybe she thought that the scholarship would provide an incentive for you to try and break the tradition.”

Tradition. I wanted to shake Eddie. One would think that he was talking about segregation as some time and honor bound code by which the majority played a game. Maybe he was.

“Chet must have known,” I said. “From the time I was a small child, he talked about how I must do well in school so that I could go to college. And I always thought that my scholarship was earned by my academic achievement.”

“Perhaps it was. But, all the same, the money was there.”

“So you’ve told me something I never knew. What else did you find out?”

“Mrs. Murphy, the old lady, wouldn’t let me talk to her grandson. She said that Calvin had almost had a nervous breakdown a year or so ago because some guy kept hounding him for an interview.”

I remembered the article in the scandal sheet. Those particular reporters had a reputation for resorting to almost anything to get a story.

“I talked to a lot of people who remembered you,” Eddie continued. “You are that town’s claim to fame.”

“And a dubious claim it is,” I said. “I’d just as soon they had forgotten me.”

“You’re wrong, Cash. No one wanted to talk to me about the murders until they realized that I’m on your side. They remember you as the boy who sang lead in the

church choir, the young man who achieved the highest awards at college, the decorated hero who came back from Vietnam.”

Tears burned my eyes and I blinked. Not now, I told myself. I could not allow my desire to vindicate myself before those people to interfere with the peace I had finally achieved after this last appointment with death had been announced.

“You must have gone to the Baptist Church,” I said, “and talked with Brother Mason.”

“This is the part I’ve been dreading, Cash, because that is where God deserted me. In that little box of a church with its one stained glass window, God chose to abandon me.”

“Come on, Eddie, something happened in that church and you’re not telling me. Otherwise you wouldn’t feel the way you do now. Did Brother Mason tell you something that caused a temporary loss of faith?”

“No!” Eddie shouted. Then he lowered his voice before the guard came back to peek through the window. “Not Brother Mason! If that old man had been born some hundreds of years earlier, he would have been one of Christ’s disciples.”

“Then, what *did* happen?”

Eddie stood up and removed a handkerchief from his back pants pocket. He wiped his forehead and then his palms. He moved toward the door, looked out the tiny window, and then came back to the oak chair which he pulled closer to me before he sat down.

“Cash, promise me that you will never breathe a word to anyone of what I’m going to tell you.”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Eddie. Who could I tell?”

“I don’t know,” he said, and shrugged. “I guess what I’m trying to say is that I don’t want you to like me any less, or respect me any less, after you hear what I’ve done.”

“Does it matter what I think? Haven’t you forgotten that you are answerable to one entity only? *You* may like yourself less, but God and I feel the same about you as always. What could you, of all people, have done that is so terrible? Lied to someone?”

“Oh, no, Cash. Not that simple. You see,” he lowered his voice to a whisper, “I’ve killed Selene.”

“What?”

“Please, Cash. Don’t shout. Just listen to what I have to say.”

I knew poor Eddie couldn’t have killed his wife. He must have attached some type of symbolism to another “sin” he had committed and interpreted it as a spiritual death.

“I’m listening.”

“Brother Mason is still at that church. He must be nearing ninety, but he still conducts prayer meetings during the week and holds church services morning and night on Sundays. It was just after noon when I found him in his small office at the back of the church. His arms were folded across the scarred wooden desk top and he had gone to sleep sitting in his chair. I must have made some noise entering the stuffy little closet because he awakened suddenly and looked at me with impossible recognition. *I’ve been waiting for you son*, he said. *You should have been here long ago.*

“Thinking that I possibly dealt with an insane man, I decided to humor him by telling him that I was sorry I was late and that I had come to talk about Cash Wilson. He looked at me as if to say that he already knew that and then motioned for me to follow him out to the sanctuary. Near the door, he stopped at a file cabinet and picked up a hammer from the dusty top. This kind of scared me because I thought he might just decide to hit me with it. So I trailed along behind him, searching for an exit in the event I needed to make a quick departure.

“But he grabbed my arm with his frail hand and I felt his bony fingers dig into my flesh. *There*, he told me, pointing to a spot on the concrete floor between the piano and the wall. *That is where she left it. Cash was supposed to pick it up, but he didn't. You'll have to take it to him.*”

Listening to Eddie's story, I could almost picture the frail, grizzle-headed Brother Mason. I could sense the chagrin he had felt when I had failed to do something that had been expected of me. But I had no more knowledge of what Brother Mason had been talking about in this instance than had Eddie.

“He ordered me to sit on the piano bench,” Eddie continued. “And I did. Then he squatted and began pecking at the spot on the floor with the hammer he'd been carrying. I watched as the concrete began to crack like a dry leaf. Then I realized that Brother Mason had simply broken away a thin layer of concrete disguising an opening in the floor that had been covered with a wide plank of wood before the concrete had been lightly spread over it.

“He lifted the hardwood flooring to expose a small wooden crate about six inches square and gray with age. He gently lifted the box out of the hole and stood up. As if it

contained something beloved and dear, he held it fondly to his chest before he handed it to me. I have never seen eyes so intense as the ones that stared at me. *This is for Cash*, he told me. His voice was solemn. *What is in this box will free Cash Wilson.*”

“What was it?” I asked. “What was in the box?” I had no idea what Brother Mason would send to me in a box. Something that had been hidden for years. He must have known that Eddie couldn’t bring anything into prison.

Eddie hung his head. When he raised his face to me, twin streams of liquid moved from his blue eyes down his cheeks.

“I lost it, Cash. I’m sorry, but I lost it.”

“I don’t suppose it makes any difference,” I said, in an attempt to console him. Actually, his loss brought my own freedom closer. “As long as *you* know what was in the box. You haven’t told me anything yet that would explain why you think that God has abandoned you. And I can’t think of a solitary thing that would save me at this time. So go on with your story.”

“I just don’t understand how I could have made such a mess of everything, including my own life, in such a short time.”

“It’s not going to help you any to blubber and feel sorry for yourself, Eddie. Get it off your chest.”

“I’ve never felt so good as I felt when Brother Mason handed me the box. I felt free. It was as if I’d always been held back by invisible cords and that now the cords had been cut. I looked around me and the intensity of the colors in the stained glass window startled me. It was as if a film had been pulled from my eyes. And smells! The concrete dust gathered in my nostrils and the earthy smell startled me. I could smell the leather of

my shoes, the wool of my slacks, the warm and slightly sweaty odor of my own body. I heard flies buzzing, birds calling, the sound of automobile tires crunching on pebbles. Everything was better than life, including the emotions I felt for my fellow man, for humanity. Brother Mason touched my arm and smiled at me; I felt such great love directed toward me and, at the same time, I felt I would burst with all the love inside me.

“I must have stood there for several minutes, savoring the feelings I had experienced. When I opened my eyes, I was alone in the church and I couldn’t find Brother Mason anywhere.

“I stumbled out the front entrance, expecting to be assailed by the magnificent sensations of a few minutes earlier. But, everything was back to the ordinary. Normal. My blue Mercedes remained parked against the curb just as I had left it. Taking the keys from my pocket, I walked around to the back and opened the trunk. I didn’t want to turn loose of the box, but I had been entrusted with it for you and I wanted to make sure I kept it safe. So I wrapped it securely in a patchwork quilt that I kept in the trunk and carefully tucked it in a corner, behind my brown leather suit bag.

“After my short nap and shower that morning at the motel, I had checked out so I had no reason to return there. At this point, it was two in the afternoon, I had talked to a lot of people and I had something that might prove your innocence. I would drive to Santa Fe, I decided, pick up Selene and then come back here to tell you about my discovery.”

“Do you mean to tell me that you didn’t even open the crate to find out what was in it?”

“We...lll...” He hesitated and squirmed. “That part comes later. See, when I opened my car door and sat down in the driver’s seat, I realized that I was not alone.”

“Spiritually? Or physically?”

“Physically, Cash. The most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen sat in my car, in the front seat, close enough for me to touch!”

Interrupted by the rattle of keys against metal, Eddie stopped his narrative abruptly and we both looked at the uniformed man standing at my cell door. Surveying Eddie from his mussed blonde hair to his shiny shoes, he frowned.

“Everything okay, Mr. Stevenson?” he asked. “You’ve been here a long time today and I thought you might be having some problems.”

“I’m fine, Sutton,” Eddie said, squinting his eyes in order to read the guard’s nameplate.

“Well, I got to bring Cash’s lunch to him. Warden told me if you wasn’t ready to leave that you could come down and eat with him in his office.”

“Thanks, I’m not hungry,” Eddie said. “Mr. Wilson and I have very little time left and I can’t waste a minute.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Stevenson. You want your lunch now, Cash? I got it outside.”

“I’ll pass today,” I told him, choking back the nausea that the smell of stew initiated.

Eddie waited until he heard the sound of the key in the lock before he turned back. He looked at me and his eyebrows lifted.

“Go on,” I told him. “You’re right. Time is short.”

Eddie took a deep breath. Then he plunged on with his story.

“*Who are you?* I asked the girl. I was trying to be calm, but my voice had a little squeak. *My name is Laura*, she said. Her voice reminded me of wine colored velvet – soft and rich and regal. *What are you doing in my car?* I asked. *And what do you want from me?* I was becoming a bit anxious about the strange situation. Up to this point, after first seeing her, I had not looked at her directly; I had fixed my stare on the church, halfway between my steering wheel and the girl. Now, I turned to face her. She smiled, showing even white teeth. Her lower lip protruded somewhat, adding a pouting look to her smooth perfect oval face. Short blonde hair made a shiny halo on top of a long, slender neck...”

“I get the idea, Eddie. The woman in your car possessed a particular type of beauty to which you were unaccustomed.”

“Cash, I’m trying to understand and explain what happened. Since I met Selene, I’ve never paid any particular attention to other women. Now, suddenly, I was unbelievably conscious of everything about this woman. You’ve seen pictures of Selene. *She’s* beautiful. She has a quiet, calm, dark beauty. This woman reminded me of some lovely wild animal. I couldn’t take my eyes off her. I wanted to watch her smooth muscles ripple underneath her soft skin. I wanted to see her green eyes narrow in anger and pleasure. I felt I had to see those delicate white fingers curved in desire, those long red fingernails making talons of surrender.

“Don’t try to make this easy for me, Cash. You can’t. You must know that I was fascinated with this woman. In a moment of sanity, I knew that I was being tested. I thought I could handle it, turn off the temptation. I knew that I had to prove myself by showing that I was above worldly desires.

“I don’t know if Laura was aware of her role in my inner torture; she seemed to be totally oblivious to the conflict she generated within me. She knew who I was, having recognized me from television, but she didn’t seem to be one of those people who are eager to brush shoulders with fame.

“She explained that she was at the church because she had recently inherited her great-aunt’s estate and, years ago, her Aunt Mattie had set up an escrow account for the church I’d just left. That was the money I told you about, Cash. Her being there at the same time as I reeked of more than coincidence, but I couldn’t think of any reason for her to be there, other than chance.

“When she discovered that I was leaving for Santa Fe, she asked if I would take her as far as Amarillo, Texas. She said that she had relatives near there. Don’t ask me why I agreed. Her clothing, her perfume, the way she held herself – everything about her screamed wealth. She didn’t need a ride with me; she could have afforded public or private transportation. But, that was when I felt the first of my sins surface – vanity. I luxuriated in the feeling that this beautiful woman liked me and my conversation enough to want to spend hours riding in a car with me. So, I agreed.

“It was early the next morning when I crossed the state line and drove into Texas. Laura had curled up on the leather seat and napped most of the way through Arkansas and Oklahoma. Before she went to sleep, she had told me a little about herself. Her father, a diplomat in the state department, spent most of his time in Washington, D.C., while her mother resided in the family home in Lubbock, Texas. Although Laura didn’t say, I gathered that her childhood had been without a great deal of affection. She had spent a lot of time alone, reading and writing poetry. When she told me that, I felt a pang

of guilt and I shook my head to empty it of a vision of my wife at her walnut writing desk. Selene loves poetry.

“Thirty miles before I reached Amarillo, I drove into a freakish storm with freezing drizzle and, by the time I reached the city limits, I could feel the rear end of the car slip on the icy pavement. I told Laura that I was going to have to stop driving until the Highway Department had treated the road. She suggested that I stop at one of the motels. This would accomplish a twofold purpose: I needed some rest and morning traffic would melt the ice to a slush. She would call and have her mother pick her up nearby.

“I suppose I was a little groggy and not thinking very clearly because the proposal sounded reasonable so I pulled off at a large motel. Laura said she would go next door to a restaurant to make her call. She told me she would get some coffee and wait for her mother. We said our good-byes and she left.

“After I checked in, I returned to the car, pulled my suit bag from the trunk and closed it before I remembered the wooden crate. I thought about leaving it there, but then I remembered how important it might be in proving your innocence and I knew I should keep it with me. I unlocked the trunk again, fumbled around and found the padded package. Once in my room, I unwrapped the box and placed it on the closet shelf. Then I stripped down, turned on the shower and let the warm water massage my skin and relax my muscles.

“I stepped out of the shower into a misty, primeval fog, lethargy gripping my body. When I stared into the fogged mirror, the eyes that returned my look were mine,

but the face puzzled me. Alien, yet familiar, it wore a golden beard and weather-worn skin. Hastily, I wiped the surface and the stranger disappeared.

“When I opened the bathroom door and stepped out onto the carpet, I sensed that I was not alone. A familiar musky perfume invaded my nostrils. Pulling my robe tighter around my naked body, I moved toward the bedroom area. Imagine my surprise when I saw Laura perched in the middle of the large king-sized bed, wearing a shirt she must have taken from my suit bag. For some unaccountable reason, I felt compelled to look at the wooden crate. Although it was still on the closet shelf, I could have sworn that I had left it on the other side, that it had been moved.

“There’s no way to explain what happened next without admitting that I gave in to fleshly desires and succumbed to temptation. Not once, but over and over until I was so exhausted that I slept. When I awoke, the afternoon sun slipped through a crack in the floral drapes. I lay there for a moment, thinking possibly that I had dreamed the events that had transpired earlier. When I realized that it had not been a fantasy, my first thought had been, not for Selene – my beloved wife whom I had betrayed – but for Laura. Where was she? I needed her. My body throbbed when I remembered the feel of her silky skin, her experienced hands, her warm mouth.

“*Laura*, I whispered. When there was no answer, I jumped out of the bed and rushed to the bathroom. My fears were confirmed when I opened the door to be greeted only by crumpled towels and white emptiness. A cold pain of fear assailed me and, with dread, I slowly twisted my neck and looked at the spot where I had left the wooden crate. My skin grew hot and then icy cold. Laura had taken the wooden crate and left.

“At that moment, I didn’t want to think about the snowballing effect of my sins. I didn’t want to confront myself with the fact that each sin had compounded the next. I raced to throw my belongings together and go to Selene. She would remove those doubts and fears.

“And then I found the other thing. On the dresser, by the television was a note written on motel stationary. Propped against it, holding it up, was an old book. A diary, in fact. I opened the letter first and sat on the bed with its still warm reminders of forbidden ecstasy. The first time that I read the words I made no sense of them; Laura’s smell still lingered in my nostrils. Then I forced myself to comprehend the message.”

With a shaking hand, Eddie reached for his suit jacket and pulled out a cream colored envelope from an inside pocket. His troubled eyes pleaded with me to read it. Poor Eddie. His greatest sin had been thinking that he was above sin.

“My dear Ed,” the letter began. “I wish there was a way for me to express this in a language that you could understand. I know that you will find it difficult to forgive me – or yourself – and yet, for your sake, you must forgive and praise yourself. You have finally accomplished what you have been trying to do since you stole the master crystal. You have finally reunited the two souls who belong together – two souls who together have the secret to create another master crystal, one of peace rather than power. Apart, each soul had a fragment of the knowledge necessary to accomplish this feat. Through life after life, these two have searched for each other, feeling, rather than knowing, that each is incomplete. And, in many of those lives, you also were present, having chosen to help bring these two together as a sort of penance for your ‘original sin.’ In each of your

lives before, you lost sight of your original goals and fell prey to physical gratifications. By doing so, you were unable to uphold your share of the life plan. And, as is true in every endeavor, if one person does not do his share, then it becomes difficult, and sometimes impossible, for the planned event to occur.

“Look past this life, Ed. Look ahead, look behind. See that, although it is now most important, this is not all that is. When we are all together again, we will laugh as we did when, because of your weakness, we chose this way to bring about the reunion. And we will rejoice that, after all of these millennia, our soul group is again complete and intact.

“It may help you, dear Ed, to read this diary that my aunt kept. You may be able to find yourself here.”

The letter was signed, *“My love forever, Laura.”*

“Eddie, I’m sorry,” I said, looking at the top of his blonde head. During my reading of Laura’s letter, he had kept his head lowered. He said nothing in reply to my regrets for him.

I held the folded paper in my hands for a long time. Laura’s words, for some reason, brought a bittersweet nostalgia to the back of my throat and caused my heart to beat with an urgency I hadn’t felt in years.

“Eddie, where is the diary?”

“I almost threw it away, Cash. I wanted to destroy it, to forget that the last few hours had ever transpired.”

“I can almost understand,” I told him.

“You should,” he said, looking up. “Because I think that *you’ve* done it before. You did it ten years ago in South Texas, didn’t you Cash? You threw away everything to forget the events of a few minutes!”

He stood up abruptly, almost turning over the chair. He walked over to the door and knocked several times, loudly. The guard appeared at the door and unlocked it, opening it for Eddie to leave.

“Sutton, I have a book on the front seat of my car – the blue Mercedes parked next to the warden’s station wagon. Can someone be sent to get it for me?”

Sutton nodded, took the car keys from Eddie’s hand, and closed the door. Eddie walked back to me.

“Cash,” he asked, still standing. “Do you understand Laura’s letter? Do you have some idea of what is happening?”

“I would be lying if I said I didn’t feel certain familiarities. But I think I’m almost as much in the dark as you are.”

“Do you know how much I hated you the whole time I was reading Laura’s letter? I hated you so much that I wanted to kill you!” He laughed, almost belligerently. “It was all your fault. If I hadn’t gone to Mississippi, I wouldn’t have met Laura, I wouldn’t have committed adultery, I wouldn’t have thought about lying to Selene, I wouldn’t have wanted to kill you. It was a vicious circle. But, because of you, I had done all of those things. Because of you, I had experienced sin. And then I remembered what the lady in black had told me about you that day in the television studio. I had interpreted what she said about you to mean that you were some type of modern-day prophet. Doing

something for you would enable me to... That was it! She called you an Enabler. An Enabler! Is that expression familiar, Cash?"

My heartbeat speeded. For a moment, I was back in that bloody kitchen in Texas. Only this time, Ben, my youngest brother, was still alive. He was bending over Emmy's broken body and when he heard me come into the room, he came to his feet and I saw the bloody butcher knife in his hand. I gritted my teeth and opened my eyes in order to lose the memory. I looked at Eddie and his face softened as he sat down in the chair.

"You remember something, Cash. But you won't let yourself recall beyond a certain point. I'm having the same problems. It's like waking from a dream. If you let yourself recall the dream in its entirety, you don't forget it. But, if you don't start remembering the dream right then, it slips away. You think it's such a vivid dream that you couldn't possibly forget it and yet you do. Until somebody does or says something that brings back a fragment of that dream. Sometimes you can remember a portion of the dream on either side of the fragment. And then a portion on either side of those portions. Until you can remember most of the dream."

I nodded. This conversation with Eddie was a fragment of one of my dreams. Somewhere, sometime, we had held this very same discussion.

"After I read Laura's letter the second time," Eddie went on, "and realized that my murderous anger toward you was obviously misplaced, I called Santa Fe. Selene had been expecting me hours earlier and I knew that I must begin my first deception of my wife. I had already decided to tell her that I had been detained in Mississippi and then had car trouble. Selene always believed everything I told her; she had never had a reason to distrust me.

“Pat Hayes, Selene’s mother, answered the telephone. Selene was not there, she told me. She had borrowed Pat’s car and left much earlier in the day. I asked Pat where Selene had gone. I knew she would know – Selene is so organized that she makes detailed itineraries before she leaves to go anywhere. Pat sounded nervous when she told me to come on home and she would be in touch with me as soon as she heard from Selene.

“Chances were that Selene had driven back to Texas, so I followed Pat’s advice and drove back here. It was late when I reached our house and I knew immediately that Selene hadn’t been there since I had left. Letters protruded from the mail box, two newspapers lay in the driveway and the house itself smelled empty, as if Selene’s essence had been removed.

“When I dropped my suit bag on the sofa in the den, I realized that I was carrying the diary Laura had left me. I threw it on the coffee table and wiped my hands on the sides of my pants, trying to remove the sweet memory of her arms around me. What had the wooden crate held? What had been so important that she had to resort to such devious means to steal it? How could I possibly explain to you?

“Thankful that my father had chosen to cooperate with what he called my ‘prison mission,’ and take over my evangelical duties for a couple of weeks, I retreated into my study with Laura’s letter. By the soft light from my desk lamp, I read it again. I, too, wished that there was some way that I could understand the hidden meanings in her letter. I kept thinking that my trip to Mississippi and my meeting with Laura had not been coincidental.

“At one this morning, Pat called. A short time earlier, the Arizona State Police had found her car abandoned in a rest area near Flagstaff. Selene had not been found. There had been no indications of struggle or force. It seems that she walked away on her own cognizance. My first selfish thought was that she had certainly chosen an inopportune time to seek her independence. Didn’t she know that I needed her?”

“*Ed? It was Pat; she was still on the other end of the telephone line. Edward, listen to me. I think I know what has happened. Selene is safe. I have with me some of her father’s papers that she had been reading. You get some rest and then come up to Santa Fe tomorrow. We can find her.*

“I knew that we couldn’t find Selene. I knew that Selene was gone forever. Don’t ask me how I knew it. I didn’t tell Pat. I excused myself by saying that I had to see you today, that I would call her tonight.”

The guard, Sutton was back at the door. He handed Eddie a small worn book and left.

“I stayed up the rest of the night reading this, Cash. I think it may help to explain what we’re up against.”

“What *we’re* up against?” I asked, taking the book from him. He smiled, a sad little smile, and nodded. I opened the cover and looked at the first page: *Diary: K.J. Courtney.*

Zombie-like, Eddie stood by my bed reading over my shoulder. I could feel the static electricity of his molecules shooting out and colliding with my own.

“Eddie, you’ve had no rest since yesterday morning. If what I’m thinking could be possible, you’re going to need some sleep. You take the cot while I sit in the chair.”

I stood up and, almost soundlessly, he slipped onto the bed, stretched out and closed his eyes. By the time I had seated myself on the oak chair, he snored lightly. It was as if, by taking the book from him, I had agreed to share his misery and responsibility for his actions.

The first entry was dated May 18, 1963. Almost twenty-two years ago.

KARA'S DIARY

May 18, 1963: I should feel exalted because a dream has been realized. But, instead, I feel a lethargic nostalgia. As if I could go to sleep and dream a fond dream and never awaken. This is not a typical mood for me; I am basically an open, honest, optimistic personality. Yet, for some reason, I feel as if I should secret my treasure from James.

Today started as a typical shopping spree for both Elizabeth and me. Our "First Saturday" of the month meant we had a little extra money to spend on ourselves. Being part of a university community has its advantages – being paid once a month is not one of them.

While Elizabeth browsed through the sale rack outside one of the more exclusive shops, I wandered down to the beach. For a weekend near the beginning of May, it was remarkably deserted – only a few juveniles running across the sand and one elderly man sitting cross-legged on a picnic table top near a deserted concession stand. I felt drawn to this pariah. I scuffed through the sand toward him and he smiled when he saw me coming, the gold of his two front teeth glittering in the sunlight. He held an object in his right hand while, with his left, he motioned me closer. When I drew near, I felt goose bumps prickle on my neck and spread all over my body.

“Yours?” he asked, a little whinny in his question.

“No,” I replied abruptly, observing with distaste that the object in his hand was an intricately carved human skull of some clear, plastic-like material. I turned to go and find Elizabeth.

“Yes,” the voice droned. “Yours.”

“Okay,” I told him. “How much do you want?”

At least he was trying to sell something instead of just begging for money. I’ll have to give him credit for that much initiative. Even if it was only some trashy prop from a horror movie.

He smiled with glee and shook his head vigorously.

“No,” he said, bowing his head and holding out the object to me. “Yours.”

Trying to hide my repulsion, I gingerly took the thing from his grimy hand and wrapped it in a scarf I had in my purse. It was remarkably heavy, certainly not plastic. I’d drop it in a garbage bin on the way home. When I raised my head to thank him and again offer some money, he was gone. Just as if he had disappeared. My eyes scanned

the beach, but he was nowhere in sight. Even the teenagers were gone now. And it was growing dark.

I rushed back up to the boardwalk. The small specialty shops were closed. I found Elizabeth at a garden café, sipping a glass of white wine.

“Where have you been?” she demanded. “You’ve been gone four hours. James expected you an hour ago!”

That’s the kind of thing you have to deal with when your sister is also your husband’s secretary. I pulled out a brightly painted metal soda chair and sat down across from her. Four hours? Not more than thirty minutes could have elapsed since I left her.

“He’ll have to wait supper tonight,” I told her. “You will never believe what just happened to me!”

She didn’t. We both went back to the beach and searched. I couldn’t even find the deserted concession stand. Elizabeth probably thinks I had a romantic rendezvous with someone and that I’m trying to alibi. Later, I’ll be able to look at the situation with humor and we will laugh about it: When we went shopping, Elizabeth bought a tartan mini-skirt and I came home with a crystal skull.

Already I feel protective about it. After dinner – James made chicken noodle soup from a can – I locked myself in the bathroom, removed the scarf from the skull and examined it. It is not leaded crystal, as I had suspected earlier. It is some natural substance and it has been carved, not molded. I wrapped it in a pink terry towel and hid it behind my personal hygiene articles.

Tonight, while James pouted and pretended to read an article on space technology, I recalled a feeling I’d had in a dream not long ago. A feeling of total

euphoria, completeness. When I closed my eyes, the skull imprinted itself on the backs of my eyelids. Somehow the skull is connected with my dream.

I recovered the skull from the bathroom shelf and now it rests among my nylon lingerie in the third drawer of the bedroom dresser. I need to have it near.

May 22: I have not slept well for the past few nights; I seem to spend a considerable amount of time in a half-awake/half-dream state. Mornings arrive, the alarm on Big Ben jangles at 6:30 and I feel tired, drained of energy. James tells me I have been working too hard on my thesis. If he only knew how little time I've spent researching and how much time just sitting and attempting to translate those little voices inside my head that are trying to tell me something.

There! I've said it. I'm a bona fide mental case. At least, as Elizabeth joked once, I'm not talking back. But, seriously, I have a growing suspicion that this all has to do with the crystal skull. Or the man who gave it to me.

At the moment, James is doing some research on communist brain-washing techniques – some used in Korea and some presently being used in Vietnam. Could suggestions have been “planted” in the skull and currently be working on me? Why me? I am a lowly graduate student of early nineteenth century literature. Unless someone wanted to use me to get to James. Dr. James Courtney. The youngest member of the faculty's Political Science department, James holds awards and citations from two presidents for his liaison work with Russia during the last six years.

The skull remains in my lingerie drawer. Each morning, as I reach for clean underwear, my hand touches its cool surface. It is almost noon. Instead of going to my one o'clock class, I am going to the beach. I'll look for the old man.

May 27: Not only have I forgotten my journal, but I have neglected my research and I won't be able, as planned, to complete my thesis this summer. A few weeks ago, this admission would have thrown me into a state of extreme anxiety. Now it scarcely seems to matter. When my faculty advisor, Dr. Marcie Elve, left for Boston this morning, I felt a sense of serenity when I shook her hand and wished her success. She reprimanded me, telling me that she would be gone for nine weeks and demanded that I uncover some little known information about my thesis topic in her absence. I'm not the least bit concerned about John Greenleaf Whittier, his philosophies, or his works. For four afternoons, I have attempted to locate the old man from the beach. Today, I thought I saw him and I followed him into a hotel near the boardwalk. On the staircase, my old man turned to me and became a mangy transient, smelling of alcohol, sweat and stale clothing.

Why is all of this so important to me?

June 1: I haven't been able to find the old man. Last night, while James was at a meeting, I locked the bedroom door and took the crystal skull from the dresser drawer. I held it in both hands until the temperature of its cool surface matched the warmth of my hands. The longer I held it, the warmer it became and I imagined warm, throbbing vibrations passing from the skull to the palms of my hands, ending with a pulsating tingle

near the surface of my head. I didn't want to replace the skull in the drawer but I don't, as yet, want James to be aware of its existence.

The meeting lasted longer than expected and I went to bed before James came home. When he came to bed, quietly so as not to awaken me, I had just roused from a most pleasant dream in which a man – no one I recognized, but someone I loved dearly – and I had just been reunited (?) after a long period of separation. I wanted to recapture the euphoric feeling, so I turned to James, to snuggle against him. I wanted his hands on my body, his lips on my throat. I wanted to feel the length of him pressed against me.

“Turn over and go back to sleep, sweetheart,” he said. “It's late.”

I felt empty. Not because James had rejected me sexually. My hollowness was due to the fact that I knew I had never and could never feel about my husband the way I felt about the man in my dream.

June 6: Another unusual happening today. Elizabeth called and asked me to meet her for lunch at Mina's, a little bistro just a couple of blocks off campus. Occupying the basement of an old department store, Mina's receives little natural light and depends highly on candles for both illumination and atmosphere.

Elizabeth had already found a table by the time I arrived and her candlelit face wavered in a ghostly manner above a small table for two near the back of the café. I rushed to sit down across from her. Elizabeth and I have been closer than most sisters and I had sensed the urgency in her voice when she had called earlier.

“Whatever you have to say must have worldwide significance,” I joked, sitting down. “I can’t imagine another reason for James to let you have an afternoon out of his crammed-full schedule.”

Elizabeth remained solemn.

“This is *important*, Kara. James is very concerned about you and so am I. He says you haven’t cooked a meal in three weeks and the house is dirty.”

Amazed, I stared at her. I felt a little half-smile tug at the right corner of my mouth.

“James is a grown man,” I told her. “He knows how to cook and keep house. He did it for six years before he married me.”

Elizabeth lifted her chin. Being short of stature, she always does that when she feels at a disadvantage and needs to get some important point across.

“Kara, today James brought in a pillowcase of dirty clothes. I took them to my apartment to wash and dry them.”

“We have a washing machine!” I exclaimed. “You know that. *And* a dryer.”

“The point, Kara, is this: James is an important member of the faculty here at the university. His wife and his home are part of his image and you’re letting him down.”

Astounded, I sat in silence, staring at Elizabeth’s pale face. One dark curl that had wedged its way from her firmly-lacquered bouffant to curl listlessly on her forehead fascinated me.

“If you don’t watch yourself,” Elizabeth said slowly, almost portentously, “you’re going to lose your husband.”

I don't remember a lot about the walk home to our little rock house. Elizabeth's words kept floating across my consciousness – you're going to lose your husband. And the most terrible thing about it all is that it made no difference. I really didn't care. I wanted the warm mingling of souls that I'd felt in my dreams. James couldn't give me that.

June 7: I made an attempt today to clean the house. My pride and joy a year ago, the four cheery rooms with my carefully hand-chosen eclectic furniture offered absolutely no appeal, no incentive. Curds of dust lay around the baseboard of the hand waxed oak plank floors. Soap scum and coffee grounds mingled with dirty bowls, cups and glasses in the kitchen sink. While sorting the laundry into darks and lights, I experienced the most awful pang of anxiety about my crystal skull.

Rushing to the bedroom, I pulled open the drawer and there it lay, nestled comfortably in the folds of my trousseau nightgown, a foamy white creation I'd worn only once. I lifted the skull gently, held it to my chest, and sat on the bed. Only a moment later, I heard a door slam.

"Kara?" It was James. What was he doing home so early? "Kara, what is this mess on the floor? There's clothing everywhere!"

I quickly shoved the crystal skull underneath my pillow. I'll make the bed later, I told myself, and then I'll put the crystal skull back in the dresser drawer.

"Kara." James stood at the bedroom door, hands in the pockets of his slacks. For a hysterical moment, I almost laughed because whoever (and I assumed that it was

Elizabeth) had ironed his pants had pressed the crease all wrong and the knees looked baggy.

“What is it, James?” I asked. “Why are you home early?”

“Early?” he exclaimed, holding up his wrist and examining his watch. “It’s almost seven. If anything, I’m late. I’m going over to the student union to eat. Try to do something about this house. It’s a disaster.”

Seven o’clock? I had sat on the bed, holding the crystal skull, for over six hours. And it had seemed that I’d been there only moments.

June 8: I don’t know if James came home last night. I think I went to sleep immediately after he stalked out and I didn’t wake until almost ten this morning. He came to me in my dreams again last night. That other man. He has no face, no name, no body. I just know that he was there and we were together and it was right. As if we were two perfectly joined halves of the same object.

I can recall only a meager bit of the dream. In it, I am standing on a narrow rock ledge of some sort, looking through a gorge into a valley several miles away. Intuitively, I know that my home is behind me, in a depression worn into the mountain by millions of blowing sand particles over countless thousands of years. I realize that the weight of my body is straining the eroded ledge and I drink in one last awe-filled look at the red mountains below me before I turn to leave. I sense that he is beside me and I feel an intensity of life that I can never remember having experienced before. With a vividness born only of a dream, I look down and watch our bare feet tread the dusty trail, two sets of reddish-brown feet walking side by side.

And then I awakened. The crystal skull, which I had secreted underneath my pillow the night before, lay against my chest. I don't think I'll ever again be able to sleep without it.

June 13: I don't know how I have managed to survive this week. My mother has been here for four days. She thinks I am having a nervous breakdown. That is her way of explaining why I have lost interest in my home, my education, my husband. In her world and in her mind, there could be no sane reason for my behavior.

I have hidden the crystal skull. If mother, in her resolve to put things back in order, had discovered it underneath my pillow, I'm sure she would have convinced James to commit me immediately. I understand. She loves the daughter she gave birth to, raised and instilled with certain values, standards and morals. Mother's dismay, because she can't find that daughter, takes the form of commanding, demanding, cajoling and self-recrimination.

She must leave soon. I haven't been out of her sight for any length of time and I worry about the crystal skull, tucked away in tissue paper, in a hat box on the top closet shelf.

James has been the model husband, alternately concerned, understanding and supportive. He sleeps on the edge of his side of the bed. I sleep on the edge of my side.

June 14: Poor mother. She left today. Her friends will tell her that she did all she could and that she shouldn't feel guilty. She will feel remorse that she didn't do more and frustration that she *couldn't* do more. But, some afternoon, she will be playing bridge

with her friends and she will forget for a few moments. As time goes by, the moments of forgetting will become hours. And then days will pass in which she remembers me only as the ideal daughter, the prom queen, the valedictorian of her high-school class, the professor's wife.

I have the crystal skull now. It rests in my lap as I write these very lines. James has to meet with some other learned men in San Francisco and he will be gone overnight. I will tuck the skull under my pillow.

June 15: I don't know if I can even describe this dream. I have the most terrible feeling of loss, centering right in the pit of my stomach. I am so afraid that I have lost him – the man of my dreams, my other half.

Last night, as I drifted off to sleep, I held the crystal skull against my chest. It had brought me much needed peace and contentment only a few days earlier and I was positive that last night was the right time to return for more.

But this dream was not like the other one. There were no fond memories of intermingled souls – only extreme anxiety, the emotion best describing the dream state into which I plunged and which I shall attempt to describe.

Always, before a dream, I experience a type of mental time-warp in which I seem to exist as something outside of my physical body and during which time, as we know it, is suspended. That vacuum of time occurred and I waited expectantly for the euphoria, but it wouldn't come. Over and over, I swirled up into that no-man's land and appeared in a strange place surrounded by feelings of fear, agitation and resentment. Finally, I just let go and the dream took over.

In this dream, I am in a sterile environment. No smog, no particles, no impurities interfere with the oxygen which my lungs breathe. Everything is white except for the roof of the dome building.

The dome building. I am filled with awe as I attempt to describe it. The sides are higher than any other building in the walled city of Cirtae and the curved roof is composed of enormous multi-faceted jewels. When we become ill in body, or weak, or negative in our thinking, one of the Enablers takes us to a specially designed cubicle in the dome center, governed by the master crystal which regulates spiritual harmony. There are no inner walls. I 'feel' when I have moved from one cubicle to another. The color bathing my body and the musical tones caressing my ears indicate a change and I am cured.

I am now leaving the great chamber of serenity. Antai stands beside me, his white robes reflecting the same rich green light as my own. My mind is calm. I attempt to recall the cause of my earlier agitation. Something to do with separation. I stare far up above me, at the huge emerald through which light filters in soothing rays. I have an urge to take Antai's hand, but I cannot. I have evolved past the stage of physical contact providing emotional gratification. I must not humiliate my chosen father.

Chosen is correct. Although Antai and I have lived many lives together, we chose this incarnation to be father and daughter. My breathing becomes short and I feel dizzy, even though I am still receiving the benefit of soothing green rays. As we stare together into the huge crystal at the center of the dome building, I am reminded of the cause for my anxiety. Antai is going away, far away. To help another civilization develop awareness and mind utilization similar to ours. He is pleased and honored that the

Enablers have been so satisfied with his progress that they have nominated him for this assignment.

“We are immortal, my dear Lealia,” he told me only a short time ago as we sat together on the green grass outside the walled city. “This physical clothing we wear will eventually disintegrate and what we are will still continue. We are never apart. Our souls are joined for eternity.”

“But not if you leave for another civilization,” I protested. “We will live again and again, but never together as we always have until now. Why can’t we go together?”

“Because, my dear,” Antai said, looking at me with tender eyes. “You are needed here. After the Enablers leave, there will be few of your spiritual development left.”

“But Cirtae will be destroyed with the earth’s shift,” I reminded him. “And the physical me will die anyway.”

“There will be another place here on this planet,” Antai told me. “A point which is unrecognizable because it does not yet exist. A few people of Cirtae will survive the mass destruction. You are one of those survivors. You and the others will remain under the ocean for many incarnations and eventually *you* will lead that group to the point not yet existing. There, you will find materials with which to build shelters and make clothing. Vegetation for nourishment will be growing abundantly near pools and streams of water.”

I raised my head to look at him. The great half-circle of the setting sun behind him almost blinded me. I could not see Antai’s face. He touched my hand, an emotional gesture not necessary in our civilization for many lives.

“We will find each other again,” he consoled me. “Perhaps in an altogether different civilization that neither of us knows now. But we are two parts of a whole. We can never be separated.”

“*How* will we find each other?”

“You will take the crystal skull with you when you begin your new civilization. I will find it.”

“I can’t stand it,” I moaned. “I can’t let you go. I can’t take the chance that we may never again be together.”

“We must go now,” Antai said, rising to his feet. “Before the mission begins, we must experience the great chamber of serenity. There we will be reminded of our immortality and our fears of the mortal mind will be erased.”

They have come for him now. When the huge crystal opens, he and the other two will be gone forever. He turns and smiles at me, anticipation bright on his face. Already, I feel empty. I cannot watch. Eyes closed, the only feeling in my void world is the flesh-warmed crystal skull.

And that is how I awoke, holding tightly to the crystal skull, feeling depressed, lonely, anxious. I didn’t want to move, to breathe. I just wanted to go back to sleep and never wake. I have never felt so empty and yet so full of hopelessness.

The sane part of me says to get rid of the skull. Throw it away, give it away, hide it, destroy it. But the part of me that still feels Lealia’s pain cries to salvage the skull because it will reunite her with her soulmate.

I will place it back in the hatbox on the top closet shelf in the bedroom. And I will force myself to get away for awhile. Maybe I will go back to Lubbock and visit

some of my friends of my youth, those carefree people I knew while growing up in Texas.

June 20: I have just read my last entry and recall my determined intent to leave to get away from the memories and feelings associated with the crystal skull. I also remember how, the next morning, I had coolly analyzed my situation with mother and decided not to go to Texas. Although she now lives in Dallas, she still has friends in Lubbock and she would probably have gone there immediately if she had known of my presence.

Instead, I cleaned house – really cleaned, this time. I changed shelf paper, waxed hardwood floors, polished silverware, washed baseboards, scrubbed sinks. The house sparkled. Sometime during early afternoon, I went down to the wharf and bought fresh sea bass, James' favorite. I would make a meal that would help him to forget my unwifely behavior of the immediate past.

I had just taken the Haviland from the China cabinet to wash when the phone rang. James had to spend another night in San Francisco; the meeting had not culminated as quickly as he thought it would. I turned off the oven and sat at the dining room table for a few minutes, feeling a little sorry for myself and a little piqued with James.

Go get the skull, a little voice inside me nagged. Remember how good you feel when you have it near.

Darned night, I remembered. I stifled a wave of desolation which threatened to overpower me as I recalled Lealia. I'll call Elizabeth, I told myself, and see if she wants to come over. Later, we can go to one of those foreign films at the Union.

When the phone rang and rang and no one answered at Elizabeth's apartment, I called Franny, the girl who lived down the hall from my sister.

"Elizabeth is in San Francisco at the International Affairs meeting," Franny told me. "May I ask who is calling?"

Why hadn't James mentioned that Elizabeth was going with him? Unless he wanted to *hide* the fact. I yearned to hold the crystal skull. Everybody had somebody except me. And my other half was gone forever.

I mentally slapped myself. If I didn't monitor my thoughts more carefully, I'd have myself trapped in a dream world, living the life of a character created by my confused subconscious.

Rushing to the hallway, I picked up my keys and purse from the hall table and left the house. My aqua Ford Falcon, parked at the curb, started easily, even though I hadn't driven it for a month. Once out on the highway, I pushed the car hard and fast. The air rushing through my open window felt good, fresh.

Within a couple of hours, I realized that I had maneuvered myself through all of the city traffic and was at the foothills of the San Bernardino Mountains, heading for the resort town of Big Bear Lake.

I had first met James Courtney at Big Bear Lake, the summer after I had completed undergraduate school, two years ago. Along with several friends, I had shared one of the quaint log cabins tucked amidst large boulders and shaded by tall pine trees. James had been taking a break after a six month educational exchange in Russia. Totally impressed by the tall, quiet, good-looking man, I had stayed on two weeks longer after my friends had left. James had everything to offer: intelligence, compassion, creativity,

connections, excitement, stability. All I had was myself – and a small trust fund left me by my father. But I knew that I could make him happy.

And I had, I told myself, decreasing speed as I turned the sharp curves. I had made him happy. And I'll make up for the past month or so. I'll make him happy again.

With no trouble, I found the lodge where I had stayed two years ago. Although there were a couple of rooms available in the renovated main building, I asked for one of the older cabins near the rear. Without the influence of the crystal skull, maybe I could gain some clarity and insight into the happenings of the last four or five weeks.

And, after that, I don't remember a single thing. Nothing! Everything that happened – or didn't happen – to me for a period of five days is lost. I remember the lady at the lodge handing me a key and then I was driving back onto the west end of campus in the middle of the afternoon. I'm not sure if I am the person who left here a few days ago or the one who came back today. That doesn't sound so crazy when I rationalize that I am the person I am because of my collective experiences and reactions to these experiences. The person sitting here at this moment has a past that is different from that of the person who left here that afternoon. So I am not that "old person" and yet I am not this "new person" either because I can't build into my repertoire of experiences something I can't remember

Who am I?

June 21: James has ordered me to see a psychiatrist. He came home last night to a runaway wife in a state of semi-vegetation. Because of a noxious smell in the house (the decayed sea bass in the oven), he had spent the last two nights on the couch in his office,

stopping by periodically to see whether I had returned. I attempted to explain my behavior.

“Is that where you bought that sweater you’re wearing?”

The accusing tone brought back some of the old fight in me. I examined the hand-knit stitches of the lovely pink sweater I had on. All of my clothing appeared new.

“James,” I told him. “I don’t know. I can’t remember anything from the moment I checked in. I hadn’t even intended to be gone overnight. I didn’t take any clothing, cosmetics, anything!”

“Where did you get the money?”

Cold. Too cold. James constantly worries that I will spend the money in the trust fund. And yet, I knew that I had less than a hundred dollars in my purse when I had left.

“I don’t know.”

“Damn,” he exploded. “Damn it all!”

“Did you call mother?”

“Of course, I called your mother. You might have been in Dallas with her. I don’t know what has happened to you lately, Kara. You must see a psychiatrist.”

“A psychiatrist? James, there’s nothing wrong with me that I can’t work out, given time and patience on your part.”

“Kara, I have neither the time nor the patience. You see a psychiatrist or I move out for good.”

At the door he paused. “And do something about that god-awful smell in the house!”

I can’t write anymore tonight. I must try to remember those days.

June 22: I have an appointment with Dr. Alan Lewin for June 27. I called Elizabeth this morning and she recommended him; she had worked for a doctor who knew him before James had hired her.

“He is the absolute best, Kara,” she said, after I told her why I was calling. “But he’s terribly intense, very involved in his research.”

“Research?”

“He’s one of the foremost in his field,” she hedged. “He was highly influenced by childhood experiences.”

“What *is* his field?” I snapped, feeling that I had to forcibly extract the information from her.

“Suicide.”

Why do I need to see an expert on suicide? Elizabeth told me that James had been pleased with the choice of doctors, so I agreed to give this Dr. Lewin a try. I managed to end the conversation on a winning note, though. I asked Elizabeth how the International Affairs meeting had been. After a pause, she had answered in a voice sprinkled with guilt, that it had been a tremendous success for the United States.

I am going to clean the oven.

June 24: I am dreading my encounter with Dr. Lewin. I discovered an article about him in an old faculty newsletter. A top notch psychotherapist, he feels that we are direct reflections of our past, that our emotions, decisions, actions and reactions are all results of healthy or unhealthy ego development in our past. He believes if we can admit our

childhood fantasies and deal with them from a mature point of view that we can overcome any psychological handicaps affecting our present “coping mechanisms.”

It will be only an hour; I’ll survive. James will be satisfied and I can then go on with life. And I’ll probably totally frustrate this Dr. Lewin because there are few, if any, childhood fantasies and I consider them fairly normal: wanting to be a movie star, a nurse, a fashion designer. Even though my father died when I was eight, I never experienced sexual fantasies with him as the object; I never wished my mother dead. Freud, himself, would have sent me home.

I’m going to the bookstore this afternoon. When I passed by the window a few weeks ago, I saw a new Ian Fleming book. If you want fantasy, read James Bond.

June 25: I *did* go to the bookstore yesterday. It was such a strange experience (but, then all of my experiences lately have had a touch of the unusual). As if a magnet pulled me, I walked right past James Bond, Ellery Queen, Louis L’Amour to the section marked philosophy and religion – two subjects I never really cared to know more about. I can still remember Mother’s father, a fundamentalist Methodist minister of the old school, chastising my friends and me for playing “Go Fish” with a deck of poker cards.

In a state of mental rebellion, I stared at the shelves of paperback books, trying to pronounce foreign names and words such as Nietzsche, Bonhoeffer, existentialism. I don’t know why, but I reached down on a bottom shelf, pulled out a book with some sort of golden idol on the cover and took it to the counter.

“Interested in the esoteric, Mrs. Courtney?”

I recognized one of James' students behind the cash register. When I handed him the money, I smiled.

"Reincarnation is quite a subject, Mrs. Courtney," he continued, dropping the book in a paper bag. "It might be the only way to explain this whole Vietnam thing and why people seem to be in such a hurry to die."

I attempted reading the book last night. Frankly, it seems to me that living one life would be enough. Why would these impoverished, underprivileged, starving Indians choose yet another existence little different from the one just completed? And, as far as those little Indian children remembering who they were in a past life, all kids make up tales. It's part of a child's stage play. Mother tells of the time that I, as a two year old, cried to go home to Tulsa, Oklahoma. Those who believe in reincarnation would say that I had lived a life in Tulsa. No. I was born and raised in Lubbock, Texas. I've never been to Tulsa, have no desire to go and certainly have no past-life memories. Some people are so eager to prove a point that they will resort to any little piece of what they consider evidence that backs them up.

Actually, when you think about it, it's almost distasteful. If I mess this life up, I can come back and try again. Reincarnation leaves no incentive to make this life the best possible. Reincarnation removes any responsibility I should feel to make this a better world.

James came in after I went to bed last night. I roused when he opened the bedroom door but quickly went back to sleep. I didn't dream, barely turned over the entire night. At least my sleeping patterns are improving.

I have an appointment in a couple of hours at the beauty shop to get my hair done. I think I'll leave early and shop a little. A new tie for James. Maybe a mini-skirt for myself.

June 26: There is a small travel agency next door to the beauty shop I use. Strange that I'd never noticed but, yesterday, while waiting for Eileen (my hairdresser) to complete her patron before me, I looked past the sun's reflections and into the window. Blonde Dutch girls and boys chased around windmills, their wooden shoes, amazingly enough, staying attached to their feet. On a rotating display, Chinese women in straw coolie hats and black cotton pajamas stood beside elaborately dressed and painted Geisha girls, while gray rock and forested volcanic mountains advertised the grandeur of the Orient. I had turned to leave when a flash of orange-red attracted my attention and I glanced, then stared closely at a beautiful green mountain scene with red buttes and mesas scattered throughout the valley below. GRAND CANYON, the poster read. I must have stood there for a full twenty minutes, just staring, before Eileen came out to find me.

I know now that the Grand Canyon is near the place where I walked with that unknown lover of my dreams. Maybe my subconscious is telling me to make a trip to the Grand Canyon. What is the phrase that the kids are all using nowadays? Follow your intuition?

June 27: Actually, it wasn't bad at all – not nearly as grueling and emotional as I had imagined it could be. Dr. Lewin is, as Elizabeth had told me, *intense*. Everything about him reflects energy, vigor, concentration – from his carefully parted light brown hair to

his crisply pressed slacks and freshly polished loafers. A person could drown in the reflections in his warm brown eyes. I warmed to him instantly. He is not pretentious, pompous, pseudo-intellectual, dogmatic. Actually, we didn't have a session. We talked (or rather, I talked and he listened) about current events, about James, about mother, about my uncompleted master's thesis. He didn't pry into my family life or ask about adolescent traumas. He wanted to know what kind of books and movies I liked; we discussed common interests in that we both like Jack London and Zane Grey, even though most people consider them old-fashioned. Our backgrounds are similar, to a point. I grew up in Texas and he grew up in Oklahoma – near Tulsa, to be exact. I told him of my entry in the diary and he laughed.

Actually, I like Dr. Lewin and I like our sessions. We have scheduled another appointment for July 8 and I'm looking forward to it with great anticipation.

I forgot to ask him about the Grand Canyon.

July 7: I was afraid that I wouldn't get back in time for my appointment with Dr. Lewin tomorrow. Aunt Mattie, my mother's oldest sister, fell and broke her hip. She called shortly after I returned from my appointment with Dr. Lewin and I left for Oregon immediately. James was nowhere around, I couldn't reach him at his office, so I left him a note.

Aunt Mattie has always has always been what I want to be when I'm in my sixties – vigorous, full of energy, humorous, caring, compassionate, totally involved in and with life. Actually, she broke her hip falling off a ladder while painting an “elderly” neighbor's windowsill.

“It’s not a bad break, dear,” she told me when I arrived. “The doctor is releasing me tomorrow, but he insists I use a wheelchair. Heavens, I have too much to do to let something like this stop me!”

And she didn’t let it slow her for long. As usual, with a bit of flattery and gentle coercion, she had me doing the work for her. From the background, she supervised. I trimmed hedges until my palms blistered from pressing the wooden handles of the hedge-clippers, but the kids at the orphanage picked up the spiky trimmings and carted them off before they held a cookie and Kool-Aid party for Aunt Mattie and me.

At the nursing home, Aunt Mattie needed no assistance. Even in the wheelchair, she still managed to make that old piano hum as the residents gathered around and sang.

“My niece almost became a professional singer,” she told them. “Kara, sing for the ladies and gentlemen.”

I hadn’t performed in years, not since the Miss Texas pageant in 1959. I tried to decline, but Aunt Mattie insisted.

“How about *The Old Rugged Cross*?” one elderly man suggested. “We can sing along with you.”

How could I resist?

Full days had no dampening effect on Aunt Mattie’s vitality. Bingo one night, poetry class another, neighborhood dinner parties, and ladies’ group the last night I was there. I begged off, claiming I needed to pack but, as I sat on the hand-quilted coverlet at the foot of my bed, I listened to the laughter and lively conversation from below. If it hadn’t been for Dr. Lewin, I would have stayed with Aunt Mattie.

July 8: It was a great day, a terrific afternoon and a wonderful visit with Dr. Lewin. Again, he asked no probing, leading questions. Never an innuendo about my possibly being other than normal. This time, we talked about my visit with Aunt Mattie, my childhood playmates and pets. He related an incident about his learning to swim. An older cousin had thrown him in a swift flowing river and the poor child had to learn to swim to save his life. I felt terrible. I felt as if I should have been there to help him. He went on to ask how I felt about helping people and did I feel that I was missing out on people-rewards I could be receiving. It seemed that I had only sat down in the comfortable chair across from his desk when it was time to go.

I wonder what James would think if I quit graduate school for good and volunteered myself in some local program to help people.

July 9: If I had been honest with myself, I could have anticipated the answer James would have for my proposal to join in the social revolution.

“You have a graduate assistantship,” he told me. “And that helps pay the rent. What happens when we lose that income?”

“A hundred dollars a month?” I questioned. “I don’t see how that could possibly disrupt our present style of living. We never go anywhere or do anything. You make enough money to support our current style of living.”

“I suppose we’ll have to dip into your trust fund to make ends meet.”

“We might,” I said, angry that he was attempting to manipulate me. “As far as I’m concerned, we can use it to *live* on. The yearly interest is far more than our combined salaries.”

“Think of the future...”

“I’m damned tired of thinking of a gray future with colorless people and nothing to do other than twiddle my thumbs,” I interrupted him. “That’s the only future I can see unless I do something about it now!”

The corner of his mouth turned down. I knew he was going to say something about Aunt Mattie and her feminist beliefs. I stalked out of the house, climbed in the aqua Falcon and here I am, at Aunt Mattie’s, sitting in the middle of the bed, feeling warm and cozy and wanted.

Tomorrow, we’re going to ‘organize’ Aunt Mattie’s attic.

July 10: James called three times last night. Aunt Mattie, dear that she is, covered for me by telling him I was asleep and she wouldn’t disturb me. At one point, I know he must have asked something about the trust fund because Aunt Mattie grew snappish and informed him that she had no need for my money, that she could support a small army on her income.

But, today was fulfilling. Aunt Mattie, desiring to try out her aluminum walker, suggested we go to a Jewish deli at mid-morning for bagels and cream cheese. We stayed for an hour and talked with the owner, a stooped man with soulful eyes and a crude number tattooed on his arm.

“How can we think that we have problems?” I asked Aunt Mattie after we were on the street. “That man survived the horror of those Nazi concentration camps. Hitler was a madman!”

Aunt Mattie struggled over a patch of uneven concrete. Then she stopped and turned to me.

“We all share his guilt, sweetheart. That desire to vindicate ourselves is what pushes people like you and me to help others.”

I suppose she is right. We spent the earlier part of the afternoon helping sort out and package canned goods at a relief center. Each box will go to a needy family. Using Aunt Mattie as an example, I contemplated using my trust fund for such a cause. Several years ago, she traveled to Mississippi and set up some sort of escrow to help support a black church.

Around four, we went back to Aunt Mattie’s house and up to the attic, no small success, considering the metal contraption she is using to help her walk. She found a comfortable leather-seated rocker and proceeded to direct me. The attic was remarkably organized and dust-free, considering that it contained forty years of accumulated keepsakes. The thought crossed my mind that she might be looking for “busy work” for me.

Midway through stacking boxes on the right side of the stairwell, I discovered an unsealed box. When I picked it up to move it, part of the contents spilled on the floor.

“Don’t worry, honey,” Aunt Mattie said. “Those are just old mementos. Pack them back up and use that tape on the shelf over there to seal the box.”

Neatly stacked and tied packets of letters – all in the same handwriting. All old and yellowed. A framed picture of a handsome officer.

“That was the man you moved out here to marry,” I said.

“Bob,” she agreed, her smile gentle, her eyes far away. “Bob, my soulmate. Only one minor wound in France during all those years of war.”

“And he drowned the day before you were to be married,” I finished, remembering the story from my youth. “Just when you finally were going to be together.”

“But we are,” Aunt Mattie said, her face brightening. “Bob and I are always together.”

I turned my back. She looked so happy. Who was I to question her philosophies?

“It’s almost dinnertime,” I said, attempting to sound cheerful. “We’d better maneuver you down those stairs and dust you off. The Simmons are coming over.”

July 11: Aunt Mattie had a bad day. I think it had something to do with going up and down those stairs yesterday. She spent all morning in the living room, her right leg propped on an ottoman. When I offered to complete the attic-cleaning, she protested. We were going to talk.

Oh, no, I thought. Aunt Mattie thinks I’m crazy, too.

“Did Mother call?”

“Now, Kara. You knew that without asking me. You also know that I gave absolutely no credence to her unfounded accusations.”

“Thank you, Aunt Mattie.”

“But, sweetheart, if I’m to help you at all, you have to tell me what is going on with your life.”

I told her. I began with the old man and the crystal skull. When I received no chastisement or criticism about that, I went on to describe the dreams, the déjà vu, the lost days at Big Bear, the rapid disintegration of my marriage, my appointments with the psychiatrist. When I had finished, I raised my head and looked at her. She seemed to be lost in some reverie of her own.

“Aunt Mattie?”

“You’re not crazy, darling,” she assured me. “A few of us are close enough to our souls that we find ourselves seeking the ideal to fulfill our lives. We are not satisfied with the ordinary because we remember perfection.”

“Like Lealia,” I whispered. “Like Lealia.”

July 12: I am filled with antipathy. I must return home tomorrow because of my appointment with Dr. Lewin the following day. Yet I don’t want to leave Aunt Mattie and my newly discovered peace and contentment.

Aunt Mattie understands my dilemma. She also feels that she, alone, cannot provide all of the emotional support that I need. From what I have told her of Dr. Lewin, she considers that he, because of his training and experience, can help me through this crisis.

“You can come right back to Oregon, sweetheart,” she told me. “If need be, we can arrange for you to fly back and forth for your appointments. There are planes every day out of Portland to the Los Angeles area.”

I must prepare myself for the trip home.

July 13: I arrived home at a little past six this evening. James had dinner ready for me – grilled steak and baked potatoes. Although I couldn't eat the steak (it was rare and I can't stand bloody meat), I put spoons full of butter on the potato and it filled me.

He was so atypically solicitous. Not since the early days of our marriage had he provided me with such undivided attention. After we had completed the meal, he cleaned the table and washed the dishes while I sat in the living room, sorting through personal mail that had been delivered while I was in Oregon. One thick letter appeared to have been opened after its initial sealing; scotch tape held the flap in place. Phoenix, Arizona. I tore it open – a claim ticket from a Phoenix pawn shop; a note informing me that I had forgotten my stub a few weeks earlier when I had hocked the ring – my two carat Colombian emerald, given to me by my father on my sixth birthday and kept by my mother until my sixteenth. It had been too large for a six year old finger but too small for an adult ring finger. After checking the date on the ticket, I realized this event had transpired during the days I had lost at Big Bear. I hadn't even realized that I'd had the ring with me. Eight hundred dollars. What had I done with the money?

Sensing I was being watched, I looked up. James stood at the doorway leading to the kitchen.

“Now do you remember?”

“You opened my mail!”

He didn't bother denying my accusation.

“Don't get defensive,” he said. “Sounds to me like you're trying to hide something. Like maybe there was someone with you when you hocked the ring. Maybe I'd better call that shop.”

I felt tears burn my eyes. I wouldn't let him see me cry.

And then he told me that I had no appointment; Dr. Lewin was in Washington, D.C., having been called there by some bigwigs who headed a national committee on which he served. He would be gone for nearly two weeks. His office had called and given this information to James three days ago.

James had known all the time. He had known while I was still in Oregon. He could have told me.

July 14: James took today off. Perhaps he was attempting to assuage his guilt by doing something for me. I braced myself to meet him halfway. We drove north along the coast and visited some of the art galleries and shops near the highway. Near noon, we found a small store and bought some luncheon meat and bread. Up the road a few miles, we stopped for gasoline and bought soda pops. Then we turned off the main road, toward the ocean, drove down parallel sandy strips and stopped to picnic at a rocky inlet.

The most at-peace with him I'd felt in weeks, I sat on the sand with my back against a grainy boulder. James slapped the sandwiches together and handed me one, along with a pop. I could feel him staring at me even though I kept my eyes on a wet boulder a few feet out in the ocean, waiting for the gulls to sweep down and grab the tiny ocean flora and fauna.

"How do you feel?"

His voice came through a tunnel. The sound of waves slapping against shore, the squeals and squawks of the birds, came to me as clear as a bell. The smell of fish

pervaded my nostrils. I shook my head away from the aquatic scene and turned to look at him.

“I feel great, James. Better than I’ve felt in a long time. We should do this more often.”

Again, a guilt-ridden look.

“I’ve been working too hard on my degree. I’ve spent too much time with Aunt Mattie lately. I’ve not been taking enough time to enjoy life with you. I’ve missed our walks on the seashore, picnics in the park. We should take a ride in the mountains.”

He turned away his head. Now *he* stared at the algae-covered boulder.

“James, everything will be okay now that I’m seeing Dr. Lewin. I feel better already. Lots of people have problems worse than this. We’ll get it all worked out.”

He still stared at the rock. But he nodded.

At that moment, five teenagers, clad almost identically in pastel shorts, tennis shoes and madras shirts, invaded our solitude. After a few minutes, James began gathering up the remnants of our picnic and I followed him to the car.

He talked very little on the way home. I’m not sure that we had *any* conversation. Lost in my own thoughts about how I would try to be the perfect wife, I didn’t really notice his silence until we were driving through campus, a couple of blocks from home.

“You look tired,” he told me when we got inside. “Why don’t you go and lie down awhile? I’ll grab a bite to eat at the union.”

I *was* tired, much more tired than I should have been after such a mild outing. When I came out of the bathroom after washing my face, James was on the telephone.

“No, I didn’t have the right opportunity. It’s not going to be easy. You know that.”

“Who was that?” I asked when he got off the phone.

“Dr. Richards from the Sociology Department. He wants me to talk to Dr. Maynard and try to get him to speak at the faculty dinner next Thursday.”

It sounded logical to me.

July 15: I’m an addict. In the middle of the night, after hours of tossing and turning, I retrieved the crystal skull from the closet and put it under my pillow. Already, I had forgotten the pain of Lealia’s experiences; I remember only nostalgic tenderness of other dreams.

I wish Dr. Lewin weren’t at the other end of the nation. Of course, what is my need compared to the needs of the other people he is championing at the nation’s capitol. I read about it in the newspaper this morning. He is part of a committee to help gain civil rights for black people. I suppose if I had ever thought about it, I would have been part of the same movement because I’ve always championed the underdog. But I had grown up in a neighborhood and schools with no “coloreds” other than domestic help. If anyone had ever tried to take away anything that belonged to Mamie, our cook and housekeeper, I would have fought them to my last breath. I foolishly thought that the only difference between them and me was the color of our skins.

But, that is digressing. Back to the events that led to my reclamation of the crystal skull. It all started with a phone call yesterday at noon.

“Mrs. Courtney, this is Dr. Richards. Is your husband at home?”

“No, Dr. Richards. He should be eating at the cafeteria. Did you look for him there?”

“No. No. I just saw him a few minutes ago and he shouted at me that he was going home to eat lunch.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” I told him. James always ate lunch on campus. What was this about eating lunch at home? “Should I have him call you when he arrives?”

“Definitely,” the gruff voice answered. “Tell him to call me right back. I’ll wait here at my office. Last week, your husband asked Dr. Maynard to speak at a faculty dinner and, although Dr. Maynard agreed, I have no official confirmation from James.”

“I thought he called you last night.”

“My dear young lady, if your husband called last night, he didn’t talk to me. I have just this morning returned from a week out of town.”

I hung up the telephone. Why had James lied to me? What was he trying to hide? And where was he now when he had told the professor that he would be here for lunch?

Without thinking, I dialed Elizabeth’s number. No, she didn’t know where I could find James. Yes, when she returned to the office, she would remind him to call Dr. Richards. In the background, I could hear tinkling of ice in crystal.

After the conversation, I stood, paralyzed, for a moment. I wanted to grab my keys and rush out to the aqua Falcon. Elizabeth’s apartment is only four blocks. I could even walk. Out of breath, I could watch the two of them leave her apartment.

I just wish they would have told me. Why did they feel the need for deception and lies? Maybe it was even a business luncheon. But why cover it with lies? How much more of our three lives can be built on fabrication?

I wanted to go somewhere, anywhere, to be away from the horrible feeling of needing to do something but not knowing where to start or what to do. Since marrying James, I had dropped all of my old undergraduate buddies who had stayed on campus for graduate school; Elizabeth has been my only current friend. With Dr. Lewin out of town, I have no one to talk to.

Rather than confront my husband and my sister, I walked in the opposite direction, toward the ocean. Walking has always helped me to sort out my thoughts and the exercise would probably accomplish miracles toward my being able to sleep that night.

The beach brought back memories of the old man and the crystal skull; window-shopping brought back memories of Elizabeth, the reincarnation book and the picture of the Grand Canyon. Before starting home, I stopped in the bookstore and found a travel book on the western states which included a large pictorial section on Arizona.

A note from James on the kitchen table informed me that he would be working late, and therefore, would simply spend the night on the couch at his office rather than bothering me. I crumpled the note into a tight little wad and threw it back on the table amidst food-caked breakfast dishes.

I love Arizona. Majestic, stark, barren mountains. Sparkling clear waters flowing through serene dells. Muted pinks, reds and yellows fuzzed on cactus plants in the springtime. Snow capped mountains. Solid, sandstone mountains, their red hues weathered pink and smooth over the years by the constant winds. Trees that became rock over millions of years. Ghost towns, Indian reservations. History. I love it.

Near midnight, I closed the book, turned off the lamp above my chair in the living room and crawled into my un-made bed. Every time I almost got to sleep, something inside my head snapped and I was instantly awake. I actually climbed out of bed to find a sleeping tablet. In the dark, I opened the closet door rather than the bathroom door next to it.

All resolve to deny the crystal skull disappeared. I felt among the tissue papers until I touched its cool surface. And then everything felt right.

I slept well the rest of the night.

July 19: My dream lover has returned. I have not seen him as yet, but I feel him nearby. Again, as in the first dream, I am on a high cliff overlooking the canyon. I feel absolutely no fear even though the bottom of the canyon is thousands of feet away and the sheer face of the cliff provides few handholds. I now know the true meaning of immortality – he has finally come back. My doubts and fears have been erased. That is where the dream ends.

I am so happy. Even James coming in at noon and throwing a minor tantrum couldn't take away from my glow of happiness.

Still in bed and napping, I didn't hear the front door open. The first indication I had of his presence was the slam of the bedroom door. I raised my head from the pillow and blinked.

“Don't you have anything to do?” The deceptively gently voice reflects a technique he learned years ago to throw his opponent off guard.

“Not really,” I said, sitting up in bed and stretching. I felt the crystal skull roll down my chest to my stomach and I gripped the covers around my breasts. James must not see it.

“What about the *house*?” His voice grew louder.

“It’s here,” I said, shrugging my shoulders and smiling what I’m sure was an inane smile. “There’s no where for it to go.”

“You know exactly what I mean, Kara,” he said, his voice becoming remarkably strong and authoritative. “There is food rotting in the kitchen, towels mildewing in the bathroom and this bedroom smells stale.”

“If you would hang the towels on the rack instead of leaving them on the floor,” I said sweetly, “they wouldn’t mildew. My towels never mildew.”

“Obviously,” he said, curling his nose in a sniffing manner, “you haven’t used one lately.”

I laid back on the pillow and closed my eyes. I really didn’t want to listen to him.

“Damn,” he muttered, walking out and slamming the door behind him.

I slept the rest of the afternoon. Around eleven tonight, I awakened for a short while and decided to write this. I’m ready to go back to sleep now. I can hardly wait.

July 21: Than goodness for the automatic battery operated calendar Mother bought last year in some specialty store in Dallas. Otherwise, I would have no idea as to the date.

I’ve slept for two days! Since my last entry, I have not awakened! I didn’t think a human could do that. Usually, after ten hours, my bladder is full and I have to urinate. I checked, but I don’t think that I wet the bed. What a foolish statement for an adult

woman to make! James must have spent those same two nights at his office or somewhere he could find a nice, soft bed. I wonder if I should eat something before I go back to sleep.

July 24: James is in the living room talking on the phone. His voice is low and I can't understand his words, but his tone is urgent. I thought I heard Elizabeth's voice earlier.

July 29: I am home again after five days in the hospital with tubes entering or leaving every orifice of my body. I don't know what happened. I don't remember a thing about the last few days. I don't feel ill. There are no wounds on my body. My crystal skull is gone. Someone has taken my crystal skull. I *must* have it.

July 29: My second entry today. They think that I am stark raving mad. Senseless. Psychotic. I can't let them discover this account I've been keeping.

This morning when I discovered my crystal skull missing, I screamed. Partially in dismay and grief, partially in anger. But it accomplished what I wanted. Elizabeth appeared at the bedroom doorway (A safe assumption would be that she is sharing the guest bedroom with James).

“What is it, Kara? What can I do for you?”

Her eyes were full of guilt and something else. Elizabeth is afraid of me. I like this feeling of power.

I screamed again, tugging at my pillow.

“What do you want, Kara?” I could feel the panic building in her. “Do you want the skull?”

I said nothing, just stared at her. She rushed from the room and I heard them arguing in the hallway. James was adamant; he intended to dispose of the crystal skull as quickly as possible.

I screamed again and again. A few minutes later, Elizabeth came in. She carried the skull gingerly, holding it away from her body.

“Dr. Lewin says you are to have the skull,” she said, her voice shaky. “And you need to take one of these pills to sleep. The doctor will be here to see you in the morning.”

I acquiesced, holding the pill under my tongue while I drank from the glass of water. As soon as Elizabeth left the room, I spit out the pill and held the crystal skull to my chest.

I will see Dr. Lewin tomorrow.

July 30: Dr. Lewin was here early today, but I couldn’t make myself awaken enough to talk to him. I know my eyes were open because I looked into his gently brown ones, but I couldn’t make my vocal cords work. He patted my shoulder and his touch felt so good, so strong, so safe. I wanted to plead with him to stay.

Maybe I ingested too much of the pill last night. Or maybe it was the dream. This was a cold dream. A cold life and a cold death.

I am on a great sheet of ice; it stretches as far as I can see in any direction. Behind me are the homes of my fellow villagers and myself, homes made of frozen blocks of ice and thick animal hides.

I know that my husband, Manao, and I built our home here on this plain long ago, when we had just become man and woman, had joined our hearts for life. That much of our lives had passed again before the Great Spirit had seen fit to bless us with a beautiful son. A son who is beautiful, loving and giving. A son who works with his father repairing the nets and cleaning the fish; a son who works with his mother to repair the home and fashion animal hides into clothing.

Strangers and villagers alike speak with awe as they observe the close relationship between the small child and his father. They watch the two sets of hands tying knots and they remark of the miracle that Manao and I were allowed to bring this child into the world at a time of our lives when we should be holding children of our children.

“My mother,” the boy would often say, “my respect for you is greater than the long day that comes but once every twelve moons and my love for you surrounds you more intensely than the great night that shelters us at the other time.”

My Linae, my son. He is into his eighth long day now and, instead of playing around the lake as do the others his age, he sits beside his father at the circle of elders. He has left his father to run to me now, throwing his arms protectively around my waist. I look over his head past the circle of elders, and see the source of his disturbance.

It is one of the great golden men. Although I have never seen one, Manao has told me of these men. When he was but a youth, he saw them. They came in big boats

with many timbers and they carried some of the young village men far away, never to be seen again. I clutch my son to my body.

Manao rises from the circle and walks toward the man who has now reached the edge of our settlement. "Stay by our home, Kasha," he tells me.

I have never seen anyone like this man. The people from which Manao and I spring are short and stocky, with dark hair and eyes. This man is taller than anyone I have ever seen; his bones are long and rangy. He has hair the color of the sun and eyes like the lake when it is not covered by ice. His clothing is unfamiliar and his leggings and moccasins are made from the skin of an animal of a warmer climate, an animal with little hair.

The man makes sounds in short, loud gasps and his voice thunders across the ice plain. I watch Manao with pride and fear as he reaches toward the stranger to offer him a hand of peace.

Now the stranger's face shows fear. The other elders are standing and moving toward Manao. The stranger pulls a long stick he carries at his side and pokes it at Manao's chest. My son and I watch with weak horror as Manao slowly topples backward, his hands clutching his red-stained chest. A painful, sharp sound that none of this world will ever hear again slices through the friendliness.

I feel Linae attempt to pull away and I tighten my grasp on him. I know instinctively that Manao is now one with the Great Spirit. I also realize that an identical fate awaits my son should I release him. He is not ready, I scream silently. He has not even lived to his manhood.

The other men of the village back away in fear as the stranger gestures toward them with the big stick. Linae still struggles against my hold; Manao lies on the ground, one leg bunched under his body in an awkward position, his life's blood softening the ice on the frozen ground, marking a place on which never again will one of his tribe walk.

"Let me go!" Linae screams, struggling in rage. "Let me try the man who hurts my father."

"No, my love," I whisper. "I cannot. It is my duty – not yours – to avenge my mate, my other half."

I motion to two strong men of the village who move toward me cautiously, eying the stranger with the big stick. Each takes one of my son's arms.

"Hold him tightly," I say to them. "For no reason should you let him go."

"My mother," he screams as I walk toward the golden giant. "My mother!"

The giant's eyes narrow as I approach him. I reach inside my sleeve and draw out a carefully fashioned knife of bone. I will plunge it into the heart of the man who took my husband. But he is quicker than I. The big stick is coming toward me. I hear the cold rush of air before I feel the waves of pain tearing through my head.

"My mother," Linae sobs.

I am cold, very cold. It is dark. Somehow, Manao has rolled underneath me on our sleeping cot. The horror returns. Manao is beneath me, but Manao is dead. I try to raise my head, but the pain is too great. I smell the smoke of burning furs and hides even though I can see no fires in the settlement. The golden giant has burned the homes and sent the people of our village into the cold. I feel warmth trickling between my legs. He

has violated me. My heart sinks. Manao was my only man. Even now, my blood mingles with his.

We are together again, my beloved other half and me. We sit on the ledge overlooking the canyon. The sun washes away the cold from that other life. Again, we are one.

I am tired. Elizabeth has come by three times this afternoon and, each time, I've pretended to be asleep. I must find a secure place for these notes.

August 5: Apparently they think that I can't hear. James and Elizabeth have already come to the conclusion that I can't talk – therefore, I must also be unable to think and hear. That is fine with me. When I am asleep, I am sharing with my dream lover. When I am awake, I know how to find him. Kasha has shown me how to find him.

August 13: They keep trying to force me to eat and drink.

"We'll have to take you back to the hospital again," James says, cajoling me in loud tones, as if I am a deaf child. "And they will put those tubes in your veins again."

I stare at him mutely. I wonder if he can see the hatred in my eyes. Elizabeth can. She no longer looks at me; when she is in the room, her eyes are always downcast.

I drink. I eat. I want control over my situation.

August 23: I think they are putting a sedative in my drink. I sleep all of the time. I must awaken in order to talk to Dr. Lewin when he returns. I'll refuse any liquids today.

August 25: Another cold dream. Will they ever stop? I want the dappled warmth of Arizona sun through green leaves in a shaded dell. I don't want to be cold anymore.

In this dream, I am in a colorless room. I should be warm because there is a black metal wood heater in the corner of the room; a Folgers coffee can filled with water steams away. An open doorway leads to the kitchen; another door, partially open to allow some heat to enter, leads to the boys' room. It is the third door, closed, from which the cold comes.

I feel the heavy cold air slide under the door. Initially, only my feet are cold and then, slowly, the cold touches my ankles and presses up toward my knees. The stale smell of chicken stew lingers in the dank air and I walk toward the door, gingerly touching the metal doorknob and then fondling the cold orb in my hand, twisting it to the right and pushing. I am engulfed by the cold which fills the blue room to the ceiling and flows out toward me in undulating waves. Two grapefruit-sized holes on the outside wall near the floor grow and shrink as the snowy wind whistles through them. It is a bad room with terrifying memories and I wish that I had not opened the door.

Mark is gone. He says that he is visiting with his grandmother. I can't believe him anymore. I know that he has gone to Diane.

The walls of the blue room tilt in toward me. The ceiling grows small, the floor large. The frigid air blows away the smell of stew and replaces it with a more familiar one – that of fear and pain. I shiver and back out of the room, pulling the door closed behind me. I take a dingy towel from a drawer in the chest beside me, fold it into a thick roll and force it under the door.

There is a pay telephone down the road. I should try to call him, I tell myself, trying to ease the anxiety. I want to let him know that I have discovered his affair with Diane. But I do not want him to know because then he will lie. I detest the thought of Mark lying to me. I feel a weakness along the backs of my upper arms and my heartbeat quickens. I pace toward the boys' room, change my mind and move back toward the kitchen. Halfway to the kitchen, I change my mind again and rush in to look at my sons.

They are curled up in sleep together on the narrow twin bed. Gentle gasps assure me that all is right here. I tug the woolen comforter from the foot of the bed and spread it over Cade's shoulders; my older boy is holding Alan in his arms, both lying in the fetal position. I feel warm again; a gentle wave of love passes over me. I feel as if I have never before loved with so much of myself.

Reaching up above the bed, I pull the long brass chain attached to the naked light bulb on the ceiling. With the room in partial darkness, the light from the living room shines a warm lop-sided rectangle on the clean wooden floor of the room. I bend over the bed and kiss Alan on the forehead. He smells so fresh and sweet and warm. Cade stirs and moves his arm so that his shoulder is again uncovered. I wrap the corner of the comforter snugly around his neck and gently tousle his hair. Only today he has told me that he doesn't kiss girls anymore.

My heart drops to the bottom of my stomach, hitting heavily. My thoughts fly to Mark and Diane. Where are they this time? Two weeks ago, Mark had gone to Oklahoma City to look for another job. Diane had left to go somewhere on the same weekend. That strange stirring in my stomach had become stronger and stronger until I had walked to Hilton's Pharmacy and used the pay telephone to call Elsie, my cousin in

Oklahoma City. The machine gobbled the coins I had saved for so long and I described Mark's truck to Elsie. The letter next week confirmed my fears. Elsie had found Mark's pickup at a cottage near the edge of town and she checked with the manager. Mr. and Mrs. Mark Hankins were in Cottage Six.

On the underside of my closed eyelids, I see Diane and a tingle of hate and fear passes over my body. Diane, with her coal black hair, shining almond-shaped eyes, and lovely pink complexion was at this moment lying in bed with Mark, her smooth pink limbs entwining his muscular body.

I open my eyes widely. I cannot close them, I think, my breath coming in short gasps. I cannot stand to think. I must do something. I wipe my damp palms on my faded print skirt. Carry in some more wood from the snow-covered pile outside. Feed the heater.

I have never told Mark why I moved the big double bed from the blue room. Alone, I had disassembled the brown metal frame and, struggling, had carried the heavy box springs and awkward mattress to the small bedroom on the opposite side of the house, a room that the boys called their playroom and which had contained the meager collection of toys they owned.

I have never told him how I had planned the trip with the boys to see my Aunt Mary. It had seemed like such a good idea, taking the boys to Aunt Mary for the weekend. I would not tell Mark, just come back and surprise him. I feel, even now, a shiver go over me, despite the obvious heat coming from the wood stove.

I had tiptoed in the back door early Saturday morning, having walked the mile from the bus station. Mark would be asleep, I knew, and I would just crawl in beside him and we would have the whole weekend to sleep and make love, make love and sleep.

At first, I had not been able to identify the scent that touched my nostrils. Sweet and clinging – almost spicy. As I neared the bedroom, the smell became stronger. The door was closed and I thought how strange that was because Mark must be almost freezing. A surge of love for him passed over me.

I pushed the door open gently and then stopped, paralyzed. Even though I could see the misty cloud my breath made, the two naked bodies on the bed were uncovered, arms wrapped so tightly around each other that one seemed to be breathing for the other.

I had pulled the door closed silently, turning the knob so that there would be no noise. Despair rushed through my veins and I felt weak. I had to get away. I couldn't let Mark find me there. I ran to the bus station and sat for two hours on a cold wooden bench, staring out a fogged window, stale cigar smoke clogging my nose, and waited for the bus to take me away.

Maybe it was a mistake, I told myself as I sat on the bus. Maybe it was not Diane. Maybe it was not Mark. I felt liquid gather on my palms and my armpits, despite the cold. No, it had been Mark and Diane. My bedroom, I thought with repulsion. My bedroom.

I did not tell Aunt Mary why I came back after I had told her I was leaving the boys and going back home. But I felt that she could see the feelings of rage, betrayal, hatred and fear that passed back and forth over my set white face.

The three of us came back on the late Sunday night bus. Cade and Alan shivered as I led them through the short-cut to the house. But I felt a hot, burning emotion that I could not identify.

Because Mark worked the night shift on Sunday, he had already left for work. I quickly buttoned the boys into their flannel nightshirts and shooed them to bed. Then I stirred up the fire, put some more wood in the stove and heated water to put in the red rubber hot water bottle. Alan said it made him warm all over when he had the hot water bottle at the foot of the bed.

As soon as Cade and Alan were asleep, I went to the bedroom – my bedroom. Opening the door, I sniffed the cool air for the scent I had smelled Saturday morning. It was gone. Maybe I had imagined it all. The bed was neatly made, something Mark never did. With shaking hands, I tore back the comforter and white sheets. The smooth bed had no telltale wrinkles. I picked up a pillow and smelled it. The spicy smell was there and I threw the pillow back on the bed. All of the terrible, confusing emotions of Saturday morning were back, throbbing and hurting more than ever.

I tore the bedcovers from the bed and dropped them on the floor. But that was not enough. The picture of the two of them in the bed still vividly crossed my mind. I had known, at that moment, that I could never sleep in that bedroom again. All night, I had moved furniture, struggling and sweating, moving quietly so as not to disturb the boys.

He had returned about two that Monday morning. The first thing he had done was to go to the bedroom to throw his plaid jacket on the bed. He looked at the empty room for a minute and then stormed toward me.

“Shit, Lisa,” he growled. “What have you done to the house?”

Angrily, he had kicked a small metal boxcar across the living room floor and underneath the wood heater. I had watched the toy roll over and over and I had begun shaking. The toy symbolized my stomach, my life. What was happening? I felt weak and small. Then Mark put his arms around me, pulling me to his chest. I smelled his body, felt his warmth, sensed his masculinity.

“I don’t like that room anymore,” I told him, pulling away, ordering myself not to fall under his spell. Did he know that I knew? I mustn’t let him suspect what I had seen in that room. The thing that made it impossible for me to sleep in it, live in it.

“Okay, hon,” Mark said, dropping his hands to his sides. He walked over to the heater where he stood for a moment, back to the fire, looking at me with a puzzled stare.

“I’ll make some warm cocoa,” I said, taking a heavy pan from the cupboard. I poured thick milk into it, watching the icy chunks glob out of the half-gallon Mason jar. I could not let Mark discover the truth in my eyes. I must escape that omniscient stare. He sauntered toward me and took the pan from my stiff hands.

“Here,” he said, smiling at me, his eyes deceptively gentle. “Let me put it on the heater,”

I stood in the middle of the floor and watched him gingerly avoid the scorched Folgers can and place the pan of milk on the black cast-iron heater. A wave of white liquid spilled out on one side and then on the other, making brown bubbles on the stove. As soon as the sizzling stopped, the burnt smell reached my nose and I felt queasy. Please God, I thought. Don’t let me be starting a baby. Not now.

After the hot cocoa, Mark yawned, raising his hands above his head and stretching.

“Hey,” he said, his mouth still partially open. “I’ve been lonesome this weekend. I’m ready for a little love and then some sleep. How about you?”

I swallowed back the nausea. Impressions of naked limbs intertwining flashed across my mind. Calm, I told myself. Be calm.

“I’ve got some things to do,” I told him weakly. “You go to bed. I’ll be in later.”

I stayed in the living room until the fire burned down and a chill crept into the room. Then I tiptoed through the darkness to the bed. When Mark turned and pulled me to him, I whispered, “No, Mark, please. I don’t feel good.”

I shake my head, denying those memories, forcing myself to come back to the present. It is Saturday night, December 6, and Mark has told me he will be back from his grandmother’s in time for church tomorrow. How can I hate him so much when he is with her, I ask myself, and love him so much when he is with me? I try lying down in bed, but whenever I close my eyes, I become lost in a whirlpool of darkness, spiraling downward to something I know is horrible. I sit by the stove and look at the Sears and Roebuck catalog until daybreak; a thought rolls over and over in my mind. I don’t know what it means, but it must be important. I find Cade’s school notebook and tear a lined piece of paper from it. With a pencil, I record these lines:

“I am K’Lei. When we were but spirits of pure energy and light, T’Fai and I united. We blended. We became one pure flame, vibrating to the same dulcet tones. T’Fai is the other half of me. If T’Fai should choose to go, I can only burn with a diminished light and eventually cease to exist. If T’Fai should choose to go, I shall spend eternity searching for our perfect melding of souls once again. T’Fai feels the same. I didn’t ask. I know. T’Fai is my other half.”

I don't know why I wrote those words. I don't even know what some of them mean. But I felt compelled to do it, just as I now feel compelled to find the scrapbook with pictures of our family.

Now I am looking at it. There is one picture in particular that I love. Taken at the county fair last fall, I am holding Alan on my lap and smiling at the camera. The background, one of those typical large screens with nature scenes, is a desert, large red buttes and mesas in the background. Alan is holding my hand tightly; he is not looking at the camera; he is looking at me.

I fold the lined sheet of paper from Cade's notebook on which I have written the strange message. I fold it again and again until it is only an inch or so square. Then I push it underneath the photograph; it makes only a small lump.

It is now daybreak. I ache from the cold. I must put away the scrapbook and awaken the boys. They have chores that must be completed before we go to Sunday School.

Nine year old Cade comes into the living room and backs up to the stove, holding his hands behind him, palms to the heat. He yawns loudly.

"Is Daddy coming back today?" he asks.

"Yes, honey," I say, swallowing the frightful need to tell my child about his father and that woman. "You go wake up Alan and carry in some wood. Then the two of you can get dressed for Sunday School and we'll be ready when Daddy gets here."

The breakfast oatmeal sticks to the roof of my mouth and hesitates at my tonsils before I forcibly swallow. Alan eats his and asks for more.

"Put some sugar on it this time," he asks. "Please?"

He is so polite, this second son of mine. Sometimes, looking into his wise eyes set in a three-year-old's face, I feel that Alan is an old, old man who has absorbed all of the problems of the world and handled them in his own stride. I sense that, by looking at me, he already knows about these conflicting emotions raging throughout my body.

“You won't leave me, will you, Mommy?”

“Of course not, hon,” I tell him, wondering why he is asking this question.

“Never in a million years would I leave you.”

“I'll take care of you, Mommy. Always.”

We are standing on the porch when Mark drives up, just in time to get to Sunday School. The boys go to the small children's room to the side of the main sanctuary and Mark and I find seats near the front where the adult Bible class meets. I feel my whole insides churning and wonder if my outer body is shaking also. I sit woodenly, Mark by my side, while Mr. Evans, the group leader, talks about Jesus and the multitude and the fish.

A door opens and Mr. Evans pauses, waiting for the latecomer to arrive. Everyone turns. She walks in confidently, her head with its shimmering black hair held high. Her lips and cheeks are covered with a red tint and she trails a spicy aroma as she sits down directly in front of us.

Diane pulls off her coat with its collar of tiny reddish-blonde animals and drops it casually beside her. With a graceful movement, she turns around and smiles at me.

“I'm glad you came today,” she whispers, black eyes cold despite her smile. “I was beginning to think that you were a backslider.”

A deep primitive growl begins at the bottom of my stomach. I feel my face turn cold and then hot. My breath comes in deep gasps.

“Hr...umph,” Mr. Evans begins, uncomfortable, sensing the hostility in the air.

“Adulteress,” I scream, standing up, my Bible falling to the floor. “Whore!”

Mark jumps to his feet and grabs me, his hands rough and cold and strange. I reach for the back of the pew in front of me, attempting to keep my balance. Entangled in my fingers are long black shiny hairs. Diane’s hair. I squeeze my fists tightly as Mark throws me to the floor. I smile when I hear Diane’s scream as hundreds of hairs are torn from her head.

I sense the roar of frightened, confused voices. A fire screams in my head. Numbly, I feel the sharp blow to my temple from Mark’s heavy boot.

There is a long period of darkness. It is perpetually cold. Then I am back on the ledge again, above the canyon. But there is no sunlight; there are no leaves on the hardwoods. Cold air blows over the snow-misted rocks around me. I look for my other half. He is not here. And, somehow, I know that he is not coming. I am alone.

August 27: He was here today in the room with me. My dream lover. I called to him, but he didn’t hear me; he didn’t respond. Maybe he does not remember his name.

Several people have been in my room, touching me, probing, opening my mouth, shining lights in my eyes. But he just sat by my bed and looked at me, his eyes sorrowful. He placed his hand on mine which were tightly grasping the crystal skull.

“I’m so very sorry, Alan,” I said. “It worked for Kasha, but it was the wrong time for Lisa.”

His eyes widened.

“Kara,” he said softly. “Tell me more. Talk to me.”

“Not Kara,” I whispered. “K’Lei.”

I watched the light leave his eyes. James entered the room and stood by the doorway, arms crossed over his chest. He shrugged his shoulders.

“I told you, didn’t I?” he said to my dream lover. “She is totally out of her mind.”

August 28: They are going to remove me from my home. Like a discarded piece of trash, they are going to put me in a metal container with a door that opens only one way. They won’t risk taking away my crystal skull; they are actually afraid that I might become violent. Or, maybe they just don’t want to hear me scream. But I must find a way to get this record to Aunt Mattie. Elizabeth is pregnant. Aunt Mattie will help the child, but she must know.

I will write no more.

CASH WILSON'S DISCOVERY ABOUT EDDIE

I closed Kara's diary and looked at Eddie. He lay on my bed in a fetal position, knees pulled up almost to his chin. He slept the innocent sleep of a baby. If I had read the diary without having experienced any of the other events that had affected both Eddie and me, I would have dismissed the words as the mental wanderings of a deranged individual.

But too many of Kara's experiences had touched a familiar chord of memory in me. Too many of her words had awakened some of those dream fragments that Eddie had described. I wanted to know more. I *had* to know more.

"Eddie," I whispered, leaning over him. His breathing remained unchanged. "Eddie," I said, more urgently this time. I reached over to shake his shoulder and he opened his eyes.

"Did you read it?" he asked, a pleading note in his voice.

"Yeah."

"It was the crystal skull in the box," he said, sitting up and finger-combing his roughened hair. "Don't you agree?"

"It must have been," I said. "But I'm not sure how it got from Kara's hands to the church. And I certainly have no idea how a crystal skull could prove my innocence. If

Kara had been the last person to possess the skull, then it should have been found along with the diary. There would have been no reason for Laura to devise such an elaborate plan to reclaim it.”

“Brother Mason told me that some woman had brought the box to the church years ago. Maybe that woman was Aunt Mattie.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But, Eddie, I think that we’re missing the overall statement of the diary.”

“How’s that?”

“Kara’s self-exploration began because she was exposed to the crystal skull and its collection of memories. When the memories penetrated her consciousness, she felt the urge to find her soul twin, the other spirit who would merge with her own to create a truly powerful entity.”

“Then what Laura said in her letter about helping bring about this reunion – how does that compute?”

“Why don’t we go far out in left field and assume that all these heretofore occult principles such as reincarnation, teleportation and automatic writing could be possible.”

“But, Cash. We would have to deny Christianity!”

“Bear with me, Eddie. Perhaps these esoteric thoughts and the principles behind Christianity are just different interpretations of the same events.”

“Possibly,” Eddie said hesitantly, wrinkling his forehead. He scowled. “I don’t think I can go along entirely but perhaps, just for the sake of possible explanation, I can try.”

“Okay. Now try the concept of Atlantis, a lost continent whose inhabitants developed a highly technological civilization thousands of years ago. The citizens of Atlantis perfected advanced means of transportation and communication. Because they were already spiritually advanced, they decided to send out representatives to other civilizations to help raise those people to the same high level.”

“That’s pretty hard to swallow, Cash.”

“I realize that. But, say that one of these highly evolved citizens who left to develop another civilization was half of a Twin Soul.”

“Like Antai and Lealia?”

“Right. Now, Antai said he would be able to find Lealia when he returned from his mission because she would have the crystal skull. Suppose that Lealia, for some reason, being unprepared for the destruction of Atlantis, lost or misplaced the crystal skull. In ensuing lifetimes, she would feel the longing for her other half. She would even be able to recall partial memories. But, not until she possessed the crystal skull, would she regain total memory.”

“Then all of Kara’s dreams were lifetimes in which she came close to finding her soul twin?”

“I think so,” I said. “And I think that the only times she could bring those dreams together and incorporate them into her so-called reality were times when she had the skull.”

“But, why would *Laura* want the crystal skull?”

I looked at Eddie's round face, his crumpled blonde hair, his wide blue eyes behind the thick lenses of his glasses. I had chipped away at his concrete world. Was he prepared to watch it crumble?

"I need some more information before I speculate on an answer to that question, Eddie. Did I read somewhere that Selene was adopted when her mother married Norman Hayes?"

"Selene?" Eddie exclaimed, looking more puzzled than ever. "Yes, she was. Her mother thought it would be psychologically healthier for the entire family to have the same name. What does Selene have to do with all of this?"

"I'm not yet sure. Do you remember her natural father's name? Or, anything about him?"

"I don't know that I ever heard his name. He died before Selene was born. Pat remarried a couple of years later and her new husband adopted Selene...Wait! I do remember something! He was a writer. He wrote college textbooks. Pat and Selene still get royalties from the book company."

Blood raced through the vessels in my body and my head grew light. Could it be?

"Eddie, you *must* get that material from Pat that she told you about. The material that Selene was reading before she left. How soon can you get to Santa Fe?"

"I can fly out of DFW to Albuquerque tonight," he said. "Pat can meet me there at the airport with the information and I can be back within a few hours."

"Then go, Eddie. We don't have any time to waste."

By the time that Eddie left, it was almost ten at night. I stretched out on my bed and closed my eyes. I knew that sleep wouldn't come, but I had to try and organize the information that had pulled at my subconscious all day. So much had happened to generate contemplation. For each incident, my mind discovered several probabilities as to the culmination. I trekked over many of these dead-end trails before I remembered Eddie's discovery: Hold the fragment in your mind, he had told me, and then recall a portion on either side of the fragment.

I concentrated on the feeling I had experienced while talking to Eddie earlier in the day when I had glimpsed another aspect of myself wearing a loose white robe. Warm air suctioned me through a gray tunnel. I relaxed the muscles of my body and felt my molecules dancing in spirals, slowly, sensuously. I am home. The air around me is clean, crisp, clear. Constructed of some smooth, cool fabric, my garment is featherweight and nowhere does it pull at my body, even as I kneel by the large generator to adjust the master crystal. Niah and Moa stand reverently behind me. They are learning the angles to which the crystal must be exposed periodically to maximize spiritual growth for all in the city.

They are almost a Twin Soul, these two brothers. Over many lifetimes, they have honed and developed with identical purposes in mind. Soon they will merge to form an entity more powerful than even I am. With their combined knowledge and experiences, they will be able to negate conditions of greed and corruption that might be encountered in other civilizations.

"Enabler?" The question is from Niah and I turn to look at him. "What would happen to our spiritual balance if someone took the master crystal?"

“Because we have learned to use the crystal as a tool for harmony, catastrophic imbalances would result. Some would become magnetized negatively and some positively. There would be a chaotic state.”

“But the one who had the master crystal would be in control. All would be subject to his desires.”

“And yet one soul alone, Niah, would not be able to control the charges created by the constant collision of positives and negatives.”

“But, Enabler, would not a Twin Soul, perfectly melded, be able to do so?”

Moa has been silent, listening carefully to the content of the discussion. A look of dismay crosses his face. I do not remind him that our souls have evolved past the need for physical expression; Moa is too sensitive and the last step before his merging with Niah as a Twin Soul will be to absorb enough of Niah’s emotional detachment to become perfectly balanced.

“A Twin Soul, Niah, will never feel the need for power.”

As I say these words, a blinding light of great intensity mushrooms around me. Back in my prison cell, I felt a tremendous sense of urgency as if I needed to be somewhere immediately. I didn’t know where, but I did know that the only way I could free myself from this square box was death.

As the remembered familiarity of death gripped me, a great wave of nostalgia surrounded me. Again, I gravitated through that warm tunnel. Again, I felt the intimate surrender. And then I am home.

The air, no longer clear and crisp, carries fragments of wispy ash into my nostrils and I find it difficult to breathe. An ominous gray cloud hangs low over the devastated

horizon. With sadness, I look at my walled city, surfaced again after twenty thousand earth years under the ocean. The beautiful white buildings are scummed with greenish-gray algae. With dread, I turn to the Dome Building, knowing that the master crystal has been gone for these many thousands of years. Knowing that had I taught him as well spiritually as I had taught him scientifically, my protégé would never have stolen the crystal.

“Within the master plan, each soul is given free will.”

I looked up, startled. I was back on my prison bed and the asexual voice echoed from far away. I stared into the darkened corners of my cell as it continued.

“Each soul is also given the opportunity to make restitution for wrong decisions or damaging acts. The act of accepting or declining an opportunity is an individual decision. We provide the opportunities, but we cannot dictate as to how the individual will choose to use that opportunity. If we make the decisions for them, then we deny them their greatest act – that of free will.”

Throughout the discourse, the voice grew more familiar until, at the end, I could almost identify her – definitely female. Who was she that this conversation should be more similar to a scolding reminder than a remarkable message of enlightenment?

“You will remember, R’Kei, when the time is right. For now, it is enough that you remember that *your* responsibility lies with your own actions. Thus far in this life, you have chosen to assume responsibility for the actions of others. By doing so, you have avoided opportunities in which you should have made choices. Earth’s time is short.”

“We’re running out of time, Cash. Please wake up!”

Eddie had returned. I don't remember having gone to sleep, but I must have. Twelve hours had passed since he had left for New Mexico. I recalled the dreams, or visions, with a vividness born of reality. Rubbing my eyes, I sat up on the bed.

"Cash, you've got to read this notebook that Selene's father kept. He was the Dr. Lewin of Kara Courtney's diary. I think that Laura and Selene are both mentally disturbed and that, for some reason, they have to play out the parts in these diaries. Read this one, Cash. Please!"

DR. LEWIN'S NOTES

July 23: I bought this book today at a business supply shop. It is approximately ten inches by twelve inches, bound securely and covered with black imitation leather. The pages are blank and unlined, a perfect canvas on which to paint my surrealistic impressions of the past six weeks – impressions I have ignored or denied since I have found no pragmatic way to explain them. These are impressions which deny my upbringing and flaunt my education and training.

How should I write? Should I use one page per day and examine my frustrations? It is a fairly thick book; perhaps I can allow two pages per day. The first pages will, of necessity, encompass the precipitating factors for this turmoil. Maybe, once I have written the events thus far transpired, I will not even utilize the remainder of the book. Words of optimism, I tell myself, for even these six weeks could cover volumes.

I hold my pen poised in mid-air. How do I begin? Do I start with Kara's gift of the crystal skull from the old man? Or do I go back to the day that she entered my life? Or, should I begin with my mother's death? Somehow, the last possibility seems to be the most plausible; it may help me understand the later and more recent events that have occurred.

I was three years old when she died. Perhaps I should say I was three years old when my mother rejected me. Because how else can a toddler perceive parental suicide?

How many other ways can a child rationalize the deliberate choice of his mother to abandon him?

“Alan’s mother killed herself.”

Our family, being brusque, frank and open, minced no words. No secrets remained hidden in closets.

“Do you blame her? Life with that selfish bastard would cause anyone to want to do away with herself.”

When they told me, I loved her more than I’d ever loved her, but I also hated her. I hated her because she had intentionally left me. It was not as if she had had no alternatives; she made a conscious choice and, in doing so, she rejected me. She left me to grow up in a family where I was constantly shifted back and forth, between aunts, uncles and cousins. She left me to grow up alone. Without her.

I never saw my father after they took her away. He didn’t even come to the funeral. And I didn’t really care. We had never been close, and after awhile, I couldn’t even remember him. Cade, my brother, was nine when it happened and he used to tell me about Daddy, about how mean he was to Mother and how he hit her and ran around with other women. But I couldn’t hate him as much as I hated her. I told myself that Daddy hadn’t had someone who loved him as much as I loved Mother. I would have taken care of her forever. I would have loved her more than she had ever loved anyone.

Despite it all, I grew up as a fairly normal child: public schools, athletics, clubs, etc. When I was fourteen, my father died and left enough money to send Cade and me to the best colleges. At that time, Cade was home on leave after army boot training, and he

spat on the check. I watched him squish the saliva around in his mouth, between his teeth and then pucker his lips.

“Don’t do that, Cade!” I cried, afraid of the look on his gray-white face.

He went ahead. I watched the air bubbles in the splotch of clear liquid spread across the ink. The words and numbers grew limp and crawled on the white background. I pulled the paper from him and swiped it on the back of my black pants.

“Now, look what you’ve done!” I said. “It’s no good now. You’ve ruined it!”

Cade’s arrogant, scornful look was replaced with astonishment.

“Do you mean that you would take anything from that man?”

“Darned right I would,” I told him, folding the check and cramming it in my back pocket. At that very moment, I decided that I would acquire the education and devote my life to studying and analyzing suicide; attempting to discover what kind of psychological hold a loser like my father had over someone like my mother. I would find out why she would rather die than live without him.

Patterns of my life funneled down, after that point, to a fairly narrow pathway. I excelled in school, becoming the youngest graduate, to that point, from my small high school near Tulsa, Oklahoma. After being admitted to college, I sailed through undergraduate school and medical school. When I acquired my degree in psychiatry, I had numerous career offers from well-paying, prestigious companies.

I say that, not to brag, but to impress how serious I was about my destiny in life. How one-minded I became in striving for my goals. My lifestyle was not exactly what I would call normal for a young man my age; three times in all those years did I interrupt my studies to enjoy any kind of social life. I mention this only because one of these

times I met a young girl named Kara Jamison, who later became an obsession greater than my desire to discover the reason behind my mother's suicide.

It was the last break before my internship began, a crisp September day in 1955. Howard, my roommate, another serious young man, suggested we take off a week and go someplace and have some fun. It sounded good to me, even though I really had no idea of what "fun" was, my only experience having been vicarious. I had watched my peers drink heavily, act insane and do everything imaginable to get some sweet virgin into their beds. These were my current models for "fun" behavior.

As it turned out, Howard also had no idea as to the meaning of the word. We ended up driving from Los Angeles in my little MG convertible to Lubbock, Texas, his home town. There, we spent a week visiting his family, eating his mother's cooking, sampling the local movies and sightseeing field after field of cotton.

The last night we were there, Howard's youngest sister, Annie, insisted we go to the high school football game with her. It was the first game I had attended since I'd made the decision about Dad's money, nine years earlier. I had much rather have stayed at Howard's home and eaten some more of his mom's apple cobbler.

We arrived late, and as is with high school games, the highest seats in the bleachers were taken by youngsters using the football game as an excuse to be out at night and didn't really care who won. Therefore, we ended up sitting right on the fifty-yard line with the football team in front of us on our right and the cheerleading squad on our left. Having no real desire to watch human flesh bruise human flesh, I opted to watch human flesh in the form of an energetic blonde who seemed to be directing the cheering squad. I could see only her back and an occasional profile – classic and simple.

Breathtaking. At halftime, I watched intently when the blonde led the cheerleaders onto the field, short pleated skirt swinging saucily. They performed some sort of inane chant, jumped a lot and clapped even more.

Thirteen year old Annie punched me in the side. “Isn’t she just the most perfect woman in the world?” Her voice was awestruck and her gaze filled with adoration as she watched my blonde. Already I thought of her as mine.

“I want to be just like her when I grow up,” Annie said. “She’s almost sixteen, so I have three whole years.”

I couldn’t help but give her a pitying look that I hoped that she couldn’t decipher. Poor mousy Annie with her thick-rimmed glasses, her jutting chin and her eyes that nature had cruelly placed too close together.

“Why like her?” I asked. “She’s just a cute blonde.”

“*Not at all*,” Annie said, emphasizing each word. “Kara is beautiful and she has a perfect body and great complexion, but Kara is *real*! She makes mistakes and admits them. She doesn’t think that she’s any better than anyone else. She’s kind and helpful. *Everybody* likes Kara.”

So her name was Kara. Halftime was almost over and the group prepared for the last cheer. More inane trivia, screams and yells. They all jumped in the air and threw their arms high. And Kara smiled directly at me!

A warm, seclusive smile. A smile meant only for one person. A smile to make a heart stand still. The kind of smile that I had experienced from only one other person. For a tiny moment, I was three years old again, it was the middle of the depression and,

when Mother scooped the last of the sugar onto my oatmeal, she handed it to me with the same kind of smile.

July 24: Yes, I shall need more than two pages of this notebook per day. Perhaps I should take this opportunity to mention that Dr. James Courtney of the Political Science Department here on campus has called three times in the past two days and asked me to make a house call. His wife, it seems, will neither eat nor drink; she sleeps constantly. Although I have referred him to the family doctor, he insists that I be present also. His wife has been a patient of mine. Her name is Kara Jamison Courtney.

Did she remember me when she first came to see me a month ago? Why *should* she have remembered? I was a nameless face in a friendly football crowd from her adolescence. Before her first appointment, I had never spoken to her.

Not because I hadn't wanted to. That night long ago, Kara had vanished from the football field before Annie could introduce me to her idol. Howard and I had left at daybreak the next morning and, weeks later, when I casually mentioned her name, Howard had told me that Kara, her mother and her sister had moved to Dallas. Once, on a trip from Los Angeles to New York, I had a layover at the airport in Dallas. Looking through the thick phone book, I was astounded that there would be so many Jamisons in one area. Intimidated by the fear that even if I found her, she wouldn't see me – or, if she saw me, that she wouldn't like me, I made no further effort. Two years later, at a conference in Denver, Colorado, I met Pat Holmes, a psychiatric nurse. Good, gentle, shy, colorless Pat. She loves me with all her being and her even-temper is a perfect foil for my moodiness. We have been married for five years.

I have told James Courtney that Dr. Pharis, the family physician, and I will be at his house at two o'clock this afternoon to discuss the patient's possible need for hospitalization. It is now ten in the morning. I have three hours.

So, let me go back. On June 22, Pat had taken a call for me and, in her usual efficient manner, had left a note that Kara Courtney would be in for an appointment on June 27. The name is not usual; when I saw it, I felt excitement and anticipation flood through my body. Then logic took control. The Kara of my youth in Texas would not be this Kara, married to a professor here in California.

But the Kara of my appointment *was* the Kara of all my memories, hopes and dreams. Actually, in real life and close-up, she was even more than I had remembered – more vibrant, more glamorous, sweeter, softer, humble, compassionate. For an hour, I fought to keep my emotions under control. I felt as if I had always known her and I wanted to put my arms around her and hold her, to somehow zip my body open and pull her inside so as to be one person and never lost to each other again.

That is the subjective part. The objective part of the interview presented itself easily enough. Married for two years and attempting to complete a master's degree in American Literature, the pressure and stress had become great enough that Kara had suffered a bout with amnesia, four days that she couldn't remember. A pompous husband and neurotic mother, rather than alleviating the stress so that Kara could recover the lost time, had only complicated matters. They were sure that Kara was suffering a "nervous breakdown" – an all-inclusive term often used by those who are unwilling to admit their own roles in a disrupted household.

Only one part of the interview disturbed me and I don't yet know why. When I mentioned having grown up near Tulsa, Oklahoma, Kara related an incident from her babyhood when she had cried for her mother to take her back to Tulsa – even though she had never been there.

We scheduled another appointment for July 8. When Kara turned to leave, it was almost as if we both resisted the impulse to hold each other. Her shoulders drooped when she left my office and I sat slumped in my chair for a long time, thinking of some rather questionable esoteric studies done by a man named Stevenson. In these studies, small children had been able to remember another existence, a past life.

Contrary to my education and training, I knew I would read more.

July 25: Sometimes I think that I, myself, may be reaching a breaking point. I cannot reconcile the Kara Courtney of yesterday with that vital personality who first visited me only a few weeks ago. Although the family physician, a mild, fatherly friend of the family, pressed me to declare Kara incompetent and label her a schizophrenic, I declined.

When I reached the Courtney home, Dr. Pharis had already arrived and he, James Courtney and Kara's sister (I think) sat in the cheery dining room. I would have known anywhere that this room belonged to Kara – it reflected the buoyancy, the zest, the personality of the Kara I knew. These three were totally alien to the environment. I actually felt tensing of muscles and visceral weakness as resentment flooded through my body.

Nothing, however, could have prepared me for the lifelessness, the dullness, the blank eyes in the bedroom. Kara lay on the forward edge of the big double bed, her back

facing the door, curled in a fetal position and clutching something tightly to her chest. On closer examination, I discovered that the object was a skillfully carved glass skull.

“She won’t turn the damned thing loose,” Courtney said, an angry laugh betraying his nervousness.

“There’s nothing wrong with her having the object,” I found myself lying. Why was I attempting to fabricate to protect Kara? Why, for that fact, was I risking my professional reputation with such unprofessional behavior?

“Catatonia?”

I sensed Dr. Pharis beside me. The question, rhetorical because he had already convinced himself of its absoluteness, startled me.

“I have no wish to label anyone with a diagnosis that serious,” I told him. “Especially when this condition could be as simple as a biochemical deficiency or even a manifestation of some physical disease.”

I sensed the negativism vibrating toward me from the area of the room where James Courtney and Kara’s sister stood. They wanted her out of the way. And, for some reason, they wanted her declared insane. I didn’t fight hard enough before, I found myself thinking. I’ll try harder this time.

I touched Kara’s shoulder. Through the thin cotton nightgown, I could feel the bone just underneath the skin. She must have lost twenty pounds in the seventeen days since I’d seen her. Her yellow hair, gummed together and dingy, lay in dirty ropes on the pillow. She smelled of urine, sweat, staleness. What could have happened? I turned back to the three who stood watching me uneasily.

“Tee Fay?”

The weak, unintelligible question came from the bed. I turned back and my eyes met hers. Wordlessly, eyes full of love, adoration and trust directed at me, Kara Courtney handed me the glass skull. Then she turned back over into the fetal position.

“Kara?” James cried, rushing to her side, pushing me away.

Elizabeth (I finally remembered Kara’s sister’s name) and Dr. Pharis moved in closer. Try as they might, none of them could create another response of any type. Holding the skull and hedonistically enjoying the undulating waves of pleasure passing from the glass skull through my body, I watched them as if from a distance.

“Obviously,” Dr. Pharis said, interrupting my gratification, “the problem is not totally psychological. We must have here some physical malfunction leading to a psychological disturbance.”

I placed the skull on a nearby chest of drawers. Almost immediately, I found myself back in control of the situation and possessing a clarity I hadn’t realized I’d had. Within a few minutes, we had the ambulance at the house and Kara was on her way to the University Medical Center. Dr. Pharis, being the admitting physician, asked if I would collaborate with him on the emotional aspects of the case.

I am home now and I have locked myself in my study. Pat, dear heart that she is, will buffer me from the world for a few hours. And she will never question my actions.

After Kara’s first appointment with me, not a day passed that I didn’t think of her – usually many times each day. The feeling was more, it was deeper than the emotion one feels when one simply wants to be with someone all the time. I feel that with Pat. I love Pat. I just feel “whole” with Kara, as if she is a perfect complement for my soul.

Should one of my learned colleagues ever read the above passage, he would be astounded that I, who have espoused such a scientific approach to our discipline, should bring in a metaphysical comment. The soul is not science; the soul is religion. Psychology is science; psychology is not religion. Therefore, the soul is not psychology and has no basis in any of my studies, hypotheses or speculations.

She looked so good when she came to see me the last time. She had curled her long blonde hair and pulled it back to one side. I caught myself wondering how she would look with a flower tucked behind her ear. She had just returned to campus, having spent several days with her Aunt Mattie in Oregon. Eyes sparkling, voice full of music, she told me about helping Aunt Mattie. At one point, I asked her if she had ever considered social work or one of the other helping professions.

“Dr. Lewin,” she said, leaning toward my chair, eyes full of mischief and glee. “I have never considered helping people as being honest work. It’s too much fun!”

“Then do it,” I said, caught up in the aura of her joy. “Work does not have to be a drudgery.”

“You’re right,” she cried, standing up and walking over toward my office window – the one that looks toward the ocean. She stared out for a long time. At one point, I had to remove my eyes from her carefully tailored silhouette because, due to an optical illusion, Kara Courtney became a tall, slender flame. I blinked, she moved away from the window, and I reminded myself that I needed to have my eyes checked.

“I’m going to go out and help people! The Los Angeles area must be full of people who need help.”

“Wait a minute, Kara,” I cautioned. What had I set in motion? “There are agencies that coordinate volunteer activities. I can obtain a list for you. You can’t just start out offering to help; some people out there are not willing to do their share. You want to direct your labors, not waste them.”

“Certainly,” she said with a little girl smile. “I just get impulsive sometimes and so carried away that I’m really not very efficient. That’s what James tells me.”

I would bet he did. In no way was James Courtney equipped to handle the emotions that Kara was capable of experiencing. I remembered Annie, years ago, saying, “She’s *real*,” and I found myself suggesting that she return to Aunt Mattie’s for more experience and guidance. I didn’t want James Courtney to hammer away at the embryo I saw growing within Kara; I wanted to protect and nurture her. Obviously, because of physical, moral and legal constraints on both her part and mine, *I* couldn’t, but I felt confidence about Aunt Mattie’s abilities.

Again, time had flown and I sensed that Kara experienced some of the same emotions that I did. Neither of us wanted the hour to end. We found trivia to discuss. I told her of the episode on the Arkansas River when I learned to swim at age six in order to avoid drowning. When I completed the episode, I laughed, but I read sorrow on her face.

“Don’t feel sorry for that little critter,” I told her. “He survived and became stronger.”

She smiled and nodded.

“I know,” she said. “Dr. Alan Lewin is who he is today, in part, because of that experience.”

“So, I’ll see you next week?”

“Um...Hmmm,” she said and then she frowned. “Listen, are all these things coincidences or do things like this happen all the time and I’ve just been too preoccupied to realize it?”

“What’s that, Kara?”

“When I was a little girl, my father bought me a dog. The dog already had a name, Duncan, because another family had owned him for ten years. Despite that, I insisted on calling him Alan. He belonged to me and he could be called what I wanted and I had always had good feelings about the name Alan.”

I must pause and have dinner with Pat. Tomorrow, I’ll go by the hospital and visit Kara. By now, the sugars and medications should have had some effect on her behavior.

July 26: Her azure blue eyes stared at me, without blinking. Straight ahead, they looked, past this life and into another without pain. Why has she gone away? The nurses say that she has shown no response to any of the tests or to anyone who has been in to see her. Meaning, I’m sure, her husband or her sister.

I was so sure that she would respond to me. She didn’t exactly speak yesterday. It was a type of verbal hieroglyphic but, when she handed me that skull, I knew it was me that she addressed. Knew, without a shadow of doubt, that she had recognized me.

Pat, again, is covering calls and callers for me. It is as if we have a nonverbal agreement; as if she understands my own actions which I must interpret for myself.

Maybe, on some subconscious level, we both communicate and understand that we must apply our communications to our conscious selves.

I must try to piece together the events that could cause an ego to be so shattered within a period of a little over two weeks. Kara left my office on July 8, healthy in body and mind. Today, she is a shell.

I know that she had gone to Oregon the day after her last appointment. I called her Aunt Mattie earlier today and confirmed this. Aunt Mattie also told me that, at the time, James had seemed overly concerned about the possibility of Kara's trust fund being "squandered." Aunt Mattie apparently has the same opinion about James Courtney as do I. I have the feeling, however, that she was not completely open with me – that she knows something about Kara's emotional functioning that she is unwilling to disclose.

I blame myself. Now that I've written it down and observed the words in print, I don't feel a bit better.

For several years now, I have been involved in the civil rights movement – both here in California and nationwide. And when the Reverend James Simpson, a black friend in Washington, D.C., called me the morning of July 11 and pleaded with me to be present at an important "official" meeting, I succumbed. Several senators would be there, possibly even the Attorney General. The reverend felt that my presence would lend greater credence to the group and promote the black equality movement.

I tried to call Kara at her aunt's in Oregon and received no response. In somewhat of a rush, I made a note for Pat to get in touch with Kara in Oregon and reschedule the appointment for July 23. I anticipated being home much sooner than that,

but I didn't want her returning to California – just in case I couldn't manage to leave D.C. as early as I had anticipated.

Pat tried valiantly to reach the Oregon number. After several attempts, she called the Courtney residence on campus and Dr. Courtney promised her he would relay the message to Kara. Pat, not realizing the fragility of the situation, assumed that he would do so.

Aunt Mattie tells me that Kara left Oregon for her appointment with me early on the morning of July 13 and promised Aunt Mattie that she would fly back on the evening of the 14th. She has not heard from her since. Kara's admission to the hospital has her extremely worried, but she is not yet physically capable of travel. I have promised to call her daily and keep her aware of any changes. I still feel that she is being secretive about something that is of utmost concern to Kara.

July 27: She smiled today. She didn't say anything, just smiled that all-encompassing smile and, if a nurse had not been present, I would have taken Kara in my arms and held her. The nurse told me that the neurologist called in by Dr. Pharis had observed proper reflexes this morning; more tests were scheduled for this afternoon.

I will also make an appointment to talk to this neurologist, a Dr. Yen, in the morning before I see Kara. Am I being too concerned about someone who is only a patient? Objectively, yes. Subjectively, I am working in symbols. If I can save Kara, then I will have done all I ever could for my mother.

Pat, bless her, understands.

July 28: The neurologist can find no damage, no infection, no disease, no blockage. Dr. Yen says that Kara is normal. Her temporary loss of voice is probably due to hysteria. But then, as he says, that is my field and not his.

Her face is beginning to fill out again and she doesn't look quite so haggard. Someone, probably her sister, brought in a beautician to clean and style her hair and she wore a baby-blue satin bed jacket.

She is not normal. If she were someone's beloved pet or a well-mannered three-year-old, she might be considered normal. But it is as if someone has pampered her physical being and removed her life essence, that totality which makes her Kara.

What I saw was a docile young lady, breathtakingly beautiful, who smiled and nodded without ever *seeing*. It is as if she is hollow. Absolutely no recognition crossed her features as I sat in the chair beside the bed and talked to her. Her emotions were totally inappropriate – she smiled when I told her that Aunt Mattie was concerned for her; her face remained solemn when I related a humorous incident that had occurred this morning on my way to the hospital.

I'm leaving for Portland the first thing in the morning. Pat has already made the reservation. I don't know how I could have done all of this without her.

July 29: They have released Kara. The fools. They have sent her home! I only hope that my flight makes it back to Los Angeles before Courtney can do any further damage to her fragile ego.

Around noon, Pat called me at Aunt Mattie's with this information. Dr. Pharis had felt it was a needless expense to keep Kara hospitalized any longer as she was

responding well to treatment. Her sister, Elizabeth, had agreed to stay beside her during the day while Dr. Courtney taught his classes at the university. Solid foods had been added to her diet and, if she refused to eat at home, she could be re-admitted to the hospital.

The airplane seemed to have sat on the ground for hours, but we are now airborne and headed south. I will be in Los Angeles before dark.

At the airport this morning when I arrived, Aunt Mattie, a study of contrasts, observed me intently, conversationally and otherwise before she invited me to her house for coffee and rolls. Very protective of her niece, she understandably wished to assure herself that she could trust me.

“I only wish that Kara had met someone like you,” she said once, almost wistfully, after we had talked for a long while. “Instead of that arrogant James.”

Aunt Mattie finally told me, in ultimate trust, of the conversations she had had with Kara during those last few days together. She described the situations quickly, angrily, as if she expected me to contradict, disbelieve or even laugh at her. After a few minutes in which I didn’t do any of those things, Aunt Mattie became less taciturn and, by the time that the phone rang, she had told me most of Kara’s life and about the experiences of the last few weeks.

The thing that bothers me now is the part of Kara’s life about which she told no one – not even Aunt Mattie.

July 30: I cannot write much today. I am angry. No, I am furious. If Dr. James Courtney were a bug, I would go out of my way to step on him, smash him, crush him beneath my foot.

Pat had just opened the door for me last evening when the telephone commenced ringing. She answered, said a few words in a low tone and then handed the receiver to me.

“Dr. Courtney,” she said.

“You’re the goddamned doctor,” James Courtney yelled, fear, anger, and agitation mingling in his voice. “She’s screaming her goddamned head off and she won’t stop! Tell me what to do!

“First of all, calm yourself, Mr. Courtney...”

“*Doctor*,” he interrupted curtly.

“*Doctor* Courtney,” I repeated. “What seems to have been the origin of the screams? The duration? Have you checked her physical needs?”

“It’s that goddamned skull,” he said, his voice rising. “I’m going to take it out to the ocean and throw it as far as I can!”

“Does she have the skull with her?”

“That’s the reason she’s screaming. When she went to the hospital, I hid the son-of-a-bitch. If she thinks I’m going to let my wife spend the rest of her life sleeping with a glass skull, she’s crazy!”

Better than sleeping with you, I thought. I felt pain begin in my stomach; weakness spread to my hands and feet. My head grew light. My mouth felt cold and tight.

“Listen to me, you imbecile. Give her the skull and call me right back. Then, if that solves nothing, I’ll come right over.”

Thirty minutes later, the phone rang. Pat was upstairs and I answered.

“Dr. Lewin?”

The voice with the question belonged to Elizabeth Jamison. She told me that the skull had quieted her sister and Elizabeth had managed to slip her a sedative. Dr. Pharis would be at the Courtney household at ten in the morning. Could I be there at the same time?

Pat walked up behind me as I replaced the receiver. When I turned, I knew she read the despair in my eyes.

“Come over here and sit on the sofa,” she said. “Your hands are ice-cold. I’ll fix you some hot chocolate.”

Pat rubbed my hands. It was over an hour before the feeling returned.

July 30: Dr. James Courtney was noticeably absent this morning when I saw Kara. How my heart goes out to her. She lies, staring at the ceiling, clutching the skull to her body. What trauma has occurred in her short lifetime to cause her to retreat thus? I want to pull her into my arms, comfort her, protect her.

On an impulse, I touched her shoulder. She turned her face to me and, for a tiny instant, her gaze held that clarity from another day. I turned to Dr. Pharis.

“I won’t sign papers to commit her,” I told him. “You saw that look. She’s not insane.”

The only leverage I have now: I'm the psychiatrist of record. And there are few psychiatrists in the area who would attempt to override my decision and risk their own reputations by making a diagnosis contradictory to mine. The family wants Kara committed to a mental institution, but that won't happen until they can convince me of her insanity. And they can't convince me of that when I see lucidity in her eyes. God, Mother, I'm sorry. You had no one to fight for you.

July 31: I am going to Phoenix, Arizona. On August 3, I have an appointment with a woman who calls herself Frenchy. But, first, I have research to do here in California before I meet this woman.

It happened last evening. Faithful Pat had, as usual, been monitoring my calls. She was in the midst of a rather long-winded conversation when I emerged from the study, feeling totally hopeless and depressed about the day's events. Pat motioned me toward her and then excused herself to the party on the telephone, placing her hand over the mouthpiece.

"Darling," she said softly. "This lady is a psychic medium. I know how you feel about people like this, but she seems to have some credence."

Frenchy. Such an unlikely name for the lively, cheerful voice. Such an unlikely title to be carried by someone with this English schoolgirl's accent.

"Dr. Lewin, I'm Frenchy Summers. Before you hang up, let me tell you this: I was in the bed next to your mother when she died. Her last words were an apology to you. To Alan. Now, no one else could know that. Right? No one else could know that Lisa Hankins said those words before she died?"

Poor, deluded lady. If she insisted that my mother had used those words, only my mother and this Frenchy would know. There had been no other witnesses. There was, however, one bit of her conversation that kept me hanging on.

“How did you find me?”

“I work as a records clerk in a library and I recognized you from the picture on the back of your book.”

“But the names?”

“That was harder. I had to write to the Department of Vital Statistics in Oklahoma and find out for sure that it really was you. I discovered that you had taken your mother’s maiden name upon reaching adulthood.”

I hesitated.

“Please, Dr. Lewin. This is very important. It has to do with Kara.”

How could she have known? I have gone from being at the top in my field of scientific endeavor to groveling in the streets with former mental patients. This is the level to which I have reduced myself in the hope of saving Kara.

August 1: I have contacted Dr. John Sanders, a noted psychiatrist and friend who has agreed to function in my absence on the Kara Courtney case. I have not told him why I am so adamant as to noncommittal, only that she still exhibits occasional clarity. John is of much the same bent as I. A mental institution is an absolute last resort.

I have collected all of the books I can get my hands on concerning spiritualism, metaphysics, reincarnation and other esoteric subjects. I will read tonight and tomorrow. Frenchy has promised to meet me at the Phoenix airport the morning of the third.

August 3: I am the one who is crazy. Stark, raving mad. How my dear Pat has gone along with this so uncomplainingly, I'll never know. But I will be forever grateful.

Frenchy met me at the airport at 9:30 this morning. As I stepped from the plane, I searched the meager crowd for a sixtyish woman, probably with white hair and, judging from our telephone conversation, an energetic walk. My only likely looking candidate grabbed an adolescent boy and jauntily left my field of vision. Finally, there were only airline personnel and myself left in the unloading area.

“Alan Lewin! Dr. Alan Lewin!”

Down the long hall, walking at a slow run, I saw a girl, mid-twenties, with long black hair. Despite the Arizona heat, from her turtle-neck sweater to her long leotard-covered legs, she wore black. A portentous messenger, I thought dryly and mentally prepared myself should Frenchy herself be dressed in the same manner. After all, an admitted ex-psychiatric patient must have certain eccentricities.

“Dr. Lewin,” she gasped. “I’m sorry I’m late. I had forgotten how long it takes to drive from Flagstaff to Phoenix.”

Close-up, I observed the girl’s alabaster white face, her deep-set brown eyes, the slight tremor of nervousness in her hand as she reached for mine. Despite the blazing sun, high temperatures and her layered clothing, the hand that shook mine was cool and dry. The accent was the same as Frenchy’s; I surmised that the girl must be a granddaughter.

“I’m so very glad you came,” she told me as we began walking toward the parking area. “I stayed awake almost all night, worrying for fear that you would change your mind.”

“I’m still skeptical.”

“Of course, you would be. You’ve spent years training and working in an area where the existence of either a soul or spirit is denied. Anyone would question your credibility if you just *accepted* what I have to tell you.”

“What *you* have to tell me? I thought I would be talking to Frenchy!”

We had reached the middle of the parking lot and the girl stopped, turning to face me. She paused for a moment.

“Dr. Lewin,” she said, looking directly into my eyes. “I *am* Frenchy.”

August 4: Admittedly, I wanted to turn and run back inside, catch the first plane to the west coast and go home. But something in the girl’s earnest voice compelled me to stay and hear more. The moment passed when I should have left. I spent six hours with Frenchy and, even as I sit on the airplane today, moving back toward Pat and my concrete, sane world, I furtively look around me, at my fellow passengers. Do they observe that I am different?

I feel as though I am moving in a world in which I am slightly out of focus. If only the giant hand would turn a knob, I would again be in focus. But then, the rest of the world would be out of focus.

I must have some time to rest, recuperate and think. I cannot help Kara if I cannot help myself. Pat's uncle has a cabin in northern California, at the base of a snow-covered mountain. I may go there.

August 7: I arrived late this afternoon at Uncle Daniel's cabin. It is nestled in a hollow practically at the foot of Mt. Lassen, with park land bordering the property on three sides. In my search for solitude, I think I have found it. I pause for only a moment's guilt at the thought of leaving Pat so heavily burdened. I have, strewn about my study, information for three books to follow the two already published. She has cancelled speaking engagements, club luncheons, and professional meetings at which I was expected. She has postponed sessions with the few private individuals I still have in therapy and she has, with utmost dedication, acted as a liaison for me with all my colleagues who are astounded by my currently unpredictable behavior.

Earlier, I noticed two squirrels chasing around on the limbs of a pine tree near the cabin window. I think I will hike one of the more public trails, commune with nature and pick up some dead wood in the forest. Daniel tells me it sometimes gets very cold here at nights, almost a treacherous cold, since the days are so deceptively warm.

August 10: I feel something of a renewal of strength, both physically and psychologically. Emotionally, I'm still weak but, with an objective understanding of my situation, that area will also heal.

For three days now, I've done nothing other than eat, sleep, drink and take an occasional walk. I have consciously blocked any thoughts of the outside world. Even my dreams are forgotten before I really wake.

When I drove in, I observed a grocery store in a small community about five miles back up the highway. Although I'm sure that it doesn't have the amenities of our city supermarkets, my simple needs for potatoes, salt, flour and canned goods should be easily met.

August 11: It keeps rattling through my head: Threads of a most beautiful dream. I am sitting beside a pool of clear, sparkling water. Even though I am underneath the limbs of a tree, I can feel the sun's heat and I watch the rippling strands of silver it leaves on the surface of the pool. A fresh, green, leafy smell permeates the surrounding area. I am not alone. Someone is with me and I feel complete.

Jung and his "collective unconscious," I tell myself. Each cell within our bodies carries the total memory of our races. Last night, my cells chose to remember pleasure, contentment, totality. But Jung cannot explain why I felt that the "someone" in my dream was Kara. Or, was it my mother?

Why are the two women becoming confused in my mind? Why am I having trouble separating their identities? Kara is uniquely Kara; my mother was uniquely my mother. It is impossible to have identical emotions about two people, yet my mind has twisted itself to that state.

Freud would have much to say about the situation. I realize that losing my mother at such an important stage of ego development has profoundly influenced my growth,

thoughts and behavior. But this is more, much more, than neurotic behavior attributed to a frustrated Oedipus complex.

Could it be a Pavlovian type reaction? Or a Skinnerian stimulus-response in which the negative reinforcement is always deprivation of love and warmth?

Although I have forced my mind to stay away from it, I find myself being drawn back to my conversation with Frenchy that day in the mountains between Phoenix and Flagstaff. And I correlate that with what Aunt Mattie told me about Kara's intuitive powers developing so rapidly after her acquisition of the crystal skull. And the most concrete evidence of all – my own feelings and reactions during the few moments that I held the crystal skull.

At the time, I had considered Frenchy to possess a massive dose of grandiose delusions. The poor child actually believed that she was a reincarnated version of Maud Wilson, my mother's "roommate" until her death at the mental asylum. She had certainly done her research well. Frenchy not only knew amazing amounts of information about Maud, she related several supposed conversations between Maud and my mother.

Naturally, there was no way that I would be able to convince Frenchy that all of this had taken place only in her mind. If there had been any feasible way to confront her with someone from the real Maud Wilson's past, I would have attempted doing so, hoping to shock her back to a level of acceptable social thinking.

An hour or so after picking me up at the airport, Frenchy drove her decrepit Chevrolet off the main road and into the mountains. Pulling off the side of the road, she stopped and brought a wicker basket out of the back seat.

“We’ll picnic,” she stated. Then, with a pleading look, “Just listen, please. You don’t have to believe me right now.”

Frenchy claims that, at age sixteen, while on vacation with her family, a tractor trailer struck their station wagon, leaving Frenchy’s parents and two brothers dead.

“They thought I was dead, too,” Frenchy said. “We were all crushed up pretty badly. The truck was hauling long reinforced steel bars.”

That was graphic enough.

“Anyway, when they had us all loaded up, someone noticed that my fingers moved. The rest is history.”

I nodded. I could accept and believe this part of her conversation.

“So, from that point in my life until now, I have been developing psychically. I don’t know why. Maybe the accident jumbled my system enough that something started functioning which, for some reason or another, couldn’t have worked earlier.”

I munched on a piece of cheese and waited for her to continue.

“I began remembering a dreary life as a Maud Wilson in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Oklahoma. There were only two bright spots in that entire life. Oklahoma became a state and I made friends with Lisa Hankins.”

Why had Frenchy chosen me for this elaborate bid for attention? Admittedly, I had gained quite a reputation in my field and she might consider that she rubbed shoulders with a celebrity. But, surely, she would have known from my books and research that I could not accept the garbage she was telling me. Whatever her reasons, I felt that I shouldn’t totally reject her; after all, she must have done a horrendous amount of research and have become deeply ego-involved. I listened patiently as she dragged me

through poor Maud's life, from her birth into an impoverished family on the red plains of Oklahoma, through her unhappy marriage to a perverted older man, to her committal, at age forty, to the state mental asylum and finally her death, only a few hours after that of my mother.

And then, as if that were not enough, French went on to tell of a "between-life" existence in which she, my mother and other spirits of like mind and goals communicated on a so-called "Astral" plane. Here, she said, spirits gathered to rest between earth lives; it was a sort of seminar in which they discussed lessons learned and unlearned in the last life and plans for future lives. She hesitated to explain to me that groups of souls choose to be born together in many different lives; that is why, she explained, that we sometimes feel an unaccountable dislike or closeness to a total stranger.

I had done my research and read my books. The terms she used were somewhat familiar. Somehow, though, I suppose I had assumed that those people who wrote the books were just writing about these things, as one would write science-fiction. I didn't think that they really *believed* them. But Frenchy did.

She described to me how she had been working on a term paper during her sophomore year in college and, upon rereading what she had written, discovered that "spirits" had entered her body and it was their message she had written and not her own word choices. I had also read of this phenomenon called "automatic writing." Through Frenchy, the "medium," several spirit guides would transcribe messages of wisdom, solace or warning. Part of my mind had buzzed off to admire the beautiful Arizona mountain view when I was drawn back to her conversation.

“About two months ago, my guides began mentioning you and Lisa. Two weeks ago, they told me of someone called Kara whose soul is in danger.”

“What’s that about Kara?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, Dr. Lewin. I know it is very difficult for you to accept what I’ve told you, but you are the only one who can save Kara.”

August 12: I haven’t slept in thirty-six hours. When Frenchy took me back to Phoenix that day and dropped me off at my motel, she shoved a sheaf of lined notebook papers into my hands.

“You *must* read these, Dr. Lewin. These are original transcripts for my last four weeks’ messages from my guides.”

I grasped the papers furtively, looking around to see if anyone watched the interchange. The circles underneath Frenchy’s eyes seemed to grow darker and pain clouded her eyes.

“*Please*, Alan,” she begged. “We are all part of the same soul group and we *must* work together.”

I have now read the transcripts, one hundred twelve handwritten pages. The premise is repugnant to me; I reject it. Frenchy’s guides have told her that, thousands of years ago, highly developed souls were sent to populate this planet. The souls had evolved to the point that they had no need for physical bodies, verbal communications, or the like. They were pure light, apparently communicating with wave vibrations or mental telepathy. They incarnated (Frenchy’s guides’ expression indicating being born) into physical bodies similar to the ones possessed by the present human race and set up a

civilization on an ancient, now-submerged continent called Atlantis. Here they developed a highly advanced technological civilization and the souls reincarnated over and over, becoming more and more spiritual.

However, some souls were not evolving spiritually as they should; these souls had let the quest for power hinder their growth. Eventually, these power-hungry souls destroyed Atlantis and only a few Atlanteans escaped to go elsewhere and found another civilization.

I had read this premise in some documents written by a man named Edgar Cayce who lives in Virginia. It is not new. Frenchy could have been influenced by this man's "philosophies," although she denies familiarity.

A certain creativity is involved in Frenchy's account – a certain deviation from the Cayce story. Or, perhaps I should say, embellishment. Frenchy's guides have told her that she, in another life, was one of those hardy souls who managed to escape the destruction of Atlantis and go on to establish another civilization elsewhere. This thought is understandable – even the most delusive of individuals wishes to be a good guy, someone important.

But Frenchy's guides have taken the tale even further. They have named my mother, Kara and myself as members of that same group. This has to be one of the most elaborate and well-researched ruses ever. Or, the truth.

My identity is fairly well based on my physical being – flesh, body, mind. My religious background promised me at death either a heaven or a hell. But, even that belief system has become obsolete. I tend to think that this life is all there is and I must do my

best to make the most of it without hurting anyone because I won't get another chance. My mind refuses to accept anything before my birth or after my death.

I am attempting to sift through these handwritten passages and organize the information that Frenchy's guides have offered. When I establish some sort of order, I will study the information carefully. There is a slim chance that something is present in those pages that might help Kara – at least, on a symbolic level.

I am planning a walk now. Birds and squirrels play about on the cabin roof and nearby pines. Fresh air will help me.

August 15: I have a slight fever – nothing about which to worry, but enough to create some discomfort. I become clammy and then flushed. This is all due to the fact that I fell asleep in the forest a night or so ago and became chilled.

I am embarrassed to admit that I don't know how long I slept in the forest, my back propped against the rough bark of a pine tree. I fell asleep in the late afternoon; it was daybreak when I awoke. When I returned to the cabin, I turned on the dusty radio and, after a few current pop tunes, the disc jockey told me it was August 15. I was sure that I went out for a walk yesterday afternoon, August 12.

Time becomes confused when one is not relying on all of the artificial time-keeping devices such as watches, clocks, calendars. The date on my last entry, obviously, should be August 14. I must begin thinking in terms of getting back to the city; I have already been away too long. I'll simply record the information I've compiled from Frenchy's notes, get a good night's sleep and then leave this haven of peace in the morning.

From the “Guides”: T’Fai and K’Lei are a Twin Soul. As such, each is incomplete without the other and, in a sense, functioning at reduced levels. I don’t think there is any sexual basis for this “soulmate” theory, simply two souls who are perfect complements to each other, like two notes of a musical chord. Theoretically, these two (T’Fai and K’Lei) were separated for some reason during the time of Atlantis. I can’t quite understand from the notes if T’Fai was one of the power hungry and was expelled, but the guides are certain that he disappeared for thousands of years. I say “he” because, for some reason, I think of T’Fai as masculine. According to the guides, however, each soul lives several lives as either sex in order to gain full insight and develop spiritual functioning.

K’Lei (whom I think of as feminine) lived through the chaotic disruption of Atlantis and led her soul group to safety several lifetimes later as Lim, a brilliant priest. The destination was, I take it, either Egypt or Central America. After that, K’Lei was allowed to be reborn as Caleta, an Indian girl in what is now either Arizona or New Mexico.

During that particular lifetime, T’Fai was allowed to return to his soul group and be incarnated as Turoc, brother to Caleta. The two soulmates, reunited after thousands of years, swore they would, from that point, continue to be born together. Apparently they did just that, but as stories of star-crossed lovers go, in each lifetime, they recognized each other too late or not at all.

In this most recent lifetime, T’Fai and K’Lei have been allowed the intervention of several members of their original soul group. It seems to be very important that the two function together again as one soul to promote peace and understanding throughout

the world. The goal of the Twin Soul seems to be that of preventing a third world war which could erupt if peaceful people throughout the world are not alerted and organized.

Again, the guides become nebulous and hazy on points, but this part explains why Frenchy felt the need to contact me. It seems that the recalcitrant T’Fai has been reincarnated in this present lifetime as Alan Lewin. Right – me! This idea is totally abhorrent to me but, for the sake of a possible interpretation which might help Kara, I will continue. In this lifetime, K’Lei was my mother and she stepped out of this life at the wrong moment. She has, I think, been granted a reprieve. Through the efforts of Frenchy and an old man (the guides call him an Enabler) who appeared and disappeared on a California beach, K’Lei will be able to communicate and collaborate with T’Fai through the person of Kara Jamison Courtney.

It is growing very hot in this room. My pencil keeps slipping from my fingers. From the depths of my mind, I recall Kara’s joyous recognition that day when she handed me the crystal skull. What had she mumbled? Something about Teefay?

August 27: I am sick at heart. Truly, deeply, hopelessly sick at heart. She is gone and it is solely my fault; there is no one else to blame.

When I didn’t come back to Los Angeles after the middle of August as I had planned, Pat had driven to northern California, to Uncle Daniel’s cabin, and had found me collapsed at the kitchen table, feverish and delirious. After having driven me to the nearest hospital for immediate care, she had had me brought back to the home hospital at Los Angeles where she herself had nursed me day and night through a comatose state which had lasted almost two hundred hours.

My immediate concern upon regaining consciousness was Kara. I asked Pat to read my notes from the cabin. I already knew that she had, with typical love and faith, gathered the notes from the table underneath my feverish head, carefully averting her eyes from my private documentary. But I also knew that she must have the information to help me achieve my goals. Time is short. She awakened me early this morning. Her eyes were red-rimmed and pained.

“I’ve been keeping in touch with the Courtney situation through Dr. Sanders,” she said, replacing my journal on the bedside table. “The family wants her in a mental institution. They already have found one psychiatrist who will attest to the fact that she is a lunatic.”

“What about Dr. Sanders?”

“He’ll go along with you,” she said. “But he doesn’t see much hope for the situation.”

“What about *you*, Pat? I’ve used you, neglected you, placed burden after burden on your shoulders. And you’ve never complained.”

She smiled. A maternal, loving smile.

“You may have doubts about your sanity, Alan, but your journal explains some of my own feelings and actions and even certain life decisions.”

“How’s that?”

“I’ve always felt protective about you – to the point that I would gladly sacrifice my own life for yours. As if I should have done it at some other time and was unable. If I believe Frenchy’s guides, perhaps there was a lifetime in which you, Kara and I were together and I should have saved you from some horrible fate and didn’t.”

I didn't bother to interrupt and correct her. I knew that she had meant to use my mother's name and not Kara's.

"Will I be able to see Kara today?" I asked.

Pat nodded. "Dr. Sanders will be there at noon. He knows that you must be terribly weak, but he would like you to be there with him."

As weak and empty of strength as I was, I somehow managed, with Pat's help, to get dressed and to the Courtney house where I semi-collapsed in a chair beside her bed. The pale, wasted form on the bed could not have been recognized as the same vital young lady I had seen a few weeks earlier. She looked even worse this time than she had the time before when she had been taken to the hospital.

"Why aren't they feeding her intravenously?" I questioned Sanders.

"She's been eating and drinking," he told me. "The question is not one of nutrition."

I looked at her. Poor, vacant Kara. She still clutched the crystal skull. I placed my hand on one of hers, feeling both her dry skin and the cool of the crystal. Suddenly, her mouth moved and a rattle-like sound moved past her lips.

"So sorry, Alan. Worked for Kasha. Not for Lisa."

All of this said in a monotone. There was no change in her facial expression. Her eyes remained blank.

"Kara," I pleaded with her. "Tell me more. Talk to me."

"Not Kara," she mumbled. "Kay Lee."

I waited for a long time, watching the slow, shallow beat of her throat's pulse. Then I became aware of movement behind me and I scooted up in my chair to pull my body to a standing position.

"I told you, didn't I?" James Courtney's voice came from near the door. "She is totally out of her mind."

I faced him and began the long walk away from Kara. In the shadows, his features were indistinguishable but, in his body's posture, I could detect his defiance, his arrogance, his vindication.

"She may be more sane than either of us, Courtney."

August 28: In apathy, I sit here at my desk, a cold cup of coffee on my left. We have two days before the ambulance picks up Kara Courtney to deliver her to Orange Grove Private Nursing Home.

A private mental institution, I chastise myself. I should have been able to do more. I let Kara slip away; her body is now inhabited by someone who calls herself Kay.

Pat understood that I felt I should use the money left by my father. For years, it had remained in a bank, drawing a small amount of interest. Being the student that I had been, scholarships and assistantships had provided my education and I'd never had to use a cent of the money he had left. When Cade had been killed somewhere in the Pacific in 1944, his share had reverted to me. I had no use for the money, although many times I had wished that I could have had it to help my mother.

And, if my mother had actually attempted to communicate with me through Kara, she would have seen this as the best way to use the money. She would have advised me to use their desire to have my signature as a bargaining ploy.

“I’ll sign,” I told Dr. Sanders today, in front of James Courtney. “Only if Dr. Courtney agrees that she may go to a private home rather than a state institution.”

They were all there. Dr. Sanders, Dr. Pharis, James Courtney, Elizabeth, Kara’s mother, two other doctors. They didn’t actually have to have my signature; the others could have done that. But, without my signing, there might have been ethical questions later on.

“I can’t afford it,” Courtney said, banging his fist on a table. “My salary as a professor is miniscule.”

“What about Kara’s trust fund?” Elizabeth said to him, her voice low.

I watched Courtney’s knuckles grow white and the ultimate realization of why he had pressed so hard for a committal dawned upon me. The selfish bastard. He not only wanted Kara out of his life; he wanted her money. Time enough to fret about that later, I told myself. Just get this agreement before they realize that they really don’t need you.

“I’ve already checked out homes,” I told them, ignoring Courtney. “There is a reputable one in San Bernardino County, not far from here, that is equipped to care for Mrs. Courtney’s particular problems.”

“But...” Courtney began.

“This home is indebted to me for services already provided,” I lied. “And they will take Mrs. Courtney as a patient in return for my canceling the debt.”

There being no further grounds for protest, the meeting adjourned in minutes, I watched varying stages of relief cross each face as they made ready to leave. Courtney, the son-of-a-bitch, smiled and offered me his hand.

I turned my back on him.

August 29: I slept on the couch here in the study last night. Sleep has been no problem since my return from the hospital; I have been very weak. Sometime before daybreak, I awoke from a pleasurable dream. Again, I remember only portions. As before, the memorable thing about the dream is my feeling of wholeness, of totality, of completeness. There is something more; I can almost, but not quite, pull it from the recesses of my memories. A voice and a presence.

“K’Lei,” I feel the words tumble from my lips. With surprise, I repeat, “K’Lei!”

Kara lying on that fetid bed, mumbling, “Not Kara. Kay Lee.” Kay Lee.

Naturally, I had only seen the name on the lined paper Frenchy gave me; I had never heard it spoken. Now I turned it over on my tongue. K’Lei.

Dear God, my mother is still attempting to communicate. I must prevent Kara’s being institutionalized and sedated. There is still hope.

August 29: It has been an extremely tiring day. I wish that I could overcome this lethargy. It has been upon Pat’s strong shoulders that the brunt of all this has fallen.

She was already awake, sitting at the dining room table, sipping from a coffee cup, when I rushed from my study with the revelation. She shook her head and moisture

came to her eyes when I told her that I thought Mother was trying to communicate with me.

“We have to stop them, Pat. They can’t take her away.”

“I’m one step ahead of you, Alan,” Pat said, blinking the moisture from her eyes.

“I called yesterday. Aunt Mattie and her attorney should be arriving shortly.”

“I thought that she couldn’t travel,” I said inanely. “What can she do that I can’t?”

“She’s coming in an ambulance,” Pat said, taking another sip of coffee. “Aunt Mattie can make most of the trip lying down. As to what she can do, she plans to force James Courtney into legally releasing Kara into her custody.”

“He won’t do that. He won’t listen. How does she plan to accomplish this?”

“Money,” Pat stated. “Aunt Mattie intends to buy Kara.”

And she did. Cold cash. She and her attorney met with Courtney on campus; I’m sure he was at the bank depositing his cashier’s check when the male nurse carried Kara past her mother and Elizabeth to gently deposit her in the makeshift ambulance. Kara clutched the skull, but now she also carried a notebook of some sort. Had she consciously picked up the book, or had someone placed it in her rigid arms?

I would ask Aunt Mattie.

September 5: The stress and anguish of almost losing Kara and, therefore, my mother, put such a strain on my system that I collapsed the evening that Aunt Mattie took Kara to Oregon. Pat has cared for me here at home and I’ve had no need to be hospitalized. I feel that, with her love and care, I will recover.

Pat is in daily contact with Aunt Mattie. It seems that, although Kara is still completely withdrawn, she has gained four pounds and her color is returning. Pat has made arrangements for the two of us to fly up to Portland on the eighth. I must regain my strength.

September 9: I have reached an impasse; I am stalemated. I must make a decision. Either I rely solely on my education, experience and training, or I plunge totally into the realm of the unknown and accept the explanation given me by Frenchy's guides. I cannot continue fluctuating between the scientific and the esoteric; I cannot continue explaining one event using pragmatism and the next event using mysticism.

Pat and I flew to Portland yesterday. We took a cab to Aunt Mattie's two story turn-of-the-century, Russian-inspired home. She met us at the door, found us comfortable seats in her bright sunroom and offered us tea. Since Aunt Mattie was now walking with the aid of a cane, Pat helped her carry the tray from the kitchen. All the while, I fidgeted, miserable, aching to see Kara.

"Kara has her tea at ten o'clock," Aunt Mattie informed us as she struggled to seat herself in an overstuffed Victorian chair. "I would like you to take it with her, Alan. Perhaps you might explain this latest development."

I looked at my watch. Twenty long minutes until I could see her.

"Tea?" I asked. "Do you mean to tell me that she is capable of feeding herself?"

"She has regained considerable physical strength."

An emphasis on *physical*. A dropping of eyes. Small talk between Pat and Aunt Mattie about the history of the house. Finally it was time and Aunt Mattie led me down the hall to a room on the opposite side of the house.

As bright as the sunroom, Kara's room had cheery yellow walls and a large bay window with filmy white curtains. As I entered, a large woman uniformed in white arose from near the bed.

"Mrs. Burnside," I heard Aunt Mattie say. "This is Dr. Lewin, Kara's psychiatrist."

But, I had neither eyes nor attention for anyone other than the frail figure on the bed. Pillows propped her back and a highly polished wooden tray, covered with a bright linen napkin, lay across her lap. Glossy blonde hair, eyes the color of cornflowers, a tidy pajama jacket, she was the old Kara.

"Alan," she cried joyously. "I waited so long! You've finally come!"

The recognition. The love. The familiarity. The warmth. Sugar on my oatmeal. A beautiful young cheerleader smiling at a serious young medical student. I moved closer to the bed and she reached for my hands.

"My dear Alan," she said, tears of joy mingled with tears of sorrow flowing down her face. "I'm so sorry."

I extracted one hand from her grasp and pulled Nurse Burnside's chair closer to the bed. Although seeing Kara again, like this, aroused new strength to flow through my body, I still became weak upon standing too long.

“I’m so glad that you’re feeling so much better,” I told her. She held tightly to my one hand as I lowered myself to the chair. Where was the crystal skull? Had she no longer the need for its proximity?

“We’ve found each other again,” she said, squeezing my hand tightly. “How could I not feel better? It’s been too long.”

Too long? Ten days? But, of course, she had no recollections of the times I visited her in her home; she was referring to the times before, in my office.

“I was always too impatient,” she continued cheerfully. “You once told me that I was too eager for resolution.”

Had I? Offhand, I didn’t remember offering that advice. Yet, a part of me seemed to recognize it.

“When you left Atlantis, I wanted you back immediately, within the next lifetime. And, when you did return, we had that most beautiful short lifetime together in the red rock canyons.”

I felt my grip loosen on her hand. A spasm ran through my muscles, causing my head to hunch forward. How could I have thought that she had returned? How could I have let my emotions become so unstabilized that I was willing to admit the possibility that my dead mother might be trying to communicate with me through Kara?

“Alan?” I recognized fright in her voice. But her fear could have been no greater than my own.

“Kara, listen to me,” I began. My voice sounded rusty, unused, even to myself. “You can’t continue living in this fantasy world that you’ve created. You have to make yourself come out and participate in the real world.”

She dropped my hand. I felt the feathery touch of her palms on both my cheeks as she turned up my face so that my eyes met hers. I floated in their pool-like depths for a moment.

“Alan,” I felt pressure increase on my cheeks. “*You* must listen to *me*. Don’t make the same mistake that I always did by letting yourself believe that *this* is real. What you call my “fantasy world” is the only real world.”

I missed the pressure on my cheeks as she leaned back on the pillows, a faraway look in her eyes.

“We were always together after that,” she said, her voice growing hollow. “And I always recognized you too late.”

I felt hot tears burn my eyes as I watched the light disappear from her eyes. I blinked several times, squeezing the tears onto my cheeks where they could run down my face and be absorbed in my flannel shirt.

“This time, T’Fai, *you’re* too late.”

The words were a drawn out whisper and, even now, I can’t be sure that she uttered them. I lay my head on the bed and cried like a baby. I felt such a loss. Aunt Mattie’s touch on my shoulder brought me back to my senses and I furtively wiped my tears on Kara’s bedcovers.

“Is this behavior typical?” I asked raggedly, keeping my head turned from Aunt Mattie, staring at Kara’s vacant, doll-like eyes, willing her to return.

“K’Lei?” I whispered. She no longer heard me.

Later, when I had calmed myself somewhat, Aunt Mattie told us of Kara's behavior since she had brought her to Oregon. I forced my tense muscles to calm so I could sit and listen.

"She has been passive and subdued," Aunt Mattie said. "If I had met her for the first time, I would have insisted that she was perfectly normal. Her conversations are verbally coherent and her emotional behavior seems appropriate. But she talks about a past I can't recognize and people that I can't remember."

Aunt Mattie is a strong woman but, at that instant, I could sense the devastation she felt at not being able to understand and help Kara. I empathized completely.

"Many times, she calls me Mitu and recalls several childhood experiences we shared in some subtropical or jungle area. She has screamed and begged me to stop my brother Knee-ah from removing something. If I question her about it, she becomes irritable that I can't remember and she drifts back into that state in which we left her only minutes ago."

I kept my mind closed on the plane trip back to Los Angeles and, upon arriving home, shut myself in my study. My mind has had its respite; it is time to be decisive. I need only one more question answered. For that, I will have to go to Tulsa.

September 17: We have conceived a child, Pat and I. When I returned last night from Tulsa, I felt a physical and emotional need for Pat's love such as I had never felt before. For the first time in weeks, we came together as man and woman, experiencing the delightful euphoria that comes with near satisfaction. I felt the seed when it passed from my body into hers. Pat will be a perfect mother.

On the table beside me rests a faded photo album. My mother's photo album, the only physical evidence left that Lisa Lewin Hankins existed.

My Tulsa trip required more time than I had planned. Having been out of touch for more than fifteen years, it required hours of searching to find the remnants of family I have left in Oklahoma. I would have preferred talking to my great aunt Mary, but she died six years ago. Mary's daughter, Edna, still lived at the old home place and gave me the phone number of my cousin, Karen, who currently lives in Oklahoma City. Even though she is older than I, Karen remembered less about my mother than did I, but she did direct me to mother's cousin, Elsie, who still lives in Oklahoma City. From Tulsa, I drove my rental car to Oklahoma City and checked into a motel.

I called the number that Karen had given me and, as this was one of the few relatives to whom I'd never been sent as a child, identified myself. On Elsie's end of the line, there was a long pause before she agreed, but she suggested that I come by her house the next day around noon.

I was there promptly at noon. I don't know what I had expected – perhaps a scraggly old crone living in abject poverty. Certainly not this elegant, perfectly made-up and manicured middle-aged woman who invited me into her charming two-story brick home.

"We were very close, your mother and I," she related, as we sat across a handsome wood coffee table from each other. "We shared a lot of secrets and heartaches. It's been so long, I don't know how I can help you with anything now."

"Just tell me about her, Aunt Elsie. Nobody ever told me anything except that she committed suicide."

“Lisa didn’t commit suicide!” Aunt Elsie cried, genuinely horrified. “You poor child! They told you *that*?”

I nodded.

“Honey, your mother just quit breathing. Her heart stopped beating. She *willed* herself to die, but she didn’t kill herself.”

“But why?”

“That man, hon. Your daddy. Lisa thought that Mark hung the moon. She thought she couldn’t live without him. And she didn’t.”

“But she had me. And Cade.”

“Hon, you would have had to have known your mother to understand. I guess I’m the only person who ever really understood.”

I remained silent as she continued.

“Lisa and I grew up next door to each other. My father and your grandfather were brothers and they shared a four hundred acre farm. We weren’t rich, but we were never hungry. And we were always loved; our families were very close. But Lisa, even as a small child, knew that there was only one man for her. And when Mark Hankins came through town, a handsome, decorated war hero, Lisa fell flat on her face. ‘He’s the one,’ she told me. ‘He’s the one I’ve waited for always!’ And that suited Mark just fine. He had no family, no place to go; Lisa offered him the security of a two hundred acre farm, money in the bank, and a wife that would make other men envious.

“Lisa was a beauty with her emerald eyes and pale blonde hair. And just as lovely on the inside. Before Mark, any number of eligible locals had asked for her hand.

But, no, she went around with her head in the stars, waiting for the right man. And, during their five weeks' courtship, Mark acted the perfect, loving, considerate fiancé."

"But, what about my grandparents?" I asked. "How did they feel?"

"They wanted the best for their daughter. They bought a small house in Tulsa and gave the farm to Lisa and Mark as a wedding gift. Two weeks after the wedding, Mark sold off all of the farm except the house and twenty acres. Uncle Thomas died a year later and Aunt Sally within only months after his death.

"I stayed there for almost a year. Finally, I couldn't stand it any longer. With my parents' house just across a dirt road from Lisa and Mark, I was aware of almost everything. Before Lisa became pregnant with Cade, Mark was discreet about fooling around with women, drinking, and rash spending. But, when she began showing, he slept with anything in the county that wore skirts. Lisa refused to see it. She loved that man so much.

"When Harvey Trevor came along and offered me a home and life in Oklahoma City, I married him and left. Two years later, my family home burned to the ground; my parents were trapped inside. I went back long enough to bury them, sell the property, and visit a few hours with Lisa.

"By this time, she was pregnant with you and not quite so blinded by Mark's charm. She told me of several times he had abused her physically. And I could see how he had abused her emotionally. She laughed too much, she apologized too much, she had lost all confidence and self-respect. And when I mentioned his name, the light in her eyes dimmed.

“I begged her to leave, to come back to Oklahoma City with me. By this time, Harvey had a couple of oil wells and, even though the depression was about to hit, we were well off. But she wouldn’t leave. She was so sure that she and Mark were meant to be together. She was so sure that it was her fault, something she had or hadn’t done, that had made the relationship go bad. She was not willing to blame anyone other than herself for the failure.

“I heard from her only twice after that. Once, she called me and asked me to check on Mark when he was looking for a job in Oklahoma City. I did as she asked and, sure enough, he was registered at a sleazy motel with another woman. Shortly after my letter telling her of this, I received a package from her. In this package, I found a scrapbook with pictures of Lisa, Cade and you. There was no accompanying letter. The next information I had about Lisa was from another cousin about six months later. She told me about Lisa’s committal and subsequent death.

“I went back. Mark had sold the home place and I couldn’t find either you or Cade. I did the only decent thing I could do; I had Lisa’s body disinterred from the pauper’s grave in which she had been buried. She’s now here in Oklahoma City. I’ll tell you how to get there if you would like to go and visit her graveside.”

I followed Elsie’s directions to the cemetery, a green, well-manicured and peaceful resting place. I sat, for a long time, staring at the tombstone: LISA: MOTHER OF CADE AND ALAN. I was glad that Aunt Elsie hadn’t put his name on it.

Back at the motel, I looked through the half-filled scrapbook. Photographs of Cade as a baby, a toddler, a schoolboy, gave way to pictures of me as a baby and then a toddler. One picture I especially liked, a picture of my mother holding me on her lap. It

was obviously at a cheap studio; the screen back ground is a desert/mountain scene. The photo bulged a bit as if something had been placed underneath it. I removed one corner of the photograph and reached behind it. My fingers touched something and I pulled it out, a yellowed square of lined notebook paper that had been folded several times until it was almost an inch square. I carefully unfolded the paper and spread it on the writing table in my motel room.

“I am K’Lei. When we were but spirits of pure energy and light, T’Fai and I united. We blended. We became one pure flame, vibrating to the same dulcet tones. T’Fai is the other half of me. If T’Fai should choose to go, I can only burn with a diminished light and eventually cease to exist. If T’Fai should choose to go, I shall spend eternity searching for our perfect melding of souls once again. T’Fai feels the same. I didn’t ask. I know. T’Fai is the other half of me.”

I sat, looking at the blurred words, for a long time. It was almost daylight when I folded the paper back to its original creases and placed it underneath the photograph. I needed to do only one more thing before I left Oklahoma. I had to check the records at the mental institution where my mother had died. I had to find out if there had been a Maud Wilson.

The flight to Los Angeles seemed to take only minutes. A tremendous weight had been lifted from my shoulders; I had made a decision and both my mind and my body had been gaining strength from the moment that decision had been made.

Tomorrow, I go to Portland. I now have no fears about my mother’s “possessing” Kara, about Kara losing her own separate identity. Now, I know why I continued having problems separating my emotions about the two women. They are the same. They both

are K'Lei. And K'Lei and T'Fai must be together to be complete. I understand what Kara tried to tell me last week. In this lifetime, I had almost made the tragic mistake.

September 18: I have no need to go to Portland. Pat insists that we must. She says that Aunt Mattie will need us. I wonder if I look as vacant as I feel. Kara died last night.

September 21: The funeral was held yesterday in the rain. Although both Mrs. Jamison and Elizabeth flew in for the services, Dr. James Courtney was nowhere in sight. I wonder if he plans to marry Elizabeth. Throughout the graveside services, I stared over the misty, flower-draped casket at her pregnant belly. Had Kara known?

Although many friends came by her home after the funeral to console and support Aunt Mattie, neither of the two alienated relatives dropped by. Heartbroken and attempting to hide it, Aunt Mattie pulled Pat and me aside before we left.

"I owe you so much," she said. Her voice broke and she cleared her throat. "Kara asked that you be given this in the event of her death."

She handed me a small cardboard box, approximately four inches square and inordinately heavy. Since it was tightly taped, I made no attempt to open it. I held it on my lap all the way home.

September 22: I opened Aunt Mattie's package today. Tightly packed in tissue paper, I realized, even before my hands touched the cool, polished surface, that Aunt Mattie had given me the crystal skull. Kara wanted me to have it, she had said.

Is there some way that this crystal skull can help me to recognize her the next time?

September 24: Pat understood why I closeted myself in my study for two days, this time with the crystal skull. As I have already decided to abandon scientific methods, I am free to subjectively examine both the skull and my reactions to it.

It is not perfectly clear as I had initially thought. The crystal skull contains swirls, airy and feathery curls of some milky appearing inclusion. There are no visible marks; this leads me to believe that it is carved from natural quartz crystal, a very hard substance rarely found in sizes large enough to carve this skull which is almost three inches in diameter.

The carving job, itself, is a masterpiece. There are no rough edges; no shortcuts were used. It must have taken years to hand polish a substance this hard to this high degree of perfection.

As the skull is an inorganic substance, there is no way to carbon-date it and discover its age. I seem to remember that the Central American Indians (particularly the Mayans and Aztecs) held the skull in high esteem. Perhaps this crystal skull originated with one of those tribes hundreds of years ago.

After observing the skull for several hours, I have concluded that, at periodic intervals, the skull emits an earthy odor, reminiscent of damp, freshly cultivated ground. There is another accompanying odor that I cannot identify; it does the same thing to my taste buds that biting into a lemon slice does..

Another non-scientific observation: Last night, I sat with my left side to my desk and, therefore, the crystal skull. Out of the corner of my left eye, I watched the crystal skull begin to glow as if lighted from within. I quickly turned and looked directly at the skull. The nebulous light disappeared. I stared at my bookcase, focusing about three inches over the top of the crystal skull. Again, the halo of white light appeared around it. It cannot be observed by looking directly at the skull, only when looking at it obliquely.

But the major effect, again completely subjective, occurs when holding the crystal skull. Time ceases to exist and one is transported into another dimension, a dimension predominated by the sensual. Pleasant smells, soft touches, rich tastes, mellow tones, vibrant. Euphoria. I now understand the craving of the heroin addict.

I must break this period of discovery and be with Pat for awhile. She will be glad to know that I am putting order into the mountains of notes I have accumulated over the past few years. She has been my liaison with my publisher for too long, having to excuse my tardiness in sending my next volume.

September 26: Although I know she must be curious, Pat has never questioned me about Kara, about my strange related behavior, about the crystal skull. We spent yesterday at the beach, swimming, splashing and laughing, forgetting that we are mature adults, acting as if, once again, we were children. It was the best day that we'd ever had. I love her so much.

I have one more test I want to do with the skull.

September 27: The dream returns to me again and again. No longer is it fleeting and hazy. It is clear with a vibrancy greater than life itself. I am sitting on a huge, water-smoothed rock, staring into a pool of crystal clear water that surrounds me. Through the years, my rock has eroded and cracked and seeds have blown in the cracks so that beautiful, smooth-barked, leafy trees shelter both my body and the pool from the hot sun. There is someone with me. I can feel another gentle presence and I am complete. I look down to where my feet dangle in the water. Next to mine is another, smaller set of legs and feet, also brown-skinned, also dangling in the water. My other half.

Now I know where Kara escaped when this life became too unpleasant. I cannot go there permanently until I leave some order in this life. It will take only a short time.

September 29: Volumes III, IV and V are in order and need only to be sent to a typist before Pat mails them to my publisher. These three books, along with the royalties from the first two, will provide a comfortable life for Pat and the child. I only wish there was more that I could do for her.

She has been so much and done so much for me. She will understand that I recognized the pool of my dreams. She will know that I have gone to the mountains where I picnicked with Frenchy that day.

I have no further use for this notebook. Before I leave, I will place both my notebook and Mother's scrapbook in the attic. The skull I will take with me. With the crystal skull, T'Fai can find K'Lei.

CASH WILSON'S VISIONS

For the entire time that I had been reading Alan Lewin's notes, Eddie had paced back and forth in my cell, from the bed to the door and back. Several times, he had removed his glasses and polished the thick lenses with a limp handkerchief. The intermittent few minutes that he sat in the oak chair, he spent wringing his hands and twisting the wide gold band on his left ring finger. He had been in the midst of one of these sporadic sitting spells when I had read Dr. Lewin's last sentence and closed the book. Now, he jumped to his feet.

"How could I have let this happen?" he groaned. "I was subjected to temptation and failed."

"I'm not sure..."

“No, Cash. You have been an impartial, objective listener and I appreciate that. But, surely, you can see that I have not only lost God, but have doomed Laura and Selene to an eternal hell.”

“Eddie,” I chided. “Look at this reasonably. There are all sorts of explanations.”

“I became too involved with everyday physical obstacles that God had seen fit to place around me. I chose to try and deal with them rather than continue my spiritual development.”

“Don’t you think that you’ve experienced a lot of spiritual growth in the past few days?”

“Cash, you can’t know what it’s like, having your world torn apart in front of your very eyes.”

“I suppose I can’t,” I said dryly.

“My whole value system has been challenged. I’ve had all of the beliefs I grew up with questioned. It’s happened to me just like it did to all of those lost souls in the Bible.”

“What do you mean?”

“Cash, you don’t have to play dumb with me. You’ve read the Bible. You know what happened when people started worshipping witches, pagan gods and necromancers. The Lord considers all of those things abominations. Look at what he did to Jezebel!”

“Go ahead, Eddie. Draw your parallels. Show me the commonalities between your last few days and the life of Jezebel.”

“I have committed the sin of adultery. I even considered lying to my wife to cover the first sin. I consorted with a medium. Don’t look at me like that, Cash. What

else would you call the woman in black who came to the studio? And, as for the crystal skull, what could that be other than an instrument for necromancy? But, worst of all, because of my incautious behavior, Laura and Selene have been led astray.”

“Eddie, you’ve mentioned that very same point at least three times since your return. Why don’t you explain to me what you mean?”

“Don’t you realize what must have happened? Selene and Laura met and now they’ve gone to that red mountain area to worship the crystal skull!”

“And how are you responsible for that?”

“If I hadn’t recovered the crystal skull from the church, Laura wouldn’t have stolen it. If she hadn’t had it in her possession, she couldn’t have enticed Selene to go with her.”

“Eddie, I see a hand greater than yours in the design of this. Laura had the diary before you ever met her. Selene had her father’s notes before you ever even knew they existed. And, as far as the crystal skull, you would never have found it if not for me. Right?”

“Uh, yes, but...”

“So, according to your biblical interpretations, *I* am the one who has committed the abomination. You are entirely without blame.”

“That’s not the way it works and you know it, Cash. Anyway, look at this fairy tale that we’ve become caught up in. All of us being born over and over again and trying to atone for some forgotten sin.”

“How is that so different from Adam and Eve and the apple?”

“It’s wrong, that’s what,” Eddie said, his voice rising. “We’re born, we die, we go to heaven or hell. We have to pay for our sins in this life. If we don’t, then we go to hell.”

“Seems to me like a pretty stiff penalty imposed by a rigid God. What do all these sinners do in hell?”

“They suffer,” Eddie sobbed. “They suffer through eternity for their sins.”

“Is it possible that the Lord has provided some sort of safety mechanism for the release of a sinner when he has suffered enough?”

“I don’t know of any,” Eddie said.

“But it would be an excellent thought for a good and loving God, wouldn’t it?”

“That’s *not* the way it is.”

“Are you sure?” I asked him. “How can you be so positive?”

Eddie sat down in the chair, shoulders drooped. He removed his glasses and wiped his eyes with the cuff of his cotton shirt.

“All of these ideas we’ve been talking about are wrong,” he said. “We’re talking about black magic and Satanism. Maybe, if you are a heathen, that type of garbage is part of your belief system. But it does not belong in Christianity. If God had wanted us to live more than one life, He would have told us in the Bible. There would be a record.”

“Remember Matthew?” I asked. Where had this information come from?

“Chapter Seventeen?”

“Of course, I do,” Eddie retorted. “Jesus took Peter, James and John to the mountain.”

“Didn’t someone appear out of nowhere?”

“Moses and Elias.”

“And what did Jesus tell them about Elias?”

“He cautioned them to tell no one until after He had arisen,” Eddie said.

“What was the connection between Elias and John the Baptist?”

“Uh... Jesus told them that they knew Elias as John the Baptist.”

“He told them that John the Baptist had been on this earth before? In another lifetime, as another person? Look at the miracles, Eddie, that occurred in the history recorded by the Bible. Look at the cases of levitation. Of someone coming back to life after being declared dead. It’s all there. You’re not giving yourself a chance!”

“I know one thing,” Eddie said. “I have to find Selene and Laura. Pat told me that her husband died in a canyon north of Sedona, Arizona. They’ve gone there. I’ll have to explain my infidelity to Selene and take the consequences. But, at least, I will have saved them.”

Was this what the disembodied voice had meant by free will? *We provide the opportunities, but we cannot dictate as to how the individual will choose to use that opportunity.* Why couldn’t Eddie hear what I was telling him?

“Just one question, Eddie,” I asked.

“What’s that?”

“Suppose they like their beliefs better than they like yours. What if they won’t listen to you?”

“They will,” he said, determined. “Because I’m right.”

Warden Hogan came in to see me in the afternoon after Eddie had left. Obviously nervous about his mission, he spoke rapidly as he introduced me to the gray-suited, pudgy man with him.

“Cash, I want you to meet Dr. McCauley. Doctor, this is Cash Wilson.”

I stretched out my hand to grasp the cool, soft-skinned one extended to me. At one time, I had estimated the sensitivity of a person by the quality of his handshake. Dr. McCauley’s damp hand rested limply in mine. The irony of the situation struck me and I had to hold back the laughter.

“Dr. McCauley will examine you after, er...”

“I know, Warden,” I said calmly. “He is the man who will sign my death certificate.”

Relieved and assured that I was not going to cry, scream, beg or threaten, the doctor and the warden went on to detail my itinerary for the big event, less than forty hours away at the time. Solicitous about my needs, the warden inquired if there was anything else they might do to ensure my comfort.

“I’d like the next hours to be totally mine, without interruption,” I told him. “I don’t want to see anyone else; I don’t want any food brought in.”

Taken aback, Warden Hogan frowned. He hesitated for a moment.

“I don’t know if I can do that, Cash,” he said slowly. “I’m responsible for certain duties and I have to follow established rules and regulations. I’ll try to do what I can. But, what about Brother Stevenson? Don’t you want to see him?”

“He won’t be back,” I told the warden. “He plans to return, but he will be too late to see me.”

They pretended not to be, but I know that both men had been eager to leave my cell. They had not prepared for quiet acceptance. They had not prepared for indifference. They had not prepared for the fact that I might welcome death.

I lay on my cot for a long time, thinking about Eddie and his journey. If he had left on the late morning plane from the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport as he had planned, he should be landing at Phoenix any time now. He would rent a car, probably a luxury model, study his Arizona map and drive north toward Sedona, toward the mouth of Oak Creek Canyon, to the area of the red sandstone cliffs.

What would he find when he arrived? Would he know where to look for Laura and Selene? Could he reverse the decision made by the two women?

“He will have almost the same kind of luck at changing their minds as you did changing his.”

I opened my eyes and looked around the room. That voice again. Who *was* she?

“In my last life,” she said, reading my thoughts. “I was known as Frenchy.”

I stared toward the wall from where the voice came. A dark form, seemingly materializing out of the bland concrete wall, stood there.

“You talked to Eddie less than a month ago,” I accused. She smiled and moved toward me gracefully, despite the encumbering black clothing she wore.

“I appeared to him just as I am appearing to you right now. This form is most acceptable to the present human race. But my last human life ended almost ten of your years ago. After I took the crystal skull to Mississippi.”

“Why did you go to Eddie?”

“You could answer that question if you would allow yourself, R’Kei. You would know that I did it because you had abdicated your responsibilities.”

“And why do you persist in calling me R’Kei? My name is Cash. Cash Wilson.”

“R’Kei is your soul essence, Cash. R’Kei is the entity who is aware of everything about you – past, present, future. R’Kei determines how you will use each of your lives to best develop spiritually and to benefit mankind.”

“Are you trying to tell me that I’m *possessed*?”

“You know better than that. R’Kei is not an entity outside of your self. R’Kei *is* you. As R’Kei, you have allowed yourself to assume human form many times in order to experience different aspects of humanity, to enrich scientific and spiritual knowledge, and to learn the frailties of human emotions. The pure form of your soul essence could never have experienced these things.”

“You keep using the expression *assume human form*. What is my, uh, R’Kei’s natural form?”

What began as a yellow glow around Frenchy’s body brightened to a white light, brighter than any I had ever seen. Suddenly, however, I knew that the thought I’d just had was wrong. I *had* seen that type of flaming white light before. I’d *been* that type of pure energy. And I knew – as I’d always known but had denied – that the spirit of white light standing before me was R’Fui, my brother enabler.

“I knew that you would remember,” the voice said, growing hollow and genderless. The glow faded. Soon, there was only a patch of the concrete wall that was lighter than the rest and, as I stared at it, the light color faded and blended with the neutral gray.

I sat, without moving, for what seemed an infinite number of minutes. R’Fui’s intervention with Eddie, Selene and Laura had been necessary because I had become so involved with this human life that I had forgotten my overall goal, the goal of reuniting T’Fai and K’Lei. For, until I had accomplished that deed, I would not be allowed to merge with my own soul twin in order to become the most beneficial of entities, a Twin Enabler. Eddie’s interpretation of recovering the crystal skull had been that, somehow, it would save me from execution – to use his expression, free me. But, it was in a much larger definition of the word freedom that the return of the crystal skull to the right hands had functioned.

Now that I remembered, it seemed impossible that I had ever forgotten. After returning from Vietnam, I had been destined to form a humanitarian group called Poetry for Peace. Prize-winning entrants from all over the world would have been able to participate in problem solving workshops. It was at one of these workshops that Selene/T’Fai and Laura/K’Lei would have met and formed a strong spiritual friendship which would eventually have led to their realization of who they were. And the world would have been a different place now, I thought. The deep-seated desire within myself to assume responsibility had been misplaced when I had taken it upon myself to suffer for my brother’s crime.

I fell back upon the bed, experiencing, for the first time in years, true desperation. What had I done? Penned in this prison like a trapped animal, I had no outlet. There had to be some way to stop Eddie. My head ached. I could almost see him now.

Yes. He is sitting in a small, cheerful restaurant. An empty coffee cup rests on the counter in front of him. He is talking to the man behind the counter who points out

the window and toward the highway. I watch Eddie pay for the coffee, stride confidently out to his rental car and unlock the door on the driver's side. For a moment, he stares directly at me and a mischievous glint of recognition touches his eyes before he slips back into his concrete world. When he pulls his car out of the paved driveway, he points the nose toward north. Toward Oak Creek Canyon.

Although it is late March and I can observe the wind moving the tops of small trees, I feel warm as I sit on a large sandstone boulder and watch two teenaged girls laugh and splash each other as they play in the cool, clear water of the winding creek below me. Sun creates a sparkling mirror on the water and rainbows a myriad of flashing lights on the darker underwalls of the cliffs.

Awakening inner memories tell me that this is the place of return – the location to which each of our soul group comes after earthly life has ended. A resting place, but also a planning arena.

Mechanical sounds break into the peacefulness and one of the two girls looks up, startled. She whispers to the other and they wade toward a nearby gravel beach, water trailing in small streams down their golden bodies. I look past the beach to the source of the disturbance. Eddie has arrived, his car stirring up a cloud of pink dust. I open my mouth to shout at him and then I realize that, in my present state, I am unable to communicate verbally.

I intuit fear, disappointment, chagrin, anger, confusion, regrets, and apologies from all three on a subconscious level. On this earthly level, Eddie is attempting to use reasoning and justify his presence. The girls rely totally on a sixth sense, one that tells them that what they are doing is right; is, in fact, the only way.

When Eddie starts forward, I want to stop him. Already, the girls have regressed to about fourteen years old, almost two years since I had looked at them earlier. Can't Eddie see what is happening? Then I am struck by the black humor of the situation: Eddie does not know who they are! He is describing Laura and Selene and asking the two girls if they have seen them. Dejected – he might as well be speaking a foreign language – he walks over and sits on a log near the edge of a wooded glade.

It has been only a short time and the girls are now about eight years old. Together, they sit at the edge of the water. One inspects a creek tumbled stone and then passes it to the other who also examines it. Then they both laugh in glee.

Something in the laughter must sound familiar to Eddie. He raises his head and looks hard at the two. They are now about five years old and, hand in hand, they head toward the middle of the clear stream. Eddie stumbles to his feet and rushes after them. I watch as he runs into the water and the splash creates a waterfall of sparkles. Slowed by the unaccustomed pull of the water, Eddie runs in slow motion; he slips and falls to his knees. The girls are almost across the shallow stream now; they are about two years old now and unsteady in their balance. Gripping each other tightly, they begin climbing a rounded sandy incline.

In the water, Eddie desperately struggles to his feet and, treading water, he half-walks, half-runs toward the sandy area. As I watch, a look of horror and disbelief crosses his features when, on top of the sandy knoll, he sees the goal toward which the girls are striving. Mere infants now, they huddle over the crystal skull, grasping it with chubby fingers.

Eddie's expression changes to dismay, then anguish. His fingers rake through loose sand. The girls are gone. Fury drives Eddie's body forward and he grabs for the crystal skull. As it disappears before his eyes, his cry echoes the anguish and frustration of every soul who has ever felt betrayal.

I want to help him. I wish I knew some way that I could. If, just for an infinite moment of time, he could see this event for what it really is.

I look at the tree beside me. As if in some state of suspended animation in which I remain the same, I watch leaves bud, grow, turn dark and fall. This happens with such blinding speed that I concentrate, instead, on the expanding trunk of the tree. I feel a jolt as part of the boulder on which I am sitting breaks off and falls into the creek below. My tree – now a mammoth one – falls and I see molecules that compose it flow back to the earth. The sandy beach is gone; water now covers it. I dangle my legs off the boulder.

With the same sunny sparkle as always, the cool water flows over my feet. It is so clear that I can see the particles of silt rise and fall as I swish my feet back and forth. R'Fui sits beside me, basking in the sun's rays; R'Fui's last life as a diplomat in frigid Russia has left him with a temporary carryover need for warmth.

K'Lei and T'Fai walk along a skinny path high above us on the red cliff. This is a period of jubilation for them because, as scientific farmers in their last lives, these two had a great deal to do with saving the world from hunger. With their combined talents as a Twin Soul, they reconstructed the master crystal and spiritual harmony began to develop across the world.

N'Mui and M'Tui discuss equal success as they recall their parts in the spiritual evolution of underdeveloped countries in South America so that survivors from the

cataclysm in the Northern Hemisphere could resettle and contribute. After many thousands of years, beginning with Niah/N'Mui's misuse of the master crystal in Atlantis, N'Mui and M'Tui will meld and become a Twin Soul.

Ironically enough, I have just completed a life of charm and luxury in which I was able, because of my wealth and charitable instincts, to prove fossil fuel that enabled earth's inhabitants to survive until the master crystal again rested in the Dome Building.

A squirrel plays on the decaying tree trunk and is gone. In reverse motion, I watch the process that had happened earlier. Desiccated cellulose is drawn back to the hulk and the tree snaps upright, dwindling in size to a mere sapling. On the gravel beach below me, Eddie is prostrated, sobbing in great gulps. I try to place an arm around him to comfort him. It is to no avail. Eddie cannot recognize my presence.

"You wish that Eddie could see the overall plan and the future as you have."

I was back in my cell and R'Fui, using that disembodied voice, spoke to me.

"I wanted to stay there," I said. "I wasn't ready to return."

"But you must, R'Kei. You have not as yet completed this life."

"I'm close enough," I said, feeling almost too human. "I have only a few hours left."

"In this segment."

"This *segment*?"

"You will remember as I tell you, R'Kei. In times of great change, we cannot sacrifice even a moment of earth's time by waiting to incarnate again in birth. We cannot risk the loss of consciousness that each advanced soul has acquired, by allowing the soul

to pass through infancy and babyhood where these things are, in a manner of speaking, trained out of them.”

“What exactly are you telling me?”

“These enlightened souls of whom we talk will need to be in particular locations with specific talents. They cannot rely on accidents of birth and parenthood to direct them. Earthly life provides too many diversions – as exemplified by your own.”

“So I am to shove some other soul out and take over his physical body.”

“This applies only to souls who have chosen voluntarily to leave their bodies. Those who, for physical or emotional reasons, have found themselves unable to continue this present earthly existence.”

“I’m afraid that you’re going to have to be more graphic in your explanation.”

“I’ll give you an example,” R’Fui said. “This should, better than any exposition, help you to understand the concept I’ve talked about.”

“A few hours ago, according to earth time, a private airplane carrying the beloved son of a wealthy South African statesman caught fire in mid-air over Ethiopia and crashed to the ground. A young Ethiopian tribesman pulled the only survivor, the wealthy man’s son, out of the wreckage and was himself severely burned. Both of these young men were taken to a hospital and assigned to adjoining beds. Because of primitive equipment and lack of medical supplies, death was inevitable. The souls prepared to vacate their damaged bodies.

“But two other souls lingered near,” R’Fui continued. “A powerful Twin Soul who knew that the bodies of the young white man and the young black man would be ideal vehicles to bring about love and to end hunger and strife in Africa. This Twin Soul

has the combined knowledge of both souls throughout eternity. This soul will be able to heal the bodies. As would the soul of any highly developed spirit who is in touch with all of his lives.”

“So you’re telling me that Selene and Laura, or K’Lei and T’Fai, are in those bodies right now and that they are going to change the world?”

“Just as there exists at this moment in the Middle East, a spoiled young man, the son of an oil sheik, who is strongly contemplating suicide. Tomorrow, he plans to drive his Rolls Royce into an oil refinery. Just about the time, R’Kei, of your scheduled execution.”

EDDIE'S CONFESSION

I hadn't known that Cash was keeping a record. Would it have made any difference if I had realized that fact? If I had read what he had written, would it have modified or changed my behavior and actions in any way? Had I really been as obtuse, as dogmatic, as rigid as Cash portrayed me?

The last time that I saw Cash, he had become obsessed with the idea that he was the reincarnation of some important leader of an ancient civilization. Kara Courtney's diary, Dr. Lewin's notes, and Laura's letter all contributed to his belief. And, because of a remarkable series of coincidences that seemingly reinforced his ideas, he had lost contact with reality by the time of his execution.

For sixteen months, I truly believed the lines I just wrote. But that was before the wooden crates of paper, soaked with seawater and smelling of urine, arrived and I read the observations he had made. Coupled with the diaries and notes, his words forcibly impacted themselves on the very core of my being.

Cash did a more than fair job of explaining where I stood spiritually at the time. He distilled with clarity the fear behind my adamant refusal to tolerate any dogma other than my own.

But, in my own defense, I worked with the information that I had available at the time and I made the only decision possible. At the moment that I finished reading Dr. Lewin's notes, I knew that Selene had deluded herself into thinking that she was a reincarnation of her father. And that Laura had the same misconception about her part in relation to her aunt.

Although Cash tried to convince me otherwise, I became fixated on the eerie concept that the two women were going to Sedona where Dr. Lewin had died. I felt that they, also, would die. I had to stop them. I had to thwart that event.

How he did it, I don't know, but Cash followed me to Oak Creek Canyon that long ago day. I know *realistically* that he couldn't have done that because he was in a locked cell in a heavily guarded state penitentiary a thousand miles away. So I am forced to admit that there might be some credence to the idea of mind travel.

I have never felt such hopelessness as I did when I watched those two beautiful babies disappear. Initially, as Cash had diagnosed, I had thought that the two young girls playing in the water were two girls from the nearby area. It was late March and the breeze blowing down the canyon carried the bite of snow. Selene and Laura, both being

city girls, wouldn't be skinny-dipping in this cold water. Although not sure about Laura, I knew that Selene would never publicly expose her body without being properly clothed. Besides all that, these girls were too young. When I attempted to question them, they seemed unable to comprehend my questions. Later, one of them laughed and it struck a familiar chord in my memory and when I looked toward them, I was horrified. They were no longer teens! These girls were *children*.

Sure that my mind played tricks on me, I moved closer. My heart raced and my blood turned cold. These little girls, baby fat rounding their naked limbs, looked directly at me and smiled. One was light-skinned and blonde; the other was olive-toned and brunette.

Not sure what was happening to the brain waves that sent messages to my eyes, I called to Selene and Laura. I knew that they couldn't actually be regressing in age and development as my eyes visualized them. It was obvious that they didn't hear me because they began wading across the stream toward a sandy beach on the other side. All the time, before my eyes, they grew younger.

At the top of a sandy hill that touched the stream on the side opposite me, something sparkled and reflected the sun's rays. The crystal skull! I knew that I had to stop them before they reached that object of evil. I ran into the water after the two girls. At the water's edge, I stumbled and fell to my knees. Laura and Selene had reached the sand and were climbing the hill; my mind saw them as babies now and I struggled to my feet.

At that instant, Laura and Selene disappeared. I knew within myself that they had gone into that crystal skull. I had to get it in my hands and shake them out. Break it in

order to free them. Just as my hand reached the cool surface, the crystal skull also disappeared.

Realizing, even in that moment of agony, that what I had seen had not actually happened, that my mind had placed this interpretation on the actual event, I fell to the sandy beach and screamed in frustration. If I had previously thought that God had deserted me, then I knew, at that moment, that he had decided to introduce me to the type of hell that I would endure infinitely.

I pulled myself to a sitting position, drew up my knees, crossed my arms across them, laid my head on my wet sleeves and cried as I had never cried. Even now, I remember a strange moment of ultimate peace in which I felt that everything had gone according to plan. I actually felt, for that instant, that Laura and Selene had disappeared into that crystal skull and I felt pride and joy that I had been able to help them.

In the ensuing days and weeks, I would suffer guilt for that thought. I would feel such guilt for my part in the disappearance of Selene and Laura that I would give up all my worldly possessions and condemn myself to a life of poverty. But, that comes later.

It was daybreak before I came to my senses and realized that I had almost frozen to death by that stream. Wet clothing had not contributed to my health during the early spring night. Then I remembered Cash. Today was the date for his execution. I had to get back to Texas! I had to see Cash.

I didn't allow myself to dwell on the thought of what had happened to Selene, Laura and myself only a few hours earlier. Luckily, someone had cancelled a reservation and I managed to walk right into a vacancy on the airplane to Dallas. Ignoring curious stares at my rumpled appearance, I checked my watch. I should be able to reach Cash

thirty minutes before his scheduled appointment. Laura and Selene were lost, but Cash still had a chance. I owed it to him to offer him this last opportunity to know his Savior.

I don't remember anything about that plane ride. I scarcely remember rushing to find my car in the airport parking lot and then driving toward the prison. I remember one definite fact: Unless some unforeseen accident occurred, I would have a few minutes with Cash. I felt unselfish enough that I could postpone my grieving until afterwards.

As I pulled into the visitor's parking space beside the warden's car, I again looked at my watch. Nine-thirty; I had thirty minutes. Warden Hogan met me at his office door, his face pale and his eyes streaked with red. Over his gray-suited shoulder, I looked at the round white clock on his wall. Ten-thirty-five. When my eyes returned to my watch, he placed his hand on my shoulder and murmured something about time zones. Cash Wilson had officially been dead for twenty-five minutes.

For days, even weeks, I wallowed in self-pity and self-castigation. Alternately, I blamed myself and then Cash. I should have had more faith in my Savior. I should have rejected temptations put before me by Satan. I should have fallen back on my trust in and love for Jesus, rather than blindly following trails blazed by messengers of evil. And then I would lash out at the ghost of Cash Wilson who seemed to follow me everywhere, out of line of my direct vision, but within periphery so that, at all times, I was aware of his mocking presence.

Blindly, and within a matter of short hours, I told my father that I would be unable to continue the ministry, that he would have to come out of retirement and resume his spread of the gospel. With the help of an adept attorney, I disposed of my house, furniture, car, boat, Florida beach property and personal items by turning them over to a

local Christian orphanage. I wanted to be away from anything that reminded me of Selene, Laura, or Cash Wilson. I wanted to leave behind everything that reminded me of my failure, anything that reminded me of my life before this one constant, aching moment of the present.

My success at this feat was a short, bitter one. No place was safe for long. If I didn't imagine I saw them on a street or in a crowd, I dreamed of them. The insides of my eyelids became screens for constant video reminders. I developed a sleeping pattern in which my mind jarred my eyes open the second that any of those three appeared in any form.

In my desire to punish myself, I first went to the open road, heading north toward Colorado and Wyoming, walking miles daily, shouldering a knapsack containing a change of clothing and a wool blanket. I refused to allow myself to accept rides from the kind people who stopped and offered. I refused to allow myself the luxury of sleeping in a farmer's barn, surrounded by warm, milk-smelling animals and sweet hay. Instead, I lay under a ceiling of stars, my woolen blanket the only cushion between my body and the cold rocks underneath. Baths were a luxury I allowed myself only whenever I encountered a cool mountain stream. And then, I forced my wounded mind to think of anything other than those two little girls, hand in hand, walking across that northern Arizona creek.

But, even that way of escape proved too gentle. I found too many people who wanted to help, who wanted to give of themselves to someone less fortunate than they. At a log cabin in the mountains, a little lady forced me to take warm clothing that had belonged to her late husband. In Wyoming, a family camped near me tried to give me

food and the man, who owned a small factory in Nebraska, offered me a ride back with them and a job. A truck driver at one of the interstate rest areas attempted to convince me that, since he had sleeping facilities in his truck, I should make use of his company paid motel room. On one icy day, a fellow hiker begged me to take an extra wool jacket he carried in his backpack.

I didn't deserve such humane treatment. I knew I belonged with scum and should be treated as such. Why couldn't they see that? I was the one pithy apple in a basket of crisp Jonathans; because of my associations with healthy humanity, my flaws were excused. It seemed to be taken for granted that, since the fellow before me was good and the fellow after me was good, that I also would be. And, because I was the rarity, I was forgiven.

But I didn't want Grace. I wanted flagellation. Late October found me all the way back across the Midwest to Chicago, standing on a gray, wet street, warming my hands over a barrel in which someone had built a fire. I read the despair and hopelessness in the eyes that mirrored my own across the flame. I knew that I was home when, late one night, I was struck from behind and someone took my jacket and belt. Each night, I found a new street, a different alley, another soup kitchen, a fresh pile of cardboard and newspaper to help ward off the cold. One gray day stretched into another, monotony broken only by the purple gash of the wino's pleading lips, the dislocated whimper of the addict, the shuffling gait of the cripple's walk, the scream of the psychotic, the whine of the beggar. My own body fear smell provided my other sensual stimulation.

Days grew into weeks, to months, maybe even years, I didn't know. I made no effort to keep track of time. I made no note of changes in the seasons. No cold could freeze the burning agony in my head and no amount of heat could warm the coldness in my heart.

There were times when dreams came to me and I was another person, one who felt no guilt or grief, one who had never hurt another. Those were fleeting moments of euphoria with a dream companion whose eyes warmed my soul and who called me "Bob." Those fragments would trail away and I would be blasted with reminders of those hours with Laura. Caught off guard by the serenity of the initial dream, I would flow into the second, unsuspecting and unshielded. Sometimes I would be holding Laura tightly, plunging into her and the face that looked up at me before I ejaculated was that of an Eskimo woman and the bed of passion a frozen landscape. Other times, Laura paled into a blonde beauty in which the only emotion I could stir was fear. At these moments, I awakened screaming, still feeling the delicate skin rip as I struck it with my knuckles.

I looked at the world through myopic eyes. Whatever was happening in the Middle East, Africa, Russia or, even the United States, bore no interest for me. Only when I slipped in blood did I turn uncurious eyes on a broken body at my feet. Only when uniformed men shoved me aside, did I smell smoke and searing flesh as residents of a burning hotel threw themselves from the windows of the decrepit building. Sometimes I awakened with cuts and bruises on my body and no aware knowledge of how or when they got there, totally anesthetized to physical pain.

And then *he* appeared. On the darkest, coldest night of my life, a shiny shoe tip mercilessly nudged my ribcage until I turned over. Strong hands grabbed my shoulders

and shook me. Dazed, I looked at the face reflected in the streetlight. Warm, brown eyes, filled with hurt for me, traveled over my wasted body. Firm, hard-muscled arms slipped under my shoulders and knees and, when he lifted me, I stared into his beloved face.

“Cash,” I whispered. “Why? Why are you trying to save me?”

Days passed. Days in which my only conscious remembrance was the steady brown hand that held the eyedropper – and then the spoon – that funneled warm liquids down my throat. Slowly, I realized that I lay on a hard, narrow bed in a small faded square of a room. One day, I awakened and discerned that the young man in the room with me, the one sitting by my bed and reading a newspaper, was someone other than whom I’d thought.

“Who are you?” I asked. The words came out slowly, gratingly. “What do you want from me?”

“Hey, man,” he said, throwing down the newspaper and eagerly pulling his chair closer to me. He was even younger than I’d thought. Despite his size, he couldn’t have been more than sixteen or seventeen years old. “I thought you were going to die on me. I thought I was too late.”

I turned my head away from him. I couldn’t let him see the tears of frustration that filled my eyes.

“I wanted to die,” I mumbled to the dirty mint-green wall. “Why didn’t you *let* me?”

“I couldn’t do that,” he said. “You and I have things to do. We have to make our lives count for something.”

“I’ve already ruined my life,” I said, turning back to face him. “You don’t need me. Go on and do your missionary work if you have to. Just leave me alone.”

He smiled and his face lighted up. Again, I was reminded of Cash. I mentally censured my thoughts, telling myself that, because of my trauma and emotional involvement, any black man would remind me of Cash Wilson.

“Did you hear me?” I snapped. “Go away!”

“I can’t do that,” he repeated, still grinning. “Without you, I can’t do what I have to do.”

A lucid clarity washed over me. Nostalgia for a younger me struggled with indignation that my free will was being denied. I felt an unaccountable empathy for my late friend, Cash. Cash, who had tried to send away the fervent young evangelist.

“In other words,” I said. “You’re going to save me whether or not I want you to?”

“You’re right,” he said, brown eyes glowing. “You’re absolutely right.”

Events and acts of the next few weeks fade in and out of my memory. Only one thing remained constant amidst the chameleon of happenings and that was the diligent presence of my new companion, Rope. Rope had picked up some sort of proverb in his early life that bespoke my future: The man whose life you save is your responsibility for the rest of your life.

My futile attempts to absolve him of that responsibility usually brought on a down-to-earth talk in which he explained that he couldn’t fulfill his life’s mission without

me and, since guilt was the largest chink he'd found in my poorly constructed armor, he used it mercilessly. In the end, I always agreed to cooperate.

Summer had arrived and the days were long and hot when a sweating Rope came home one afternoon to the cheap studio apartment we now shared. He had made a decision. Sticking his head in the kitchen sink, he turned the cold water tap full blast for a few seconds before he grabbed an old towel from the rack above the sink and dried his face and hair.

"I've got a proposal, Jason," he said, tossing the towel in the sink and turning to face me. I had given him the pseudonym rather than my real name; I wanted to leave poor Edward Stevenson III behind. Frankly, I doubted that *Rope* was his real name.

"What's that, Rope?" I asked, looking up from the newspaper I'd been studying before he entered the room. "What kind of proposal?"

"Well, look at us," he said. "Two strong, healthy young men wasting ourselves here. All day, I unload crates of lettuce while you sit here and look at the want ads, trying to find a job you can do where you won't have to have a social security number."

My head snapped up and I looked into his eyes. Suddenly I felt defensive.

"Don't bother to try and defend yourself, Brother," he said, pulling out a chair from the table and sitting down across from me. "I'm not attacking. I'm just stating fact. As far as I'm concerned, you can be who you want to be. But look there," he said, jabbing a calloused finger toward the newspaper. "Read that front page, man. *Any* page! People out there need our help, man. And if we don't give it, we've lost our souls!"

Less than a week later, Rope and I boarded a freighter at the Port of New Orleans and headed south. I had agreed to his insane scheme to do this – perhaps because it was the point of least resistance or maybe because a part of me had started thinking again of helping someone else.

I remembered his final argument – the one I had let him think had persuaded me – and grinned to myself. We could teach those people how to farm, to irrigate, to market their produce so that the two of us would, in effect, obliterate hunger in that part of the world.

“You do the mental and I’ll do the physical,” he had told me. “People only start wars when they’re hungry. Full stomachs make peaceful countries.”

Another home-grown homily. But it had worked.

We started from scratch, in a manner of speaking, in an isolated area populated by skeptical natives who automatically distrusted us – an unfamiliar white man and an unfamiliar black man who, rather than walking, had arrived in a mechanical contrivance. Despite my protests, Rope had paid a ridiculously high sum for the ancient jeep over on the coast. Between the coast and the foothills village, he had used it as a battering ram, a bulldozer and, when we forded one river, even as a boat.

Within two days, the villagers had sensed Rope’s innate goodness and the jeep full of giggling, gleeful children, bouncing over tree stumps and mud holes, became a familiar sight. I kept myself secluded in the tent we had set up about a city block away and behind the village. I had done my part and come here; Rope could be the Messiah.

Something happened the second week that forced me to revise my previously egocentric thinking. Before we came to South America, Rope had seemed always to have a constant flow of funds. Not that the amount of money he had was ever very large; he just seemed to have an endless supply. I suppose I attributed this to the fact that he had had employment the whole time we had shared the apartment in Chicago. And, when it came time to begin the trip that eventually brought us here, he had sufficient funds to pay both our ways. Toward the end of the first week, however, Rope appeared to be running low on ready cash. I noticed this only because the goodies he handed out seemed to become smaller and less frequent. Fewer hand-woven napkins he bought to subsidize local labor showed up at the tent.

And then, one morning before dawn, he awakened me and told me he was going to the coast. He used the excuse that someone in the village needed a certain type of medication that could be found only in a larger community. I accepted that.

He returned late that afternoon, when the great reddish golden orb of the sun dipped and touched the horizon. The jeep, loaded almost to the point of danger, bounced into the clearing beside the tent. I had been sitting on a log bench one of the villagers had constructed for Rope, reading a three-year-old *Time* magazine Rope had found somewhere, when I heard the familiar grinding sound as he shifted into lower gear to pull the small incline.

“Where did you get that stuff?” I yelled, trying to make my voice heard above the sputtering jeep.

“This?” he asked innocently, casually looking at the boxes and packages around him, on the seats, in the floor, tied on the sides. “Listen, man. I made one super deal at the port. They were practically giving these things away!”

I accepted his explanation, although a part of my mind didn't really believe him. While he distributed the clothing, toys, tools and kitchen implements among his new friends, I found myself speculating about the source of his new-found wealth. It couldn't have been drugs; I was sure that I would have noticed something such as that among our pitifully meager possessions. What about theft? I actually knew nothing about Rope, the person other than my friend. Maybe he had grown up in a ghetto and stealing was considered a way of life, an acceptable one. And who was I to say that he was wrong? Stealing was a sin that could, in no way, compare to the ones I had committed. So I leapt back into my shell of isolation and refused to let my mind question anything else about Rope or his current activities.

It was almost a week after that event that Rope and one of the old men left the village and climbed the mountain, looking, I was told, for an animal that had strayed too far away from the farmer's home. By the middle of the afternoon, they had not returned and I found myself glancing to the circuitous trail that curved along the steep mountainside. A narrow trail, designed for single-file human traffic only, and at points so weathered that it was crumbly, it held no invitation for me. Actually, I saw little chance that any domesticated animal could have navigated it. A piece of conversation that Rope and I had had earlier kept coming back to me. A conversation about old gold mines and some primitive shafts and tunnels.

Toward dark, and during one of the intervals that I was not staring toward the mountain, the old man who had left with Rope stumbled into the clearing. Blood streamed from a gash on his forehead and he held his left arm as if it might be sprained, or even broken. He stood for a moment, looking at me, breathing heavily and saying nothing. Then he began gesturing, emitting some guttural sounds.

“Rope?” I questioned. “Where is Rope?”

He pointed toward the mountain, still talking in that strange language. He moved forward and grabbed my arm, trying to pull me toward the path. At one point, he realized that he couldn’t understand my questions and I couldn’t understand his needs. Then he started telling me a story, charade-like, using his body. He kept pointing to the tent, then to his head and, finally, he threw himself on the ground, rolled on the incline and acted as if he were dead. Rope had fallen! He had fallen somewhere up on that mountain and he could be dead!

I rushed into the tent and grabbed the Coleman lantern and a flashlight. Somewhere, I remembered seeing a thick hemp rope. Opening Rope’s army surplus trunk, I rummaged around among his personal items. A long bluish-white envelope caught my eye. In the dusk, I peered at it. Striped diagonally around the edges with navy blue and red, it was the kind of envelope in which someone mailed a letter if he were sending it overseas. Curiously, I picked it up and looked at it carefully. My blood turned cold. The letter had come from Selene’s mother, Pat Lewin Hayes, and was addressed to Calvin Wilson. Why would Pat be writing to Cash’s nephew? And, more importantly, where had Rope found the letter?

The old man made some urgent vocalization and I remembered my initial purpose. Sticking the envelope in my back pocket, I dug down further in the trunk and my fingers touched the bristly length of rope. Following the old man up the mountain trail, I was glad that it was not fully daylight so that I would be aware of the ravine below me. Fighting a touch of acrophobia I hadn't known I'd had, I clung periodically to clumps of roots protruding out from the side of the mountain and prayed that Rope was not hurt too badly. Ahead of me, the old man stopped abruptly on the trail and pointed down a steep incline. I moved cautiously to the edge of the footpath and peered over the edge.

"Rope!" I yelled. An echo of ope-ope-ope trailed back to me. "Rope! Are you down there?"

"Hello up there!" The voice came from directly below me. I held the lantern over the edge. I almost lost my balance when, seemingly out of nowhere, Rope spoke. "Man, am I ever glad to see you!"

The old man and I managed to feed the hemp down to my friend and drag him back up to the trail. Despite a severely bruised knee and some cuts and lacerations, Rope made light of the whole adventure as he dusted himself off and grinned at the two of us.

"Thought I'd almost bought it back there," he said, turning to go down the mountain. Almost as an afterthought, he looked directly at me. "Well, friend. Either this cancels my responsibility for you or it makes you equally responsible for me. Choose your way."

With all of the frantic scurrying, worry and anxiety, plus a celebration for Rope's safe return, I didn't again think about the envelope until the next day as I knelt beside the tepid stream to wash my denims. A telltale crackle of paper warned me and I rescued the incriminating evidence just before I doused my pants in the water.

"Rope!" I yelled. He stood by the jeep, talking to several of the young men of the village. When he heard me, he turned and waved.

"Come down here, Rope," I said, using a calm voice. "I need to talk to you right away."

He said a few words to the boys and waved to them. They went the opposite direction as he moved toward me. When he was close enough to see the envelope I held in my hand, a sheepish expression crossed his face and he grinned broadly.

"Got myself caught, didn't I?"

"Don't laugh, Rope. This situation is not humorous."

"Hey, man," Rope said, scooting down the stream bank and perching on a rock beside me. "Loosen up. I'll tell you anything you want to know. No reason to fret."

"What are you doing with this letter?" I asked, waving the paper at him. "Where did you get it?"

"Hey, man. I just picked up my mail when I was down at the coast last time."

"*Your* mail? You're Calvin Wilson? Cash Wilson's nephew?"

"Yep." Not a word about his deception. But then, a little voice inside me told me that I hadn't been truthful with Rope, either. And another little voice answered the first one, saying that Rope had known who I was all along.

“Tell me how you and Pat Hayes came to be corresponding. And don’t try to laugh it off, Rope. I want to know.”

“Sure,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “I’d have been happy to tell you earlier, but I didn’t figure you would have handled it very well.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ah, come on, man. You’re not going to try and convince me that you would have welcomed me with open arms when you found out that I was Cash Wilson’s nephew. And that Pat Lewin Hayes had sent me to help you get your life back together.”

I looked at the tan water swirling around my pants near the edge of the stream. Reaching down with my foot, I used my toe to fish the pants up onto a nearby rock.

“Just tell me, man,” he said, his voice defensive. “What would you have done that day in Chicago if you had known that?”

I lifted my burning eyes to his hopeful ones. I looked at his smooth black face, a face for which I had grown to feel a great affection.

“You’re right,” I said finally. “We could never have reached this point.”

With the negativism, anger and hostility all gathering at once, at the same time, I found myself unable to continue talking to Rope. Striding off toward the forest, I walked through jungle vegetation for hours before I sat down on a decaying log and forced myself to think. And to remember.

What could Pat have known that would cause her to go to Mississippi, find Calvin (I still preferred to think of him as Rope) and then pay him to find me and rehabilitate me? I would have thought she would have hated me for my part in the loss of her daughter. And, other than money, why would the nephew of a man I was unable to save

take the time, energy, patience and tolerance to find and care for me, to link his life with mine?

I spent the remainder of the night walking in the forest, oblivious, for the first time since our arrival, to the threat of snakes, poisonous insects and bandits. Just before dawn, I found myself back in the clearing near the tent. Rope, his black skin lost in the shadows, spoke to me, his voice containing a little belligerence and much care.

“If you’ll sit down here with me and have some coffee, I’ll try to explain what I’ve been doing. I know that you probably feel betrayed because you think that I wasn’t straight with you. But, that’s not the way it was. If ever, even once, you had asked, I would have told you. But, to be honest with you, you’ve been too wrapped up in your own selfish grief to even care *who* anyone around you was.”

When he stopped for breath, I lifted the aluminum coffee pot off a low flame on the Coleman stove and refilled his cup. Then I poured some of the hot liquid in a nearby cup and squinted at him, trying to read his expression.

“Before my uncle was executed, he was allowed to talk to a visitor who came to the penitentiary. A lady visitor.”

“Pat,” I said. “My mother-in-law.”

Rope nodded. Cradling the metal coffee cup in his big brown hands, he held it to his mouth and sipped.

“When Pat left the penitentiary that day, she took with her the two diaries and the notes that Cash had kept. It was almost a week before she read them – Cash told her to – and she immediately called you, but you had already lost yourself. A few weeks later, she called my grandmother and asked if she could come and visit me. My granny had

been pretty sick for months and didn't quite know what to do. So I took it on myself to write a letter to Pat and invite her down."

"Forging, of course, your grandmother's name."

Sheepishly, Rope nodded. Then he continued.

"As it turns out, Granny died the day before Pat got to Mississippi. Man, don't try to say you're sorry. My granny lived a good, long life and she had been ready to meet my grandpa again for years. I was happy for her."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I mean, for presuming that I should..."

"Hey, that's cool," Rope said, laughing. "When Pat told me what she thought that she and I should do, did I ever almost flip out. She wanted me to help her find you – a man who had simply disappeared months earlier and no one had heard from him since. She told me that you could be anywhere, or even dead. But she was willing to foot all of the expenses to track you down and take care of you."

"You and Pat did all that searching?"

"Hey, man. I'm no computer or bionic man. She hired a bunch of private investigators. She paid them good money and they did the work. I even know how many hours you slept the night before I found you in Chicago."

"How did you know that someone had found me? That it wasn't just some other bum?"

"We didn't. We just took a chance and hoped. You were the third bum that week that we had flown to check out. Odds were that it wouldn't be you."

"*We*?" I asked. "Pat was with you?"

"Man, how do you think I knew who you were?"

Dreams of Cash Wilson awakened me throughout the night. Rope slept peacefully in the cot on the other side of the tent, never once, I'm sure, comprehending the hornet's nest of questions and memories he had stirred in my mind. What could Cash have told Pat? What could he have written to initiate the search for me? At daybreak, I awakened from the last dream, sat up on the edge of the cot, sweating, and listened to the bird sounds from outside.

"Rope?" No sound other than snores. My friend had no worries. "Rope, wake up." I reached over to shake him and his eyes opened.

"I just dreamed this dream," he said, throwing off his covers and sitting up. "Crazy dream. I was a woman. A rich, white woman! And I was back in Mississippi talking to Brother Mason, the Baptist preacher!"

I frowned at him. Brother Mason and Mississippi brought back memories. Why pay attention anyway to dreams?

"I mean to tell you," Rope continued. "I had me some fun spending money."

"Rope, did you ever read any of the material that your uncle gave to Pat before his death?"

"Nope. But Pat said that the time would come when you would want to read it and I should let her know so that she can send it here. You want it?"

"No," I told him. My head pounded. "Not now."

The next time that Rope went down to the coastal city, I asked him to buy me a writing implement and some paper. Now that I knew where his money was coming from,

I didn't worry about it so much. Selene would have wanted anything of hers to be used to help the living. I couldn't help but think that perhaps that was what Rope and I were doing. Now that he didn't need to feel he had to hide certain information from me, Rope and I had sat down and made lists of helpful items he might purchase. The items that he brought home that night were more oriented to the needs of the adult community, rather than the usual toys he found for the children. Sometimes I had to force myself to remember that Rope was little more than a child himself. What reason would he have to know the importance of vitamins, flour, bolts of fabric, common medications and kitchen utensils?

With the help of several young boys from the village, we set up another tent Rope had bought and emptied the loaded jeep. At one point, while lifting a heavy crate, a thought that had been on my mind resurfaced.

"Rope," I asked. "Did you drop out of school to help Pat find me? I know that you're not old enough to have graduated."

He had been carrying a bolt of unbleached muslin. He found some stacked crates and placed the fabric on top of them. Then he turned to me and lifted the box from my arms.

"I finished school this past semester," he said proudly, throwing back his shoulders. "I was one of those *ex-ceptional* children. You know, very bright. At least, everyone thought I was. I have this type of mind that remembers everything, so learning was easy."

"What about college?" I asked him. "Don't you want to become a professional of some type? You should be able to do that."

“There’s plenty of time to think about that later. Right now, I’m doing exactly what I want to do.”

And so he was. I don’t think that I have ever known anyone who was so content as was Rope. He loved everything he did with his life and everyone loved Rope. Old and young alike flocked to him like bees to honey. I sometimes chided myself, feeling guilty, thinking that surely I was jealous of his social success or I wouldn’t have those feelings.

But, if it hadn’t been for Rope, I never would have known that people and needs such as these existed. I had always thought that if anyone wanted anything badly enough and was willing to work hard enough, that it would be possible. Not so. Rope and the people of the village had taught me that. Occasionally, I thought about Cash and I realized that, in his own way, he had been trying to tell me this.

Several weeks after the confrontation about the letter, I thought of the diaries and notes that Pat had. I didn’t particularly care about reading those far-out diaries again, but I had the desire to read the observations Cash had written down. After days of dread and procrastination, I sat down and wrote a letter to Pat, asking if she could freight those items to me.

Strangely enough, that letter to Pat seemed to break the communications barrier I had arbitrarily imposed on myself. Over a period of several more days, I composed a letter to my father, attempting to justify my actions back in the states and explain what I was doing now.

Almost without realizing that it was happening, I began to learn the English equivalents of names that Rope had given to the villagers. I became acquainted with

Nancy, the bent and calloused old lady who was head weaver for the wraps that the men of the village wore. Now, every morning, she waved at me from her hut and smiled a toothless smile. George, the man who had led me to Rope in the mountains after he had fallen, became a faithful helper when I decided to build a schoolhouse for the children. He still talked the same guttural language that I couldn't understand, but his actions conveyed his messages. And, when I opened the school for the first day, with ancient textbooks and cheap notebooks that Rope had procured down on the coast, I quickly became acquainted with shy Amy, flirtatious Sally and quiet Tom.

Supplies began arriving from the United States, both from New Mexico and Texas. Pat concentrated on supplying the school and developing home products; my father seemed to have remembered his Kansas childhood and, even before the seed packages and fertilizer arrived, we received notice that the farm equipment had come in on a freighter. Both of them emphasized that, should the need for duplication of such a project in the surrounding areas arise, I must let them know immediately and they would help us both with supplies and necessary staff.

Throughout this time, between preparing my English classes and helping the farmers learn to operate the machines, I awaited the promised papers and notes from Pat. In an early letter, she had told me that she had shipped them as soon as she had received my request. Still, they had not arrived. Perhaps I was not meant to have them. I desperately wanted to read the things that Cash had written.

Weeks passed and I developed a daily habit of going out each morning to the roughly plowed fields to inspect the vegetables that had broken their way from seeds and forced themselves upward through the coarse earth. After that, I would walk over to the

area Rope had set aside as an orchard and inspect the frail limbs of the fruit trees. Then I would make my way back to the tent and have breakfast with Rope before going to the school. Breakfast usually consisted of oatmeal or rice and a fruit from one of the wild trees, usually a coconut (which I've never liked) or a grainy pear-textured fruit he called a mango. I'm not sure when I stopped complaining about the food Rope prepared. It must have been a sixth sense or something but, one day, I realized that if I criticized his cooking even once more, that I would be doing it.

On that particular day, I forced myself to swallow sticky lumps of oatmeal which threatened to clog my entire digestive system. I bit into the piece of coconut that he had placed on my plate and my system rebelled at the sweet, dry material that made my teeth feel that they were coated with chalk.

"Rope," I said, throwing caution to the wind. "Don't get me wrong. But is there any food here in this jungle for variety? What happened to old fashioned bacon and eggs?"

His eyes widened and he looked at me with astonishment. One would have thought that I had suggested some sort of unholy sacrifice.

"A hen gives up her eggs freely," he said, scraping the last of the meat from his coconut. "But you can't mean that you would actually consider eating the flesh of another warm-blooded animal!"

How could I have been so unobservant as to never have suspected that Rope was a vegetarian? Instant replays of all our previous meals passed through my mind. I hadn't eaten red meat for almost a year, first because I had no opportunity in the streets and then

because Rope had always been able to fill me with nuts, fruits and vegetables in such variety that I hadn't seemed to crave meat.

"So that is why you want only milk cows and chickens brought here for the farmers," I said. "Don't you think that *they* have the right to raise beef, pork and lamb if they wish? Who are you to determine choices for them? Whatever happened to free will?"

"My, we're becoming socially conscious," Rope said, a challenging twinkle in his brown eyes. "Man, have you ever watched these people eat? It's not the case everywhere in the jungle, but our people in this village live on grains and leaves and berries. They have primitive weapons. They could go out in the jungle and slaughter an animal to eat if they wanted. Or, if they became hungry enough."

"I've seen them eat fish."

"Fish are cold-blooded. They're not brothers."

"In that case, I'll have fish for breakfast tomorrow."

"Fine. I hope you know how to catch and cook them."

In order to allow the youngsters time to help their parents in the fields, I structured the school so that it could be dismissed at noon. Actually, without recess (which they didn't seem to want because it might interfere with their learning), without assemblies, without band, choir, sports or clubs, the four hours every morning allowed much progress in the basic scholastic requirements. I hadn't counted on the fact that the elders of the village might also be just as starved for knowledge. And, every night, just before dusk, the parents and grandparents of my young students gathered in front of the

school. Carrying books and pencils that belonged to their children, they awaited my leadership to guide them to a mystical land of which they had only dreamed.

As I taught the villagers how to speak and write English (and they, in turn, taught me their language), I also learned from them lessons in humility, care, pride, respect. At the time it happened, I couldn't have put it into words but, as days and weeks passed, I became conscious of the fact that, every day I was a better person than I was the day prior.

When Hank, the old cripple who lived at the edge of the clearing opposite us, who smelled of urine and vomit, who touched young girls and boys in wrong places, who stole from his neighbors, came to school late one afternoon and brought me a piece of wood that he had carved into the shape of a primitive human, I looked into his eyes and turned cold. Hank exemplified everything that I had spent my earlier years preaching and praying against; he was everything that I became in the months just before Rope. Hank's eyes told me that he understood my confusion. Those brown orbs forgave my initial judgments and promised me a time when I would have no need for that kind of thinking.

Hank disappeared, just melted into a dark jungle night not long after that. Even now, I'm not sure that he was real or if my wounded mind had created him. Afterward, I slept better at nights and the haunting dreams turned to rejoicing ones. Again, I met the beautiful, dark-haired woman whose gray eyes and tender love warmed me. Even when she drifted away from me, and I found myself in a white stucco-looking futuristic city, I no longer felt pain and guilt. When, in this city, my brother and I played amongst vivid blocks of color and filtered light, I drank in the same camaraderie and exultation of spirit I felt with the woman.

And then Rope approached me with his shocking proposal. He must leave for a time. He had the need to be alone and away and review his life and plans for the future.

“Can’t you do that here?” I demanded. “I’m seldom around here during the daytime and, lately, I’ve been sleeping so soundly at night that I couldn’t possibly disturb you!”

“Man, I got to go,” he said, his brown eyes growing liquid. “I can’t explain it to you. I don’t know why. I don’t understand what’s pulling me. If I don’t go, if I stay here, I’ll die.”

For the first time in months, I forced myself to examine this most dear friend of mine. Since Chicago, he had lost weight and his cheekbones threatened to crack through the thin, almost transparent, brown skin of his face. His long fingers, woven together nervously now, had lost the pudgy characteristics of youth. Denim pants, purchased only weeks before down on the coast, flapped around his scarecrow legs and, when I observed his barrel chest, I could count the bones of his ribs. No, I whispered silently. When I really looked at Rope, I saw someone who courted death. What if he went off somewhere and I never again saw him? But it was now my turn to be responsible.

“Go, Rope,” I told him, speaking the words gently so as not to fracture his fragility. “Go with my blessings. I won’t try to stop you or follow you. I’ll wait here for you.”

After he left,

I slept.

It had been long

And painful

And I had fought

Much more
Than he
For he had been
Glad to go.

Across a green field
Strewn
With yellow flowers
I saw him
His back
To a light
More brilliant than the sun.
He reached out
His hand
And mine
Melded with it.
Souls
In perfect harmony.

With a gentle shove,
He left
And I grasped the air
He parted.

When again
My eyes would open,
I gazed,
Uncomprehending,
At the green
Canvas walls
And prayed

For the warmth of death

The days after Rope left were fully as painful as the days when my mind struggled with the dilemma of Laura and Selene. I felt the tumult, the pain of loss, the anxiety of what I might have lost, the loneliness. As with Selene, I knew that I had lost Rope. Fruitless, unprofitable days passed as I labored over my thoughts, wishing for things I could have done, ways that could have been.

Ginny saved me. Ginny, the motherless six-year-old, whose father occasionally strayed from the village in search of female comfort. School was almost over for the day and the students were engrossed with the art papers and colored pencils that had come in the latest shipment from the states. Silhouetted by the outside sunlight, a frail figure leaned on one of the door facings. I watched in amazement as the tiny child slid down the facing to the floor, like jelly sliding off a ceramic bowl. The noise of her head hitting the floor startled the students and several turned to look. Already, I was at the door, lifting the small figure to my chest.

Sam, who had an answer and explanation for everything, led the way to Ginny's house and one of the other boys ran to the field to find her father. All the way through her layers of clothing and my denim shirt, I could feel the fever that ate at her body. I placed her on a pallet spread on the dirt floor and sent one of the girls who had followed me from the school to find a village woman who might be able to help. Ginny moaned and I wished for an ice pack to wrap around her body. Grabbing a handful of rags from the corner of the room, I tossed them to another of the girls, telling her to go to the stream and wet them. The damp rags arrived at the same time as the village woman who told me

sadly that Ginny's father was nowhere to be found and that this was the way that Ginny's brother had died two years earlier.

I felt a helpless moment. I remembered Rope. What would he have done? Wet rags and all, I pulled tiny Ginny back into my arms and carried her to the jeep, where I arranged her as comfortably as I could in the passenger's seat. Not even sure that I remembered how to drive, I tried the ignition and the beast made a friendly noise. Now for the gears.

I hadn't remembered the road being this steep or rough when Rope had driven us in here the first time. I had forgotten the large holes in the tracks. I had not recalled how close the thick, viny trees grew on either side of those tracks, threatening to grab the tiny jeep and choke both Ginny and me to death. But, most of all, I hadn't remembered the crossroads, both ends of which looked similarly traveled. I pressed on the brake and slowed the jeep. In the almost silence, Ginny's raspy breathing made a chill run up and down my back. Even from my position, I could feel the heat of her body.

"Stop and listen to your inner self," I heard a voice say. Startled, I looked around the isolated jungle, seeing no one. "Go on, man, you know which way to go!"

Rope. It was Rope's voice! He had spoken to me from beyond.

The coastal hospital was none too eager to accept a feverished young native girl with no money and an absentee guardian. When they heard me talk and suspicioned my nationality, the protests faltered and then stopped completely when they saw the money.

After he examined her and began treatment, the doctor told me about Ginny.

"It's an heredity weakness," he said. "Many of the natives contract this fever and die every day. If we can get her fever down and stop the rapid dehydration, we might be

able to treat the cause which is buried within the nerves running up and down her spinal cord.

“Will she be normal again?”

“I don’t know. I’ll do my best.”

We needed medical professionals. It had been made obvious to me in the most graphic way. We needed a clinic. If Pat and my father had been able to help with educational facilities, they would also be able to help now. I wandered through the streets, pausing only when I reached a hotel with a very American insignia. Inside, I queried the desk clerk and then the manager. I wanted to send an overseas telegram. Would they help me?

After I brought one of the village women with no children of her own to sit by Ginny’s bedside during the tenuous days that were to follow, I returned to the village, reasoning that there was nothing further I could do at the hospital. Before the medical team from the United States reached us, I would have to organize a working crew to build the hospital at the village.

Often, as I lifted logs and hammered nails, I thought of Rope. He would have been in his heyday here building the hospital. I remembered his glee as, day by day, he watched the walls of the schoolhouse grow toward the sky. I forced myself to deny the regret and nostalgia and to appreciate this building’s growth doubly, a memorial to Rope.

They arrived more quickly than I had anticipated. We had just put the facings around the openings in the walls that would hold windows and doors when the first of the

trucks arrived at the village. Young, eager, enthusiastic, my father and Pat had picked the cream of the crop. I met three doctors, five nurses, a social worker, an administrative officer and, when the last vehicle pulled up, I knew I had a psychiatric nurse. She smiled with recognition and love when I pulled her from the truck and held her. Tears blinded me and I struggled to steady my voice.

“Rope is gone, Pat. You’ve come, but Rope’s gone.”

“Rope will never be gone,” Pat Lewin Hayes told me. “Rope is forever with us.”

Within a matter of weeks, our village had a hospital which would put to shame some hospitals I had seen in the United States. The workmen, now free from hospital construction, again attended their crops, continued to learn to read and, in late afternoon hours, began construction on a dormitory for the new staff.

After our initial short exchange of condolences, Pat and I conversed only on an objective, concrete level until, one night after my adult classes, I walked toward my tent and she fell into step beside me.

“Have you read the notes yet, Ed?”

Having been caught unaware, it took me a few moments to realize that she meant the material she had sent weeks ago. I shook my head.

“You ought to,” she said, her chiding voice containing love. “I think that, at the other time, you were not ready for the information. Now, you have grown emotionally and spiritually. You will be able to use the information.”

“The papers haven’t come yet, Pat. I’ve been waiting. Since Rope left, I’ve known that I was ready. I’m just waiting.”

The next day, Pat drove my jeep down the coast and put a tracer on the crate she had sent. When the jeep bounced back into the clearing several hours later, I felt a fist of fear clutch my heart as I watched her stiff, white face. She crawled out of the jeep slowly, as if she were very weak. Not Pat, I thought. I won't lose you, too. Sure, she was almost sixty years old, but she had always taken care of herself. She was always in good health, strong. She had to hang on now. We were so close. *So close to what?* a little voice inside my head nagged.

She must have realized that her face and demeanor had frightened me because she looked up and smiled a reassuring smile. *It's okay*, the smile told me. *We're going to make it.*

"I brought you some magazines, Ed," she said, handing me a stack of fairly recent issues of news magazines.

"These are last week's magazines," I exclaimed, surprised. "I haven't been this up on news in a year and a half!"

"I know," she said. "Ed, I have some things to deliver to the medical compound so I'm going down there right now, but I would love to talk to you in the next couple of days. Especially after you've caught up on the latest news."

"Thank you, Pat. You'll never know how much I appreciate you."

She nodded and smiled before she walked back to the jeep.

Late that night, fighting attacking mosquitoes and night insects, I read the magazines, *Time* first, then *Newsweek* and finally *U.S. News and World Report*. The similarity of major happenings as reported in each magazine struck me as highly unusual

since each magazine normally represented either a conservative, liberal or middle of the road viewpoint. Major issues, as had been true even two years ago, consisted of hunger in Ethiopia, oil crises in the Middle East, strife in South Africa, suppression in the communist countries. The one article, common in all magazines, that kept drawing me back for study, told of a varied political and humanistic group organized for the purpose of aiding the weak and powerless of the world. Composed of eleven representatives (twelve had been the initial plan) the committee would meet monthly and, in a round table format, gradually alleviate the emotional, physical and political pressures of a given trouble spot. Only one picture, the same in all three magazines, existed of the participants. I studied it. An oil sheik, a very white man in a rich black suit, a very black man in a fine white suit, a Tibetan (judging from his native costume), a Polynesian, a Russian (from Siberia, judging from his cold, pained stance), and five others who were on this side of the conference table and were either in profile or had their backs to me: an Indian man, a redheaded woman, a woman draped in the traditional black of the Middle East, and a very European-looking man with blonde hair and sharp facial angles. The one seemingly discordant representative at a peace conference sat with his back squarely to me, a large black man wearing army camouflage. And, next to him, an empty chair.

Before daybreak, I tossed the magazines to the floor and lay down on my cot, exhausted. My dreams drew me back to the conference table. Only it was a different conference table, a white geometric table with soothing green light filtering from above. The members of the committee were dressed differently from the article; all wore long white, loose robes. As I fell deeper into the dream, I knew that, although these people were not the people of the magazine articles, somehow they *were*. And the astounding

fact was that I, also, sat at the table, an active participant, and that I knew each of the people well.

Pat awakened me sometime in the middle of the morning with the exciting news that the shipment was in from New Mexico. Washing my face and pulling on clean clothes, I hurried to drive her down to the port. Halfway there, we met an ancient pickup driven by a young native man. He and his partner had contracted to deliver the crates and, if I would lead them, they would drive up to the village and unload the material themselves.

“Crates?” I asked Pat, when I had turned the jeep around and started back to the village. “I would think that all of the notes would have fit into a single crate. A small one at that.”

“I packed some other reading material that I thought you might have use for after you read Cash’s notes,” she said. “And after you and I talk about the whole thing.”

I didn’t stop to rest when the boxes were unloaded and placed in the tent beside my sleeping tent. I scrambled around, found the one that Pat had marked “PRIORITY” and used a pry bar to tear off the metal binding. Then I began the all night process of reading the material.

I had to stop halfway through Cash Wilson’s observations and take a nap. Either the heavy material of his discourse or my own lack of sleep the previous night weighted my eyelids so greatly that I became nauseous attempting to keep my eyes open. I didn’t want to stop; strangely enough, the discussions that Cash and I had had eighteen months ago now hit a familiar chord of memory and, instead of sounding amoral, irreligious or

insane, made a great deal of sense. Before I went to bed, I wrote a short note on a piece of paper and pinned it to my tent flap. Pat would read it the next morning and shield me from intruders. Just as she had done for Alan Lewin. Had Pat always known all of this?

The next day, I read Cash's last entry and my heart felt heavy and sluggish. I should have been there with him. Even better, I should have listened to him from the beginning rather than attempting to proselytize with my own half-formed ideas of humanity. But, more than anything, I had to find Pat and discuss Cash's last few entries, the ones that most psychiatrists would label schizophrenic. Was there a connection between all of those people who left my life in such a short period and the advent of the new group I had read about in the magazines?

I found Pat down by the creek, rinsing out some blouses and underclothes. When she saw me approaching, she gave a final twist to something pastel and nylon.

"A well is what we need," she said, as I sat down beside her on the very rock that Rope had used for a chair only a few days earlier. My heart skipped a beat thinking about my friend.

"I suppose the chauvinistic side of me never thought about how running water would help with laundry and dishes," I ventured.

"Sure, it would be nice for those purposes," Pat agreed. "But think about purification of drinking water. It would be a fairly simple procedure if there was a central source of water that could be monitored."

"That should be our next project."

“Ed, you didn’t wander down here to watch me wash my dirty clothes and discuss the feasibility of a water and sewer system here in the village. You’ve finished Cash’s notes and you want to talk.”

“I sure do,” I said fervently. “I really need that.”

Rope had built a primitive sort of picnic table near the back of the clearing, behind the sleeping tent, and Pat and I sat on some upended logs and looked at each other across the table. She sipped some lemonade out of a glass she had brought from her own tent. When she offered me some, I declined.

“You’ve known since before Selene was born,” I began.

“Not everything, Ed,” she said. “Because of dreams and déjà vu type experiences, because of emotions I felt for certain people, I thought that there had to be some reason rooted deeply in my past, perhaps extending as far back as another life I’d lived. Even that thought, the possibility that I had existed before, was only a superficial one. It was not something on which I based my beliefs and behavior.”

“When you read your husband’s notes, it reinforced certain beliefs.”

“Yes, I knew, without being able to fully accept, that Alan, Kara and I had lived before and that I had needed to help them and had been unable to do so. I felt even more strongly that I must, in this life, do everything possible for that reunion.”

“You were Linae, the son, in that Eskimo life.”

“Yes, although I didn’t know for sure until later. When Alan left, I knew that I’d never again see him in this life. But, within myself, I knew that it was the only way he could accomplish any type of reunion with his soul twin. I had to accept what had happened, go on with my life and wait for the revelations.

“Where did he go?” I asked, dreading what I would hear.

“Eventually, he went to the area of the canyon north of Sedona. You know the area.”

I nodded. How could I forget the two little girls wading that creek?

“Yes, that same place,” Pat said, reading my thoughts. “That particular area is a vortex, a place where members of our soul group go between lives to think and discuss the life just passed and to plan for the next one. Occasionally, even in our dreams, we return to that place for reassurance.”

“How did you find it?”

“I found Frenchy.”

“The same Frenchy that came to me that day and sent me to Cash? The one in Cash’s visions?”

“Right. Only, at that time, Frenchy was a young lady in her twenties, who was relatively inexperienced and unsure of her psychic powers. At that time, she had few ideas as to her importance in the total scheme of the soul group’s life purposes. And you have realized that, after reading Cash Wilson’s notes, haven’t you? You have learned that no one person on this earth can work apart from the rest?”

“I’m beginning to comprehend,” I told her. “While Cash and I discussed it, it seemed familiar, but it was such an unorthodox concept that I didn’t want to accept it. My own outlook was much more comfortable.”

“And easier. And less painful. I know,” she said. “I had some of those same emotions, myself. I didn’t want Alan to leave, especially after Selene was conceived. I

could look ahead in this life and see how good it would have been for all of us. He knew that what he did was not only necessary, but the only way.”

“So he took the crystal skull to Sedona,” I said. “And disappeared into it just like Selene and Laura did.”

“Not precisely,” Pat said. “First he went to Flagstaff and talked to Frenchy. He wanted to discover any new information that she had from her ‘guides.’ Of course, we now know that Frenchy’s guides were just an acceptable way for Frenchy to convey the knowledge that she had within herself.”

“Alan wouldn’t have believed the messages if he thought that they simply came from a young girl’s mind?”

“I’m afraid not,” Pat said. She smiled at her memory. “He was so thrown by the supposition that he had quite a lot of trouble accepting the information, even under the misconception that it had come from some higher intellect.”

I thought about the way I had felt when I had read Kara’s diary. And Dr. Lewin’s notes. And Laura’s letter. When Cash Wilson had seemed to accept it all and tried to make me understand, I had rebelled.

“When Alan didn’t show up in Flagstaff after a few days,” Pat continued. “Frenchy drove down to the canyon and found his body. After she called the police, she called me. I caught the next plane out and, even though I knew what had to have happened, I wanted to hear it from Frenchy.”

“Pat,” I interrupted. “There’s something there that I don’t understand. Alan’s body was found. There was no trace of either Laura or Selene.”

“I’m going to explain that, Ed. But let me try to keep things in some sort of chronological order for simplicity. An autopsy could reveal no reason for Alan’s death. His death certificate listed heart failure as the cause of his death. We now know that Alan’s soul simply vacated his earth form as it had before, just as Kara’s soul had done. But, unlike Laura and Selene, Alan’s soul went to the between life existence with Kara for a few months and, as K’Lei and T’Fai, they discussed their new lives and decided that their goals could best be met by taking the bodies you knew them in during this lifetime.”

“Anyway,” she continued, “Frenchy had recovered the crystal skull from beside the stream and taken it home with her, saying nothing to the police. Frenchy was so very kind to me during that time. Seeming to understand the loss I felt, she moved my suitcases into her spare bedroom and I stayed with her for several days. During those days, I touched with many of my pasts and, even though at that moment I had no desire to keep living, the pressure from within forced me to continue with life.”

“Because of Selene?”

“I didn’t know her as Selene, then. As a matter of fact, I thought of my unborn child as a little boy. After Frenchy explained how souls chose their bodies so as to advance spiritually, I became convinced that, at the moment of my baby’s birth, Alan’s soul would inhabit the tiny body. And I would have another chance. This may sound strange, but in the seventh month of my pregnancy, I felt Alan’s soul, T’Fai, enter my baby’s body.”

“So, when you lost Alan, you felt the same way that I did when Selene left me?”

“Probably,” Pat said. After a second, she rolled her eyes upward. “But, thank goodness, I didn’t choose the same way to punish myself.”

“Did you know that Elizabeth and James Courtney’s child would be the same soul that was Kara?”

“I think that I suspected as much, more from Alan’s notes and Kara’s diary than from inner knowledge. I knew that it would be very important for the two souls to reunite in a life together. There had been so many near-misses.”

“The Eskimo life,” I said. “I messed that one up for good, didn’t I?”

“Actually, you didn’t. The two souls, even though together, had become so complacent in their being together that they had forgotten their higher goals. You merely provided them the opportunity to start over again.”

“What about the life in Oklahoma?” I asked, having been curious about that one since I had read Kara’s diary for the second time. “It felt so familiar when I read it. Was I Mark? That horrible, selfish creature?”

“No,” Pat said. I watched the muscles in her cheeks as she controlled a grin. “As Aunt Mattie’s soulmate, Bob, you and Mark were chronologically in the same age group. In that Oklahoma lifetime, you were Cade Hankins, Alan’s brother, who was killed near the end of World War II.”

“But I remembered it all so well,” I protested. “I could almost predict the next moves. It was as if I actually experienced some of Mark’s acts.”

“Because you were there as Cade, you witnessed many of the physical acts and retained them in your memory. But, even more importantly, we are sometimes, through an Enabler, allowed to experience more fully, more deeply. We may be allowed to empathize with another soul and accurately predict and interpret his emotions and thoughts.”

“An Enabler? *Cash* was, er, is an Enabler. And you’re saying he enabled me to empathize with Mark? Why?”

“It was felt that you needed a life in which you could observe, from outside, how one human being’s irresponsibility can affect us all.”

“I learned, alright. I can’t even understand why Mark was allowed to exist.”

“Without him, neither you nor Alan would have gained necessary experience. He enabled T’Fai and K’Lei to be together again.”

“You keep using the expression, *enabled*,” I said. “Was, uh...”

“Right, Ed. Your Cash Wilson was Mark Hankins.”

“And he punished himself right through his next life,” I said. “Poor Cash.”

Pat shook her head. This time, she grinned.

“Why was it so important for K’Lei and T’Fai to recognize each other while living a human life?” I asked. “If I knew the answer to that question, it might help with some other things I have in mind.”

“It has to do with the crystal skull,” Pat explained. “Remember how T’Fai told K’Lei he would find her when he came back from his mission? He said he would find the crystal skull?”

“Yes.”

“Because T’Fai and K’Lei were a Twin Soul, they needed a repository for their combined experiences. The particular instrument in their case was the crystal skull; it contained the accumulated knowledge, understanding and growth of both souls over their many lifetimes. The only way to utilize this growth was to incorporate it into a *human life on earth!*”

“I know,” I shouted, excited. “This information was always available to them between lives; they had no use for it then.”

“Now, you’re getting somewhere, Ed.”

“Wait,” I said. “Laura and Selene, or K’Lei and T’Fai, didn’t keep living to utilize the knowledge – even after they knew who they were and they had the crystal skull. Something’s wrong.”

“Who said that they’re not still existing in this life?”

“You mean that crazy stuff that Frenchy was telling Cash at the end?” I asked.

“About taking over someone’s body?”

Pat nodded.

“I guess, when I really think about it, it’s no more crazy than the initial thought of being born over and over again. So you think that Laura and Selene are alive right now, in the bodies of those two men who were so severely burned in that airplane crash?”

“Don’t you?”

“I don’t know, Pat. If I believe that, then I have to accept that Cash Wilson is somewhere in the Middle East, rolling in money. But, more than all of that, I have to realize that, since all of them have retained their memories of their respective past identities, then they know about me and where I am and what I’m doing...”

“And the pain and torment that you’ve been through? Is that another bitter pill to swallow, Ed? The fact that they knew of your suffering and did nothing to alleviate it?”

“I suppose so. Actually, it almost makes me angry.”

“Would you be here right now, doing the things you’re doing, if you had known all along the way things really are? Wouldn’t you have had a tendency to get on your

sailboat and take a cruise around the world, secure in the fact that you have been assured of immortality? Could you have gone through the self-discovery process that you've experienced in the past eighteen months? Would you feel the same way that you now feel about these villagers?"

"You're right, Pat. I apologize for my belligerence. I guess one of the things running through my mind that has been bothering me is this: If all those others had to leave their bodies and take on a new identity, what about me? What is my destiny?"

Pat frowned. For the first time since our conversation began, she seemed at a loss for words.

"Perhaps you have found your destiny in the here and now. Maybe you will be able to complete your purpose without any further complications."

Skeptical, I said nothing. Pat seemed tired; she needed rest and I needed to think.

The dream came to me again. And this time, I remembered that I had dreamed it many times and had always forgotten it. I am in a location which I can now think of as Atlantis. It is the same as the walled city of Cirtae of Kara's dream personality, Lealia. The Dome Building is the one described by Cash in his vision as the Enabler. But I am not in the main part of the city. I am flattened against the wall near the gate. My heart pounds rapidly and I am holding something in my hand that alternately burns with the heat of fire and freezes with the cold of ice. I stiffen and pause; footsteps warn me that someone is approaching. It is my brother, Moa. Moa, the complacent, the sensitive, the rational, the helper. He has come to save me. But he cannot; it is too late. Already the city is dying because, when the time came for the revolution and exposure to the crystal

rays, none were there. Already the system is out of balance. It is in my hand – the master crystal. With the master crystal, I will have anything I want. I must scale the wall and be gone before Moa finds me. Feeling a toehold, I pull myself a third of the way up the wall. Another toehold and I am halfway there.

“Niah, Niah,” I hear the whisper. “Where are you? We must return the crystal. Please, Niah!”

My heart hurts. I want to take him with me, my chosen brother. But I cannot; my desire for power would kill him. Another toehold and I am near the top of the wall; I will make it up to him. He will never want for anything. My foot slips and I feel the rough wall grind the skin from my hands. I see a spark and I know that I have damaged the crystal. Now, I am sliding. More sparks. I hear Moa’s screams. Pain. Pain. Terrible pain. Voices moving nearer me. Voices around me. I hear a special voice, the Enabler.

“It is gone,” he says solemnly. “The master crystal has been destroyed.”

I awoke, sweating and shivering. Memories of the great pain and the infinite regret remained with me. I sat up on the bed and held my trembling hands to my eyes and felt tears I had not known that I had wept.

“Rope!” I screamed. “Rope, help me!”

And, then with despair born of the promise for eternal punishment, I realized that Rope, my chosen brother, Moa, had gone. I had no one. I lay back on the bed, turned my face to the wall of the tent and sobbed. I felt a gentle hand on my shoulder. Turning back over, I wiped my eyes with a shirtsleeve.

“Pat! What are you doing here?”

“Don’t cry, Ed. Don’t mourn. You’ve redeemed yourself.”

“What do you mean?” I cried angrily. “I doomed an entire civilization because of my selfishness and lack of responsibility!”

“Atlantis was doomed, Ed, because of a shift of the earth on its axis. Remember Kara’s diary? The conversation that she, as Lealia, had with Antai? They knew it was inevitable. You allowed it to happen a little earlier, that’s all.”

“Pat,” I whispered, trying to force my heartbeat to slow. “That’s what Frenchy told me in the auditorium that day. Another shift is due to occur soon and the majority of the northern hemisphere will become uninhabitable. At that time, my interpretation was all wrong, but I remember now. What can I do? At least, with the master crystal, the southern hemisphere might stand a chance of survival.”

“Think back to the discussions between Cash and Frenchy when they were talking as R’Kei and R’Fui.”

“I don’t see how that absolves me.”

“A Twin Soul,” she said patiently, holding my hand in her own. “K’Lei and T’Fai knew the secret to create another master crystal. But, separately, neither one could provide the information. Only when they functioned as a Twin Soul, could the crystal be formed again. And you, dear Ed, have finally helped in that reunion. At this very moment, the crystal is being structured in an isolated part of the world and, again, humanity will function with that perfect blend of emotions and cognition.”

“How do you know that?”

“I listen, Ed. I have attuned my Pat self with my Being-of-Light self, L’Mei. The same self who, in Atlantis, was Rina, the mother of Moa and Niah.”

“Oh, God,” I said. “I hurt so many people.”

“You must learn to look at your experiences in a different way, Ed. You must not reflect on the negative because, once an act is done, it cannot be undone. You learn from it. And you realize that there is, in every act, an equal amount of good and bad. Review all of your lives and you will see that, whenever you did your so-called worst, something good grew from it. Perhaps, if you had it to do over again, you would choose an easier way or one that was less painful, but would the lesson be of the same value? Go forward always, Ed.”

I laid my head on her chest and she curled her arms around me. For the first time in months, I felt a type of comfort. Pat was right; I remembered Atlantis and my warm mother. But, I remembered another little boy cradled in her other arm.

“Rope,” I cried, sitting back up and looking at Pat. “Rope and I were soulmates. If I hadn’t fouled things up, we would have become a Twin Soul. I have to make it up to him.”

An icy fear wedged into my heart. Despair again engulfed me.

“I’m going to have to go through another life to find him,” I moaned. “How will I know him? What if I mess up again like I did all of those other times? What if I miss him again?”

“You’ll know him,” Pat said, tightening her arms around me. “I guarantee you that you will know him.”

Pat was right about listening. In both my dreams and my everyday life, messages came through. Sometimes, I heard Rope tell me how foolish I was to plant the seeds so

deep. At other times, Cash warned me to check the generator. In whispers, Selene and Laura offered me hints as to how to overcome technical difficulties.

But, nights taught me the most. I learned of my own Spirit of Light identity, N'Mai, and how my major purpose initially had been as a transmitter of energy. I recalled lives in various and exotic places. These were not always lives in which I would have taken pride but, as Pat had told me, I had learned and the people who experienced those times with me had also learned. I remembered the common meeting place between lives and returned in spirit to Sedona. Although I no longer felt the devastation I had felt upon first visiting the spot, I sensed that something was wrong. Because Cash, Laura, Selene and even Frenchy had gone to other bodies, I had no expectations of finding them. My only source of disappointment was that I should have been able to find Rope. He should have been there.

The time came when I knew I would write a book, incorporating my new knowledge. When I approached Pat and asked her if she would contribute a piece, she hesitated for a long time.

“Yes,” she said, finally. “But, it’s almost frightening to expose myself so. Everyone would know my weaknesses.”

“Pat,” I scolded. “How can you talk of weaknesses. You are the epitome of strength.”

Days and weeks passed and our little society progressed rapidly. Crops grew and were harvested. Hungry people from nearby came and were fed and each had a desire to

obtain knowledge. My father sent more and more teachers, good people with whom to found idealistic societies, to areas we could not reach. Our technology advanced, but it was a controlled system. Because of lessons we had learned previously, we were cautious about experimenting with any type of industrialization that could lead to a person or a group craving power over another. And, all the time, Pat's body grew weaker.

When she died, I knew that I had to continue. She had taught me that. I didn't want to. Pat had taken up my emotional slack after Rope had left and now I was again raw. I allowed the women of the village to cleanse her body and wrap her in treated fabrics.

But I dug the grave. Underneath a blistering sun, I broke the hard earth and, shovel by shovel, I lifted the soil to which my friend would return. That night, I carried her pitifully light body and tenderly laid it in the cool earth. And, handful by handful, I sifted the earth over the body she had chosen for this life. When the cavity had been filled and I had smoothed the crumbly earth over the top, I sat for a long time by her side, holding the piece of paper on which she had written the words, her contribution to my book.

Morning came faster than I expected and the sun shone fully on my face. I knew I must celebrate Pat's passing rather than mourn her absence so I stood up, dusted myself and looked toward the village. Over the crest of the hill, the silhouette of a man appeared, dark against the yellow sun. For a moment, I felt resentment that anyone should invade my communion with Pat. Then I caught my breath. My heart beat faster. Could it be? Could he have returned?

No, a voice told me. Forget it. You had your chance. You're going to have to do this again and you'd better do a good job next time. But then, the voice that really knew told me that my hopes were justified. I ran toward him. He threw down the knapsack he'd been carrying and ran to me. At that same moment, I knew why the broad back in the peace conference picture had been familiar. I also knew why there had been a vacant chair beside him.

I dropped my societally imposed ideas of homosexuality and threw my arms around the man, held him close. I overcame my last human prejudices and hugged the black man, drew his sweaty body to mine. I lost the fear that love might bring pain. I loved Rope. It no longer mattered that he might reject me, ridicule me or deny me; my love for him was unconditional; I asked for nothing from him in return.

And, in that instant, I felt his body shake abruptly and mine shook with it, the combined movement settling to a steady smooth vibration. At that moment, I knew Rope as well as I knew myself – and I knew that he had the same knowledge about me.

Something akin to an electrical current passed from his body through mine and then back to his. As if by prearrangement, we pulled apart and the bright glow that had surrounded us faded to a dim, sparkling glimmer. Our eyes exchanged the message: *We've done it, dear one. We've made it.* And aloud, Rope said,

“Man, you've let this place fall apart while I was gone. Come on. Let's get to work.”

EPILOGUE: PAT'S LETTER

This is the story of several members of a soul group, one group among hundreds existing at this very moment. Parts may strike your deeper self as familiar because the processes of recognition and reunion are the same for all of us. You may realize that happenings, events and meetings were by design, rather than by choice, and that deep, seemingly unaccountable emotions are not simply products of association, but elements of a larger plan devised long ago and in which each of us played a part. You may even set out to find your soulmates because of an unfulfilled yearning that you've always felt. Look carefully at those closest to you, remembering that we chose to be where and who we are.

Don't let yourself become complacent and aloof from this world because you assume your immortality is assured and that poverty, hatred and war will no longer exist after your death. These horrors will exist until you have met, understood and obliterated them. By denying your responsibility to change them, you are promised a return in which you again will face them in a way perhaps more grim even than this. We have chosen to conquer these villains, all of us, and your repudiation is not simply masochistic; it is damaging to your soul group. And when your soul group, which reacts and plans with mine, is flawed, then the smooth evolution of humanity is set askew.

We are each responsible.

THE END

