

## **Heart of the Leopard Sampler**

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This brief document contains three short stories taken from my collection, *Heart of the Leopard and Other Stories*. The complete collection can be found on Amazon.com, where it is available for \$9.99 as a print book or \$4.99 as an ebook. The samples in this selection run the gamut, from an absurdist piece to a sci-fi to a contemporary fantasy. There are 16 stories in the complete collection, and several are much longer than the pieces which I have selected for this sampler. Those stories form a wide variety of tales, though most are fantasies in some vein. I hope that you will read the stories in this sampler and be amused to purchase the full book!

## The Informant

*You don't see much absurdist literature in America. Perhaps we're too serious a culture to truly appreciate the absurd, or perhaps it simply hasn't caught on here in America yet because not enough people are writing stories in this vein, so people don't know to ask for them. This might also be called a surrealist piece, if absurdism isn't your cup of tea.*

Bill is smoking a joint outside the high school when the class bell rings. He is supposed to be in English Literature right now, but he doesn't feel like it today, and so he is out here huffing and puffing away, holding the joint away from his body so he won't stink of weed when he eventually goes back inside. He often doesn't feel like English Literature, it's all Shakespeare and other boring dead guys. He can't remember now why he signed up for it, probably Traci had talked him into it in an attempt to broaden his mind. Traci was just full of ideas like that.

Right now Bill has his buzz on, a nice low-level vibration in the front of his skull that tells him he is feeling no pain. In fact, that he is feeling good. It's hard to tell for sure how he feels, because he's currently pissed off at Traci, who has tried to get him to try cocaine for a while now and is making noises about breaking up with him if he doesn't give it a shot in the very near future. Bill likes marijuana, it makes him feel good and smoothes the rough edges off the world, but he isn't at all sure he wants to try something as hard as cocaine. People die on that shit. It just doesn't sync with Bill's idea of who he is.

So Bill is slouching on the bike rack when Walter Hernandez and his pack of bitches come along. Walter Hernandez graduated from high school two years ago, but he keeps coming back to bully the current crop of students. Apparently he's unemployed,

because he has time to come to the school during the day. He shows up like now, between classes, with his loser buddies, trolling for kids like Bill who are out and about on school grounds when they shouldn't be. Then Walter leans on them, roughs them up for their money, and so forth. Etcetera, as Traci would say. So Bill is bracing himself for the loss of his pocket money when Walter pulls a new move; he takes a pearl-handled nine millimeter out of his back pocket and walks up to Bill and puts the gun to Bill's left temple.

"Yeah?" says Bill.

"Pussy little kids like you don't know your place," says Walter.

"And you do?" says Bill.

And Walter clicks the safety off and starts squeezing the trigger. Bill isn't sweating it. Walter is a bully, not a murderer, everyone knows who Walter Hernandez is.

"Bad mouth on you, bitch," Walter says, and then he squeezes the trigger and blows Bill's brains out. Walter's posse raise their sunglasses to take in the scene; Walter has upped the ante this time.

Time passes. Bill's parents refuse to pay for his burial or cremation. Bill's mother's parents offer to pay the costs until they learn how much a modern funeral will run them. Then they, too, back away. No one wants to foot the bill for Bill, so to speak, so in the end everyone leaves him where he lies, right there next to the bicycle rack. The coroner comes by and does the autopsy on the spot, scooping out Bill's guts and his heart and what passed for brains and weighing them on a scale and putting them all back where they belong when he's done. Traci comes by and calls Bill a dick who didn't know how to stay out of trouble, and she pours some dirt over him, but it's not enough to keep away the stink as he rots over the next couple of months. No one wants to use the bike racks, and the kids come up with alternate transportation. So for Bill the next few months are decomposition. All the kids are talking about how cold Bill's parents are, but they're getting off on it, too. The harsh edges of the world are clearly visible in the case of Bill, it makes a good study case.

Ninety days to the day after Bill was shot in the head, he comes back to life as a skeleton. He sits up, and the dirt Traci poured on him falls away. The flesh has rotted off him completely, and he's a nice, smooth, perfectly white skeleton with a hole in his left temple.

"What the fuck was that all about?" he says to no one in particular. It's in the middle of third period, and there's no one outside today. Bill gets up, checks himself out, realizes there have been changes since he last checked in. He decides to go inside and ask about himself, see what the buzz is. The doors to the high school are typically locked when class is on, but today the janitor forgot to do it, so Bill waltzes right in and

goes to the principal's office, where a mousey student aide named Janet something-or-other gets big eyes to see him and squeaks:

"What the hell is *your* story?"

"Bill Arrington to see mister Soto," Bill says as casually as he can. How he can talk without a tongue is a mystery, but sound comes out of his mouth anyway.

Janet something-or-other depresses the button and speaks into the intercom: "Bill Arrington to see mister Soto," she says. She listens to something coming out of the intercom and says, "Yes, sir. Well, he's come back from the dead. You'll have to see this one, to believe it."

The intercom buzzes, and Janet nods. "Go right in," she says to Bill.

Bill walks past Janet and goes to the principal's office. The door is open, and Bill helps himself. Inside is a large office with cherry furniture and a beefy middle-age guy who is taking a drink from a plastic water bottle. He's in his mid-fifties, Bill would say, with thinning salt-and-pepper hair and double chins and pimples, of all things. He looks like a former football player gone to seed, is what he looks like, and Bill immediately feels sort of sorry for the guy.

"Bill Arrington," says mister Soto. "Didn't expect to see you up and about again. Care to tell us who killed you?"

"Walter Hernandez," says Bill. "He was the triggerman, his posse just gave moral support."

"We thought that was who is must be, but no one had evidence." Mr. Soto gives Bill a stare that goes on so long Bill gets uncomfortable.

"Sorry about the accommodations," says Mr. Soto at last. "Your parents didn't want to pay for a funeral, so everyone thought it was better to leave you where you lay."

"My parents are cheap," says Bill shortly.

"Amen," says Mr. Soto. He gives Bill another stare. "You know, I could use a man like you," he says to Bill. "You've passed your eighteenth birthday, if I remember right, so you're a free man now, Mr. Arrington."

"Kick *ass*," says Bill.

"I need an informant, to keep an eye on the malcontents. What do you say?"

"Like what?" says Bill.

"We'd post you by the bicycle rack, just hanging out. When the likes of Walter Hernandez come along you'd let me know, and I'd see to it they get run out of here or sent to the pokey."

"I like it," Bill says. "Protecting the school, and all that."

"Exactly," says Mr. Soto.

So Mr. Soto has a little guard shack constructed next to the bicycle rack, and that's where Bill is now, just hanging out, watching for bullies and shooters to come to the school. It's pretty sure that Walter Hernandez won't be back, because Mr. Soto told the cops about Walter, and they put Walter away. But every year brings a new crop of bullies and thugs, and it's certain that Bill will be worth his weight in gold, as the informant to the principal. It's an odd twist of fate for someone who used to be a stoner, but the world brings turnarounds every day, and in the end the only question is whether or not a citizen is useful to himself and his country. In his new role as public safety specialist Bill Arrington has at last found a valuable place in society, and his future is just looking brighter by the day!

## Aftermath

*It seems clear to me that all the boosters of interplanetary travel who are itching to find life on other planets haven't really thought this one through too well. If there are life forms on Mars or even Venus, they're likely to be microbial. If you remember back to the conquest of the New World by the European powers, you'll recall that European diseases wiped out most of the Indians and depopulated both North and South America. One can only imagine what an alien virus, to which humanity would have no immunity, could do to us. And yet every year NASA blithely relays its plans to go to Mars and bring back rock samples, as though this presents no danger to us at all. This story follows the aftermath of such arrogance.*

That morning in May, Davidson filed a motion at the World Court on behalf of the United States, asking that the damage award be reduced from \$100,000 per casualty to \$1,000 a head. It was a token payment as far as human life went, but when you added up six billion casualties, at \$1,000 a head it was six trillion dollars in damages, which was still more than the United States, in its newly reduced capacity, could pay. This was the first attempt to reduce damage payments, and if it was successful there would be another attempt to reduce the payments even further. The United States was still a rich country, but with a population now reduced to one hundred twenty million, its economy was no longer the powerhouse it had once been. No one's was.

After he filed the motion, Davidson left the World Court and went to the Tradewinds restaurant, where he ordered a tomato juice and waited for his gang to show up. He didn't have to wait long. Michelle Two-Feathers, attorney for the American Indian Nations, came in just a few minutes after he settled, and Brian MacOfee of the European Union arrived shortly after her. Finally came Preet

Chatterjee, the Indian woman. Each greeted Davidson and sat down at the table with him and ordered something to drink and maybe something light to munch on. It was already ten in the morning, and they'd all eaten breakfast already. Just a snack, then.

"So, the mighty United States is begging for mercy already," said Michelle, with a smirk.

"Like the Indian Nations didn't?" said Davidson. The four people at the table shared common cause; their respective interests were all part of the joint Mars Mission, and they were all being sued together. The American Indian Nations had already petitioned for reduced damages several days ago, and Brian's European Union would so file in a few days. India had declared itself a junior partner in the Mars Mission and claimed they weren't at all responsible for the Mars Plague, so they had argued for zero damages. All of this would take months to work out, of course, and there would be further petitions and motions depending on the success of this batch, and the entire case would stretch out to years, if not decades. Actual blame was not in doubt, it was just a matter of who paid how much, and when.

"Now, now, let's not go at each other," said Brian, ever the polite Brit. "We've got the entire World Court to go at us, we don't need to tear into each other."

Michelle promptly took an interest in her lemon juice, and Preet chewed on her grapefruit. Preet had marks from the Mars Plague on her face, but she was one of the lucky ones, a survivor, and the others treated her with extra respect.

The Mars Plague was a strange disease. It was easy to catch, unless you had the immunity, in which case you got a light cold with itchy skin, that blew over in a week. The other seventy-five percent of the people who caught it died of it. It responded to sulfa drugs, like the ones used for leprosy, but they only stopped the disease cold about twenty percent of the time. Most people who got it just shriveled up and died over the course of about a month. First World countries with strong medical infrastructure suffered losses of about sixty percent, and Third World countries took losses of eighty to ninety percent.

Preet took a bite of her grapefruit and chewed it up and swallowed it, then she turned to Michelle and said, "The American Indian Nations are going to take it the worst of all of us, I think. You were the weak link, and you're the ones the global public blames for the plague."

"It's joint responsibility," Michelle growled. "The U.S. should never have sent the space plane up to the space station. They should have sent a one-shot capsule up with the food and medical supplies and not provided a way back home for the astronauts. The temptation was just too strong."

"We would have supported a one-shot capsule," said Preet. "But the U.S. wasn't consulting us. They were the leaders on the Mission, and they wanted to call the shots. They were proud of their space plane and wanted to show it off. Technophiles with misplaced priorities, that was NASA."

This was all familiar territory to the four attorneys. Every few months they would have one of these little hashings-out, and it was Brian's self-appointed job to make sure it didn't turn too ugly. Brian nodded his head at Preet's comments and said,

"Well, we're all in it together, like it or not."

"The U.S. is going to take it harder than the Indian Nations," Michelle said primly. "It was our guy who brought it back, but it was the U.S. that was in charge of the mission. They should have stopped it before it spread. They should have taken more draconian precautions."

"There was no chance to get precautions in place," said Davidson, "With your guy commandeering the space plane the way he did and flying it down."

"All right, all right," said Brian. "We've done all this before, remember? Come on, people, let's talk about the motions we're filing to reduce the damages."

"There wouldn't be any damages, if the astronauts would have stayed on the space station," Preet said. "It was contained. It was safe. Six people had it, six people would have died from it, that would have been the end of it. 'My people are my destiny,' remember *that* one?"

"We've suffered the worst for it," said Michelle. "Our people were most susceptible to the plague; the Navajo were virtually wiped out as a people when Grey Eagle returned to them. Our numbers declined by over eighty percent, even with First World medicine available. Don't tell me we didn't suffer for it."

"*Everyone* suffered for it," said Preet. "Look at Samoa, ninety-seven percent kill rate. An entire nation, gone. India has lost a billion people, China has lost a billion people. The American Indian Nations should have to pony up the lion's share of the damages. India was a silent partner on this expedition. Our gal stayed on the space station and died, like a responsible citizen of the Earth."

"Did you hear they're pulling the entire space station out of orbit and flying it into the sun?" said Brian. "They don't want any further strains getting out."

"Too little, too late," said Preet. She stabbed her grapefruit, and a stream of juice shot out and struck Brian in the face. He wiped it away with a napkin while Preet went on: "They should have flown the space station into the sun while all six astronauts were sick."

"Well, hindsight is twenty-twenty vision, isn't it?" said Davidson. "No one knew how lethal it was, at first. The astronauts had it for six months without developing

secondary symptoms. Who could have guessed it would mutate almost immediately after reaching the ground?"

"Anyone with a degree in virology, or disease control and management," said Preet. "They had the blood work done while they were still in Mars orbit. They knew it was Martian in origin, or at least wasn't a known Earth-based disease. Actually, thinking about it, they should have never returned to Earth to begin with. They should have aimed their ship at the sun and burned up. Too much emphasis on saving the astronauts. Hubris. Hubris and misplaced priorities."

"The motions we're filing, please," said Brian. "I'm filing for the EU on Friday. Haven't a clue how the Court is going to rule on it. Anyone else have a feel for the direction the Court is leaning?"

"They're leaning toward being punishing," snapped Davidson. "They're pissed at the U.S. more than anyone, but that's because we've got the deepest pockets. It should be about the plague and the casualties, but it's going to become about the money. Everything becomes money, in the end."

"What about the nukes?" said Preet. "The First World nations can't keep track of all their nukes, anymore, with so many people dead. All those silos full of nuclear weapons, all waiting for terrorists to come and cart them off. The U.S. says they have twelve thousand nukes unaccounted for, and the Russians have eighteen thousand unaccounted for. God knows what it's like in China. They won't admit the size of their problems."

"Where did you get those numbers, Preet?" mused Davidson. "You always have the most interesting numbers. Or the most made-up."

"We Indians talk to people, dear heart," said Preet. "Remember us, the world's friendly neighbor? All these parties I go to here in the Hague, I'm always talking to my peers and colleagues. That's where I get these numbers, from the ambassadors and others in the know. Trust me, there's a whole world of people beyond the lawyer pool we socialize with. You'd be amazed what they know about."

"Thirty thousand loose nukes, just from the biggest nuclear players. That's something I don't want to think about," said Brian.

"On the other hand, there are probably no terrorists still alive," said Michelle. "They're not famed for medical expertise. Their death rate must have approached one hundred percent. With any luck the major terrorist groups have too few men to mount any nuke-gathering expeditions. The plague wasn't all bad; it gave us a reprieve from terrorism."

"Not worth it," said Preet.

"I didn't say it was worth it, Preet," said Michelle. "Only that it's a small blessing."

“The E.U. wants America to shoulder the bulk of the payments,” Brian said. He sipped his orange juice and shrugged. “The motion I’m filing will try to shift seventy percent of the blame to the Unites States.”

Davidson stared at him. “We were equal partners,” he blurted.

“The U.S. was in charge of the mission,” said Brian. “It was their space plane that was hijacked and brought the plague to ground. EU leadership sees this is an American problem. We were bit players.”

“With equal voice in the decision-making process,” Davidson said. He was trying not to get hot under the collar, but everyone was dumping on the U.S. Grey Eagle didn’t help: an American citizen brought the plague home. Some humorists had noted that the Europeans brought plague to the Indians, and now the Indians brought plague to the rest of the world. Tit for tat, as it were. Grey Eagle flew the space plane back to Earth and landed it on the Navajo Reservation and immediately infected others. By the time disease control was in place, dozens of infected Navajo had driven off the reservation, spreading the disease everywhere.

The virus that had given the astronauts a bad cold mutated within a few weeks into a new strain: fast-moving, hard-hitting and seventy-five percent lethal. While that disease raged on earth, the lightweight version the astronauts had contracted at last showed its teeth, and the five astronauts still in Earth orbit died of it. Their deaths were almost unremarked, amidst the general die-off. All sorts of drugs were tested, and pretty early on the sulfa drugs showed some ability to fight the disease. That was the only class of drugs that had proven at all effective against the Mars Plague, and manufacturers mass-produced sulfa drugs and got them to market in record time. Hospitals were overcrowded with the sick and dying, so most people got the drugs from pharmacies and administered them themselves. What the hell, twenty percent of the medicated even lived to tell about it.

“I’m just telling you what the EU leadership wants to see happen,” Brian said, placating. “They want the blame shifted to America. You guys are going to be awful lonely out there, Mark.”

“If the Court sees it your way,” said Davidson. “If they let you shimmy out of your share of the responsibility.”

“Yes,” Brian said. “Rather big ‘if.’” He crunched on his bagel. “The rest of the world sees the U.S. and the EU as equally culpable, I’m afraid. I’m not sure this latest gambit will be successful, but we have to try.”

Davidson felt somewhat mollified at this remark, and he said, “I expected our four interests to stick together better than we have.”

“Only India has argued zero culpability,” said Michelle. “The rest of us have shouldered our share.”

“The American Indian Nations are a small player,” grumbled Davidson. “I’m sorry, but with the die-off you guys have gotten pretty dinky. There’s no way you could take a large share, there aren’t enough of you to shoulder the burden.”

“We’ll pay our share,” Michelle said archly. “All half million of us.”

“It would surprise me if the Court lets you off lightly,” said Preet. “Your guy spread it. You bear the most direct responsibility. What a bitch, eh, dear? Finally get a national organization together, and its first real duty is to pay reparations.”

Michelle ignored this.

“If this batch of motions is successful, we’ll have a rate we can actually pay,” said Brian. “\$100,000 a head was unrealistic. I think the court will bite on \$1,000 a casualty. They have to. We can’t pay it if they go farther north of that figure. We’ll just ignore the judgment if it’s too outrageous.”

“You’re not going to get off the hook, I think, *dear*,” said Davidson to Preet. “You were in on the project right along with us. I think the Court is going to throw out your motion for zero reparations.”

“We’ll see,” said Preet. “I think I was pretty convincing in my arguments.”

Brian smiled. “Maybe we should all file for zero reparations, say it was a natural disaster that could not have been anticipated.”

“The Court would never accept that,” said Michelle. “Human agency was too clear in this case.”

“Speaking of human agency, I hear the appeal is going to be denied,” Davidson said.

“*First* appeal,” said Michelle. “Grey Eagle has several appeals in his pocket. He has excellent representation.”

“‘My people are my destiny,’” Preet snorted. “Well, he wiped out his people. I’m surprised he has any support at all.”

“He doesn’t have any support from the Indian Nations,” said Michelle. “What do you think all those bodyguards are for? His own people want a chunk of his ass as much as everyone else does. Frankly, I’m surprised he’s lived this long.”

“What a joke,” Davidson said. “Flew back to Earth and spread the plague, then survived it himself. Now he’s the most hated man on the planet. He’ll get the death penalty, you can bet on it. Was I the only one backing that decision?”

Michelle didn’t say anything, and Brian munched his bagel. Preet said,

“Not the only one, Mark. He couldn’t possibly be allowed to get away with omnicide.”

"The smiling face of the Mars Plague," said Davidson. "Just wanted to go home, be with his people. You can understand the impulse completely while still hating the man for his decision."

"They say the plague is mutating again," said Preet. "Have you heard? New strain. No telling yet how lethal. First cases are coming in from Tanzania and Kenya."

"Urban legend," Brian said, but he didn't sound convinced.

"Every few months that rumor goes around," Davidson said, shaking his head. "Always with the new strain. I wouldn't put much stock in it, Preet."

"I have this on *very* good sources," said Preet. "Be watching for this one, people. This could be the strain that brings an end to the human race."

The four of them sat there for a long moment, thinking about this.

Brian spread cream cheese on his bagel and took a bite.

"What about you, Mark?" Michelle said. "Any juicy rumors? The U.S. has been awful quiet on this whole matter of reparations."

"I just do my job and try not to listen to rumors," Davidson said. "Sometimes I think my government is planning to give the finger to the whole world. But we can't afford the loss of trade, so we'll probably go along with reparations."

"It would do the U.S. a lot of harm to ignore the decision of the Court," Michelle said. "But if you do, we'll probably do the same."

"Tut, tut, no good thinking this way," said Brian. "None of us can afford to be scofflaws at this level of the game. No good even going there."

Now there was a general lull in the conversation, accompanied by drinking and munching on snacks. Davidson wasn't coming out with the rumor he'd heard, the big one. The rumor that said the U.S. government was growing frustrated with Grey Eagle's 'excellent representation' and his lengthy appeals process. Rumor said Grey Eagle was going to be killed, murdered, gunned down on the way to his hearings. Like Preet, Davidson has this on *very* good sources. He doesn't like to think about this sort of thing, it's outside the rule of law. The U.S. government doesn't do assassinations anymore, is the party line. But they were going to make an exception this time and kill the bearer of the Mars Plague. He was too outrageous a case, he caused too many deaths, and now it was his turn. This sort of thing made Davidson nervous. It was probably just a rumor, albeit a well-placed one, but the anger at Grey Eagle was real, and there was no telling how the government would bounce. The government shouldn't be in the murder business, Davidson felt. Soak the American Indian Nations for the deaths, soak the U.S. for their role, and give Grey Eagle his fair trial and fair lethal injection. No need for an assassination. It was bad for the rule of law to be assassinating people.

Davidson glanced around the table at Michelle, who was eating a cup of fruit slices, and wondered if she'd heard the same rumor he had. She probably heard that rumor once a week. Already there had been two attempts on Grey Eagle's life, one in prison and one on the way to his hearings. In both cases it was someone angry about their family having died of the plague, looking for payback on Grey Eagle. The U.S. was going for the death penalty in the case, but some people didn't want to wait for the state to put the big Navajo to death. They wanted to do it themselves.

He had to admit, the American Indian Nations had an attention-grabber on their hands. Everyone was watching Grey Eagle's trial, they were calling it the Great Trial in the media. Also, Earth Versus Mars was a favorite. Every motion, every petition, every appeal got a ton of media play. In terms of getting the Indian Nations' name out there, it was unparalleled publicity. Grey Eagle! Why in hell did you have to come to ground and spread the plague? Fear of dying alone and separated from your people, fear of dying period. And you took six billion people down the drain!

In that moment Davidson felt something like hatred for the man, hatred for the reparations the U.S. was certainly going to have to pay, hatred for all the death and mayhem, hatred for the temptation to have him killed and disregard the rule of law. The plague was bringing out the worst in people, from riots to casual killers preying on the sick to the lust for reparations and simple greed. The Mars Plague had come, and its strains were going to be around for a long, long time, and it might yet kill off the entire human race. And Davidson prays for Grey Eagle's appeals to fail quickly, and for the state to execute him swiftly, and for the Earth to close this chapter and get on with living. Because life for those who still had it was sweet these days after the plague, and Davidson felt lucky to still be alive, and he wanted to celebrate that life as much as he could while he still had it, before the new strains came and put paid to Mark Davidson and his hopes and dreams, forever.

## Pharaoh's Boat

*I have traveled to Egypt several times in the last twenty years and always enjoy my visits there. Egypt has a sense of history that only a few other places on Earth can rival, and its daily rounds of work and café life are appealing to my writer's sensibility. Then there are those mysterious few who seem to spend all their time at the café; what they're up to the world doesn't quite know. This story follows a young American traveler as he gets to know one of the permanent café denizens and comes face-to-face with the strange.*

The man in the Cairo café had yellow teeth from smoking the hookah pipe for years. He was a tall Arab with a thin face and strikingly handsome looks that had become downright majestic as he sailed into middle age. He had a salt-and-pepper moustache and a white goatee, and he was seated at his leisure with his back to the wall and his legs crossed in front of him. He was brown-skinned and was in his mid-fifties, I guessed, and his teeth were intact, which was somewhat unusual for the men of Cairo, who like their thrice-daily tea with heaping spoonfuls of sugar. He wore a peasant's robe, dark blue, and a pristine white turban. On the ground next to him was a tall hookah pipe, which he was contentedly huffing away at. As I approached the café he winked at me and motioned for me to join him on the café's terrace. I had a seat and said,

"Hello."

"Excellent," he said with a faint British accent. "American?"

"Yes. California."

"Malak," he said, offering his hand.

I shook the hand and said, "William."

He called out in Arabic, and a hunchbacked man came from inside the café. It was early morning and not hot yet, just warm on this sunny April day, and the hunchback said, "Aiwa?"

"What would you like?" asked Malak.

"A lemon juice and a hookah with apple tobacco."

Malak spoke in fluid Arabic, and the hunchback glanced at me and nodded. He disappeared into the café, and within two minutes he reappeared with the requested items. He set up the hookah and put a wad of apple tobacco and a few fiery coals on the burner, and I sampled the tobacco and was satisfied that it was the good stuff, smooth and flavored, instead of the cheap tobacco, which has little flavor and is harsh. What they cut the cheap mix with, I was afraid to ask.

"How long do you have in Cairo?" Malak asked me.

"Three more weeks," I said. "I started in the south of Egypt a month ago and am working my way north along the Nile toward Alexandria. I have three months in all. A friend of mine came to Egypt two years ago and really loved the place, so I decided to come and check it out."

"That should be long enough to see all the big things," he said. "Have you been to the Egyptian museum?"

"Twice," I said. "Everyone raves about the mask of King Tut, but I liked his gold sarcophagus better. Isis is so beautiful with her wings outspread."

"Ah, an art lover," he said and puffed his hookah. A thin wisp of white smoke arose from his tobacco. "You appreciate beauty."

"Who doesn't appreciate artifacts that are thousands of years old?" I said. "There's nothing like this in America. The sense of history here in Egypt is incredible. I want to go see the solar boats by the pyramids, they're forty-five hundred years old."

He smiled. "Tell me one thing about Egypt that you'll always remember," he said.

I thought about it. "I took a sailboat, a *felucca*, from Aswan down the Nile for three days. There were eight tourists on the boat, all friendly people. The captain's name was Taha. He spoke no English, and I speak no Arabic. He'd point at the limestone cliffs and say something in Arabic, and we'd all look at where the rock was carved out, by whom or for what I still don't know. He served up peasant food for the meals, but it was delicious. At night we slept on the boat, while the captain and his cabin boy kept watch. Sailing the Nile is so relaxing, it was a truly humbling experience."

"Be careful," he said. "You'll fall in love with Egypt, and you'll never want to leave."

"So far Egypt has been good to me," I said. "I can't get enough."

"You like boats?"

"I didn't like boats until I came to Egypt," I said. "The *felucca* trip won me over."

He nodded. "You're in luck, then. There is about to be a special event right here in Cairo, on the Nile, on a boat. Interested?"

I had seen the river boats that were converted into floating restaurants and marked those out as possibly interesting. And I had already taken a small sailboat out to Banana Isle to see the banana plantations. I wondered what he was talking about.

"You mean the floating restaurants?" I ventured.

"No, this is more powerful. The pharaoh's solar barque will be going down the Nile in three days' time, carrying pharaoh's body to the west bank. Be at the Kasr al-Nil bridge as the sun rises, right in the center of the bridge, and you'll see it. It will have thirty rowers and will be moving fast, so be in a motor boat. You know where to find the motor launches?"

"Yes," I said. "Is this a re-creation?"

He smiled a mysterious smile and said, "Sometimes the membranes between different times are thin. This is an actual pharaoh's solar barque you will be witnessing."

"There haven't been any pharaohs in two millennia," I pointed out. "You're jerking my chain, Malak." I smiled to let him know it was okay, but I wondered what he was up to. We both took drafts on our hookahs, and he seemed to be thinking for a while.

"Tell the motor boat operator that Malak sent you, and maybe he'll give you a discount," he said, with the same odd little smile. This seemed to confirm my suspicions that he was a shill who would get a kickback for sending me to the motor boat guys. Egypt's tourist economy was full of such tourist touts, they were everywhere along the Nile. It didn't bother me, everyone has to make a living, but sometimes I was amazed at how the tourist people all knew each other.

"I'll bring my camera," I said, and he nodded.

"Come back and tell me how it all looked," he said. "It's good to have experiences like this when you're young. You're how old, twenty-five?"

"Twenty-four," I said.

"Ay yi-yi, who can remember being so young?" He grinned.

We puffed in companionable silence for a while, then he asked me if I'd ever read *The Arabian Nights*, which I had, and that started a whole other conversation. I was at the café for several hours, enjoying Malak's company thoroughly, and went through seven wads of tobacco and four more lemon drinks. The entire event cost me about eight bucks. I loved that I could afford things in Egypt. Back in the States I worked as a temp, doing data entry and a little desktop publishing. The pay was okay, but I lived in San Francisco, which was a very expensive city, and my money didn't go very far. In

Egypt my hard-earned dollars went a long ways, and I ate well and drank lots of fruit drinks. April in Egypt isn't terribly hot, but it's much hotter than San Francisco, and I was thirsty a lot.

I liked that there weren't many tourists in Egypt this year. The Arab Spring drama had convulsed the country, and there was a backlash against Americans, who were seen as trying to influence national events, so people were staying away from Egypt. The tourist places were glad to get me, and they were offering discounts and special deals. The three day trip down the Nile in the *felucca* cost fifty dollars American, which is cheap entertainment for three days, and I was finding bargains like that everywhere. Plus, people were happy to see me, and very friendly, and who wouldn't like that?

After a while I got the urge to get moving, and I thanked Malak for helping me order my tobacco and drinks. He waved me off. "Don't forget to come back here and visit me," he said. "I want to hear about what you see. Wait. Let me do this for you." He reached over and put his hand on my forehead, and I felt the warmth from his palm as he pressed his thumb into each of my eyes in turn. "For vision," he said. Then he put his hand over my mouth and pressed down on my lips. "For speech."

"Sure," I said as he lifted his hand.

For the next couple of days I went to see the sights in Cairo. The Citadel is amazing, especially considering it dates back to medieval days. I spent a whole day there. I went to Giza and spent another day viewing the pyramids and the ancient solar boat, and that got me in the mood for Malak's little adventure.

On the morning of the third day I set my alarm clock for early and got up before the sun and hurried down to the boat launch. I had already arranged with a motor boat operator named Hamdi for a sunrise excursion on the Nile, and I met him as the sun rose. He was in his mid-thirties and spoke good English, and I told him I wanted to go to the Kasr al-Nil bridge and head north from there. So he took me to the bridge, the motor putt-putting away. The Nile had a clean, watery smell as we shot across its surface, so different from the dusty scent of the city proper, and I wondered what Malak had gotten me into, with his strange offer.

As we approached the center of the span I heard oars splashing and saw suddenly a large ship skimming swiftly through the water. It looked like the solar barque I had seen out at the pyramids, with a bent prow and twisted stern, painted gold and green and decorated in many colors. The ship rode low in the water, and there were dozens of rowers seated at its sides. The barque was about eighty feet long and fifteen feet wide in the center. There were few boats out on the Nile at that hour and none close to Hamdi's motor boat or the barque.

"Pull up alongside the barque," I said.

“What barque?” said Hamdi.

I had been facing forward but now looked back toward the rear of the boat, where Hamdi was fussing with his motor. “Don’t you see the ship?” I asked him.

He looked out over the water. “I see a few small boats, across the Nile from us,” he said.

So I directed him to the barque, and we pulled up alongside it, and I saw in the center of the ship a sarcophagus made of what appeared to be gold. It looked to be heavily carved, but from thirty feet away I couldn’t tell what the motif was. The sarcophagus couldn’t be gold, that much gold would surely sink the barque. Wouldn’t it? I wasn’t sure. Who was in the sarcophagus, pharaoh? I didn’t understand what I was seeing, or why, or why Hamdi said he couldn’t see the barque. I remembered Malak putting his hand on my forehead and pressing his thumbs into my eyes, and I wondered fleetingly if that was why the boat was clear in my vision.

I shouted over to the barque, “Who is in the sarcophagus? I’m an American, I want to see.”

“Crazy man, how do you float on the water?” called a bald-headed man who was standing next to the coffin.

I called out, “Can I come aboard?”

“Not now,” called the bald man. “Maybe later.”

“You’ll be gone by then,” I called out desperately.

The bald man gave a wave and shouted something, and the oarsmen put their backs into it, and the barque took off like a rocket. I was left behind. Hamdi was staring at me in horror, and I turned to him and said, “I suppose you didn’t see any of that. I must seem mentally ill, to you.”

“Malak sent you?” he said dubiously.

“Yes,” I said.

“He put his hand over your eyes?”

“Yes.”

The look on his face changed to amazement, and he muttered something in Arabic. “Where to now?” he said.

“Back to the dock,” I said. “Show’s over for this morning.”

“Maybe a nice ride around the Nile?” he said, clearly hoping for a bigger tip.

“All right,” I said. I was sure we were done with the barque for the day, but Hamdi had been a trooper, and I didn’t mind letting him earn a little extra money off me. We motored around the Nile for the next hour, passing several bridges and seeing the large river boats that carried tourists in comfort and style. Hamdi pointed out famous ships

he knew about, that had carried Egyptian movie stars and politicians, and then he took me back to the dock. I gave him a nice tip.

"Are you coming back?" he asked.

"Tomorrow at sunrise," I said.

"I'll be ready," he said. I paid him well for his time, and that made me a valued customer.

I went into Cairo and found a fruit vendor and bought a honeydew; I carried a knife and spoon with me everywhere I went for impromptu meals of this sort and sat on a bench and had breakfast. Then I got up and went to the café where I had met Malak. Despite the early hour he was seated in the café, puffing away on a hookah pipe, drinking an orange juice. When he saw me he called out, and the hunchback came out of the café.

"What would you like?" Malak asked me.

"Apple tobacco, and an orange juice," I said, and he made the order. The hunchback disappeared into the café and soon returned, lugging the hookah, which he set up, and an OJ, which he set on Malak's table. I sat at the table and puffed the hookah pipe for a while, then I said, "I saw the solar barque. It was impressive. Why didn't my motor boat operator see it?"

"Such things aren't for everyone," he said.

"I'd think it would be for Egyptians before foreigners," I said.

"You'll be an Egyptian before all this is over, if you're not careful," he said. This didn't make any sense to me, and I said,

"There was a gold sarcophagus in the center of the boat. Was that pharaoh?"

"Yes. He was just embalmed. He was travelling from the temple of Ra in Heliopolis across the Nile to the pyramids. Did you look closely at the boat?"

"It was a beautiful boat," I said. "There was a bald man aboard."

"That was the high priest of Ra," said Malak.

"How can this be happening?" I said.

"Tomorrow, go to the 6<sup>th</sup> of October bridge," he said.

"Go to the middle of the span?" I said.

"Yes," he said. Then, "Are you happy in America?"

"I'm no one in America. I have a small life, and I want more. Egypt has been the most exciting thing that's ever happened to me."

"You have been to college?"

"I studied creative writing," I said. "I want to be a writer."

"There's work as a scribe back there. Good work, pays well. And beautiful women, William. Many beautiful women to choose from. More than one, for a successful man."

I chuckled. "Back where?" I said. Now I felt I'd had an insight as to what Malak considered happiness, and it was amusing.

"Did you board the barque?" he asked me.

"They wouldn't let me board," I said. For some reason this was a crushing disappointment. I had really wanted to view the sarcophagus, see pharaoh's final resting place up close.

"Tell them Malak sent you, and see what they say," he said.

"If that barque is set up for the tourists, there weren't many around to see it," I said. "They need to promote it better."

He smiled and puffed at his hookah, and I breathed in the smoke from mine. The apple tobacco was soothing and tasty.

"Does 'Malak' mean anything?" I asked him. "Many Egyptian names seem to be poetic in their meaning."

"It's an old name," he said. "I'll let you look it up, if you stay interested."

That was annoying, but his grin was so full of good humor that I didn't stay annoyed. We smoked our hookahs and drank our orange juices and talked about the pyramids and the Citadel and what a monster of a city Cairo was, and I spoke about my travel experiences, and several hours passed in agreeable companionship. I had friends in America, but they were tight-assed relationships, not comfortable at all. I was a temp worker, lower middle class, and no one wants to really be friends with the poor. My friends were other temps, we were writers and painters and sculptors doing data entry to put bread on the table while pursuing our art on the side. All of us were wrapped up in the daily struggle for existence, there wasn't much energy left over for friendships. My time with Malak was different. It felt easy, natural. Somehow I just rested easier with Malak than I did with anyone else I knew. He put me at ease. I found myself lingering.

"Do you remember *The Arabian Nights*?" he asked me.

"Of course!"

"Do you remember all the djinn in that book?"

"How could I forget?"

He smiled a big, happy smile and then gave out a booming laugh and blew smoke out his nose. "The world is full of magic, and Cairo has more than most places," he said.

"I'd love to find a djinni and get three wishes," I told him.

"That's one way to do it," he smiled. "But now I must ask you to go, William. I have other clients coming, today is a busy day for me. I'm glad we had this time together, though."

It was hard to get up and leave, but I felt I had to respect his need to do business. I wondered who his other clients were, Westerners like me or Arabs? I had him figured for a tourist skill, but for a lot of people that was just a sideline. What was Malak's line of work really?

I wandered around Tahrir Square for a while, until I came across a tiny internet café and bought some time on a computer. I had a few emails from friends who were curious about what Cairo was like, and I answered these without talking about the solar barque. Malak hadn't really answered my questions about the boat, and I didn't have any real understanding of what it was I had seen. This gave me the chance to think about my friends in San Francisco and see just how shallow those relationships were. I had one good friend, a woman my age named Erin, but her career as a painter was taking off, and she was crazy-busy all the time. We didn't see each other often. She had sent me an email, and I answered her questions in a perfunctory way. Something odd was going on, and I wanted a better handle on it before I started talking about it.

While I was in the café I decided to look up the name Malak, and I was surprised to find that it meant "angel." I had expected it to mean "djinni" or some such thing, after Malak's comments about djinn. I didn't know the Arabs believed in angels, somehow I thought that was Western. I thought of Isis with her outspread wings and wondered if the West got its angels from the Middle East. Ideas have been going back and forth between these two cultures for an awful long time, and Egypt was there first...

"Angel" seemed a good name for the man. He was good looking and—what was the word?—*smooth*. He talked about interesting things and reminded me of good times and good people and the best life had to offer. I'd never met anyone quite like him. But Egypt had a male-oriented culture, and you had to expect there to be men like him who were really good with other men. Men who know how to be good company. I was half-tempted to go back to the café but instead went on to visit al-Azhar Mosque and the mosque of Al-Hussein. This kept me busy the rest of the day, and when I went back to the hotel I was tired and worn out. Dinner was shawarma from a sidewalk vendor; I had already had the trots and was now on the system, and I could eat street food with impunity.

The next day my alarm went off early, and I got up and dressed and went down to the dock and found Hamdi, who looked sleepy.

"Today we need to go to the sixth of October bridge," I said to him. "Middle of the span."

"Where you will see an invisible ship?" he said doubtfully.

"Yes, I think so," I said.

"Hokay," he said, eyeing me up and then shaking his head.

We eased out onto the Nile, which was as always calm and tranquil, and putt-putted up the river to the bridge in question. It was a big bridge, and it took a little while to get to the center of the span. As we arrived I heard the splash of oars, and there was the solar barque, gold and green and gorgeous, with its pairs of oars splashing in the water. It was the same as the day before, with the golden sarcophagus in the center of the boat. I directed Hamdi until we had gone past the oars and were right next to the front of the vessel. I looked around the boat and saw the bald-headed man coming quickly forward.

"You have returned," he said to me.

"Malak said I should ask you for permission to come aboard," I said.

"The angel said that," he said flatly.

"Yes," I said. "He put his hand on my eyes, and now I can see you."

"Come aboard, then, and let's talk," he said.

"Hamdi, I'm going to board the barque," I said.

"There is no boat here, American," he said. "If you jump you will drown."

"There is a boat, Malak has shown it to me," I said. "Stay on this bearing, and I will be back in a few minutes."

"I will pull your body from the Nile," he said, sounding troubled.

I turned back around and leapt from the motor launch onto the solar barque, which was a big boat and didn't rock under my weight. The bald man reached out a strong arm and balanced me, and I said, "Pleased to meet you."

"What is your name?" he said.

"William," I said.

"A strange name. Where are you from?"

"A distant land," I said. I had learned to say this instead of "America," because anti-American sentiment was strong in Egypt these days, and saying you're an American can get you in trouble.

"I don't recognize your accent, but welcome to the land of the Nile," he said. "I am Ra-Khnumbaf, the high priest of Ra. This is the royal funeral barge of pharaoh Khufu. We are taking his body across the Nile from Heliopolis to his pyramid. Normally we would not stop for passengers, but if Malak sent you..."

"He seems to be an important man," I said.

"He is well known to many people," said the high priest. "But you labor under a miscomprehension. Malak is not a 'man' at all, but a servant of the gods. He comes and goes in our affairs and I assume the affairs of many others, including yourself."

I glanced over the side of the barque and saw that Hamdi was keeping up with the boat, but of course he could not see it and was slowly drifting away. I determined to hurry.

"In my day Khufu is widely known," I said. "He is famous far beyond the lands of the Nile."

"As he should be, who else has built such a great pyramid?" said the high priest. "It is a marvel of the world."

"May I see his sarcophagus?" I asked. "It's going into the pyramid, isn't it? No one will see it after that."

The high priest looked at me for a long time. He had a square, plain face with a big nose and crooked teeth but gentle eyes. He was middle aged and had an air to him of command, of being used to giving orders. He smelled of oranges, and I realized he was perfumed. "Come," he said. "The sarcophagus took a year to make. It would be good for a few people to see it before it is entombed."

I followed him as he led the way down the length of the barque. I didn't fully understand what was going on here, but I remembered Malak saying that the barque was from another time. He pressed his hands into my eyes, and I could see the invisible ship. A servant of the gods, the priest said. I wanted to talk with Malak again, get him to be plain with me.

As I walked I saw the far bank of the Nile, and I realized with shock that all the tall buildings and skyscrapers of downtown Cairo were gone. There were groves of bright green palm trees along the shore of the Nile, and manor houses of what looked like yellowish mud bricks. Farther off was a temple, four or five stories high, towering over the date palms. It was painted white and shone in the morning sun. Many people worked in broad fields, scores of people, hoeing and pulling weeds. I stared in amazement at this glimpse of the past, a lost world made apparent. Then the priest jostled me, and I looked back at the boat and got my bearings once more.

We stopped beside the sarcophagus, and the priest said, "It is made of solid gold." It was carved with thousands of symbols in writing and Isis kneeling at its base, whose outspread wings took in both sides of the coffin. The carvings were inlaid with paint, so the writing and the rows of gods and courtiers shone in red and black and turquoise and white. The craftsmanship was the highest quality, both finer and bolder than Tut's sarcophagus in the Egyptian Museum. Not a line was out of place, there was not a mistake to be seen. I took my camera out of its pouch and snapped a dozen pictures, from all sides, while the bemused priest watched.

"Will you come with us to Giza?" he asked me.

"Not today," I said. "Maybe tomorrow I can return."

He nodded. "As you must," he said.

We walked back up the barque to where I had gotten on. Hamdi was twenty feet off the prow, motoring along, his face resolute. He was scanning back and forth in the water as if looking for me.

"Thank you for showing me the sarcophagus," I said to the priest.

"I look forward to your return," he said. "I have questions about your 'distant land.'"

I called to Hamdi, whose head snapped up, and he changed the angle of the motor under his hand and came to within a few feet of the solar barque.

"Can you see my small boat?" I asked Ra-Khnumbaf.

"No," he said. "I hear an odd sound, but I see no boats. You stepped aboard from thin air, and to thin air you return. You are indeed under Malak's influence."

"Tomorrow," I said, and I leapt from the barque onto the motor launch. I landed on the seat, and the launch rocked wildly. Hamdi gave a surprised cry and said,

"And not wet at all! This will be a story for my children."

The solar barque turned toward the west bank and rowed away, out of sight.

"Let's ride down the Nile a ways," I said to him. "Let's take an hour and enjoy the river."

He obliged me, and we rode around the peaceful Nile for a while, and then he took me back to the dock. The skyscrapers and office buildings of downtown Cairo had returned once more, and I went to the café where Malak conducted his mysterious business. He was seated in his place, smoking the hookah pipe, and I joined him at his table and ordered my usual. The hunchback brought a pipe and a lemon drink and set them down.

"Malak, is that solar barque really the funerary boat of Pharaoh Khufu?" I asked him.

"Yes," he said.

"How?" I said.

"It is God's will," he replied.

"Why?"

"That is complex. To mix the blood, to keep history alive, to maintain a flow of miracles."

"How does everyone know you?"

"I am a traveler. I spend a year here, two months there, half a year somewhere else. I cause things to happen, strange things. People don't forget me," he chuckled.

"The high priest on the boat said you're a servant of the gods. Are you a Muslim?"

"I belong to all religions. Times change, I change, but always I serve the will of Heaven."

I reflected on that for a long time, serving the will of Heaven. Finally I said, "You pressed your hand into my eyes, but when I look at you I just see a man."

"You would be blinded," he said, "If you could see me."

"What's back there, then? A whole society, one of the first civilizations in the world. I would miss my family and my friends."

"Go for a while, come back, return again," he said. "You have met me now. More things are possible than before."

"Why me?"

"You are young and deserving. You have acted in a moral fashion your whole life. You are at a point where you can make great changes and survive them. It's your decision, William. An opportunity has opened up, but whether you take it is entirely up to you."

"I need more time," I said.

"You have one day," he said. "Then the window closes, and it's back to America."

This was upsetting. I was being pushed to make a major decision too quickly, and I resented it. "Can't you, can't you just give me a few more days?"

"It's not my decision," he said. "To each thing its time."

I took a puff on my hookah pipe and drank the lemon drink. They would have pipes back in Khufu's time, but not hookahs. It would be an alien world, devoid of anything I knew. Beautiful women, Malak promised. A good job. Versus living at the bottom of the food chain in San Francisco and struggling for the next twenty years as a writer. I had the feeling that knowing Malak would stand me in good stead in Khufu's time.

"Malak, can I take your picture?" I asked him.

"It won't hurt anything," he said mildly, and I pulled the camera out of its pouch and stood up and snapped his picture. He smiled for the camera and waved his pipe around, and I took a second photo.

"I can't stay today, I have too much on my mind," I said.

"Of course," he said. "If you decide to go, be at the fifteenth of May bridge, on the west side of the island, at sunrise. That is your chance to go. It is the last time you will see the barque."

I left him in an unhappy mood, my thoughts conflicted and my heart uneasy. It was a strange thing he was offering, a new world. I wanted to go and explore, but I wanted more than that, too. I wanted to keep air conditioning, and cars, and computers. I wanted the new world, but I didn't want to lose the old one. Could I travel back and

forth between worlds, spending half my time in Khufu's land and half my time in America?

I went and ate breakfast at a small restaurant I knew, just eggs and sausages and slices of fruit, but my mind was in turmoil and I couldn't concentrate on the tasty food. I still had three weeks left in Cairo, three weeks or one day, depending. It took a while to eat, I just picked at my food, then I went to the internet café and sent messages to my little sister, my parents, Erin. I told them a strange job opportunity had opened before me, without elaborating, and said I might be staying in the Middle East indefinitely. I sent the emails and waited an hour for replies, but no one got back to me, no one said anything clever that would help me make my decision.

It was better if I stayed moving, so I couldn't think too much, so I took a cab to the Khan el-Khalili, the tourist bazaar, where I walked around all day until I found a shop selling lamps and bought a small brass oil lamp. I took the lamp to a café and ordered a hookah and a pomegranate juice, and I sat there smoking all afternoon, staring at the lamp and thinking of Khufu's Egypt. Malak was a servant of the gods, said the high priest. He pointed people to open doors and gave them the chance to walk through. I sat there and worried over the opportunity in front of me, getting nowhere with it, horrified by the enormity of what was being offered.

Finally, as the mosques squawked to life for the evening call to prayer, I picked up the brass lamp and rubbed it and said, "Open sesame."

I waited for a long time, but nothing happened. No smoke, no djinni. No one to bail me out.

My mind was awhirl. Ancient Egypt, or modern America. Both had attractions, both had liabilities. There was no clear choice.

I must have smoked half a dozen wads of tobacco, over several hours, and drank about five glasses of lemon and orange juice. I didn't feel like eating dinner, so I went straight to bed, where I tossed and turned for more hours. No tiebreaker occurred to me, nothing clever popped into my head. I would just have to wing it in the morning.

The traveler's alarm clock went off an hour before sunrise, and I got up and dressed and started on my way down to the Nile, but as I looked for a cab something finally occurred to me. It was so simple and so in keeping with what had happened to me that I let out a laugh. The tension that had lay on me so heavily evaporated. It was the best of all possible worlds. I went out into the city until I got to my favorite nook, which was serving up breakfast to early morning commuters, and had scrambled eggs and sausage and fruit slices. This morning I took time for the meal, and as the morning progressed I wondered if the priest Ra-Khnumbaf would miss me or if he would even

remember me. I wasn't going on to ancient Egypt, at least not right away. There was a better way, something that would let me continue being a tourist and traveler. Something that would give me Egypt and America and Khufu's time all rolled into one package.

Breakfast over, I walked to the café where Malak hung out and was pleased to see him seated in his place, as always smoking away on the ever-present hookah. His white turban looked spotless in the bright morning sun. He looked at me for a long moment, letting grey smoke out of his mouth, and then he nodded. "So sorry," he said.

"Nothing to be sorry for," I said and indicated his table.

He said, "Please," and I sat down. He called to the hunchback, who knew without being told to bring a hookah and a lemon drink. We smoked for a while in easy silence.

"I have an idea," I said. "It's about you. You're the most interesting person I've ever met, and I've never so enjoyed anyone's company before in my life. I want to become you, Malak. An American version of you. Maybe I'd hang out in American hookah lounges just for the exotic aspect of it. Do you see what I want to do?"

He let out a booming laugh and slapped his knee with one hand. "It would not be an easy path to walk," he said. "I can teach you, but it will take at least a year."

"I'll run out of money."

"I'll supply your basic needs, but there won't be any frills."

"I don't need frills," I said. "I'm used to operating without frills." That was certainly the truth. Then I asked him the burning question. "Malak, are you really an angel?"

"I really am a servant of God, yes," he said.

"Imams are servants of God," I said. "Koran reciters are servants of God. That's not what I'm asking. For a while I thought you were a djinni, but now I think differently."

"Why don't I just say that there is room for discoveries, as you learn," he said.

We puffed away at the hookahs for a while, and I sipped my drink, and he smiled. "All right," he said. "There are some easy things to learn, like how to be companionable, and some difficult things to learn, like what is the will of God."

"Will this be religious instruction?" I said. I was an agnostic, myself.

"Yes," he said. "But it is broad in its scope. There is only one God, but He has many forms. Sometimes He appears as a group. And He is always tinkering in the affairs of humanity."

I contemplated this while smoking. "I'm eager to learn," I said.

"Then let's begin."

## About the Author



Randal Doering has a BA in creative writing from San Francisco State University and an MA in anthropology from Cal State East Bay. He has published 16 short stories in the small press and semi-pro magazines and won honorable mention in the *Writers of the Future* contest. He believes travel is a great teacher and travels as much as possible, both in the U.S. and abroad. His work tends to highlight the Middle East and American Indian cultures and mostly falls into the realm of contemporary fantasy.

Randal has a website at <http://www.randaldoering.com>. There you can download two free novels and a selection of short stories as samplers for his short story collections. There are also links to his for-sale books on Amazon, which include a memoir and about a dozen novel-length works of fiction. His email address is on this site, so you can send him a message if you wish. He loves to hear from his readers and wants your feedback!

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