

Chapter One

Modern man likes to pretend that his thinking is wide-awake. But this wide-awake thinking has led us into the mazes of a nightmare in which the torture chambers are endlessly repeated in the mirrors of reason.

—Octavio Paz

Theo Gardner awoke screaming, tangled in a netting of sweat-drenched sheets. His hands tore at the bedclothes in a frenzied attempt to break free from their imprisoning grasp. The wave of panic crested and after a few moments passed beyond him. His head fell back against the pillow as exhaustion pooled in the wake of the night terror.

“Oh, God,” he groaned. “That dream again.”

How often had the nightmare assailed him? How many times this week alone had he been jolted awake by a heart-pounding rush of adrenaline? Fight or flight, that most primitive of emotions. For more than a month the dream—the same terrifying dream—had tormented him four or five nights a week. Was he going insane?

Perhaps the worst aspect of the recurring nightmare was that it would not stay confined to the nighttime hours. Vague images seeped into his thoughts during the day, rendering him incapable of focusing on his writing. Actually “images” was too strong a term. These daytime hauntings were not disturbing

scenes from the dream. No, they were not visual in nature, not even shadowy specters. Feelings more accurately described these . . . these daymares. Sensations. Emotions. Constricting feelings. Claustrophobic feelings. Feelings of confinement, madness, fear, and pain.

He squeezed his eyes shut, willing himself to take hold of whatever it was that produced these horrific feelings, to name the demons that tormented him. But like all previous efforts, he struggled in vain. Like trying to grasp gossamer tendrils of fog. There, but not there.

* * *

Lying amid the tangle of sheets, Theo felt something soft nuzzle his right hand. Simultaneously, the comforting purr of his huge Maine Coon cat pulled him into the present moment.

"Morning, Alexander," he said, stroking the cat's long yellow hair. The gentle eyes spoke volumes, temporarily exorcizing the shadowy fiends of the night.

The soft light of early morning filtered through partially opened plantation shutters covering the bedroom window. Alexander had already performed the first act of his morning routine: at the first hint of dawn, the cat would jump atop the antique Wells Fargo trunk under the window and use his huge paws to pry open the shuttered slats. The cat's internal rhythm was more reliable than any alarm clock.

"Hungry?" Theo asked when the purring grew louder. The feline had an enormous appetite in the morning, in sharp contrast to Theo's inability to eat until he had been awake for a while.

He sat up and swung his feet over the edge of the bed, much to the cat's delight. With fluid grace Alexander leaped to the floor, landing without a sound. Yawning, Theo pulled on gray jogging shorts and a Claremont Graduate University tee shirt before stumbling toward the kitchen—Alexander leading the way—where he poured dry Iams cat food into a ceramic bowl

inscribed *Alexander the Great*. While the cat enjoyed his breakfast, Theo set a kettle of water on the stove. Mornings simply were not civilized affairs without a cup of tea, preferably Earl Grey or English Breakfast.

Waiting for the kettle to boil, he shuffled over to the computer workstation in the corner of the apartment's compact living room and powered up the machine. As it slowly came to life, he slipped on his glasses and picked up the black, three-ring binder that held the initial pages of his doctoral dissertation. Opening the binder, he glanced at the upper left-hand corner of the first page. *Second Draft, Chapter One, June 13*. Today was Independence Day. What had he written in the three intervening weeks? Nothing. Well, nothing worth printing. He should have completed a rough draft of chapter two by now.

The kettle whistled, signaling that he was only minutes away from that first invigorating sip. He spooned aromatic leaves into a cobalt blue ceramic teapot and carefully added boiling water. Allowing the tea to steep, he slipped two slices of whole wheat bread into the toaster and retrieved a jar of strawberry preserves from the refrigerator. The absence of any sticky residue on the outside of the jar served as an unwelcome reminder of Jamie's absence. For someone so fastidious about her personal appearance, Theo thought it incongruous that she could be so messy in the kitchen. Had it really been almost four years since she stormed out of their ocean view apartment in Laguna Beach?

"Two roads had definitely diverged," he mumbled, "and I have taken the one less traveled by. Frost, right?"

Alexander was too involved in his after breakfast grooming to answer.

Carrying the tea and toast to the computer work station, he logged on to America On Line to check his email and scan the news headlines. The unmistakable shriek of a pop bottle rocket followed by the squeal and laughter of children drew his

attention from the monitor to the window. Golden morning light turned the leaves of the pepper trees lining the street a soft yellow-green. From the vantage point of his second floor apartment, he saw a cluster of children sitting on the curb watching an older boy kneeling in the street. Within seconds, an irate woman burst from the apartment building directly across the street.

“Joshua, you get in this house this second!” she ordered.

Theo breathed a sigh of relief; the children had supervision. Wildfires were an ever-present danger in Southern California even without illegal fireworks. The city of Claremont prohibited the discharge of fireworks by private citizens, but as Theo well knew, boys will be boys.

According to AOL Weather, the day would be another scorcher, a full twenty degrees warmer in Claremont than at the beach. He enjoyed the stimulating, intellectual atmosphere of this foothill community nestled beneath the towering San Gabriel Mountains. The consortium of seven colleges created a unique environment perfectly suited to the surprising turn his life had taken. Claremont, the City of Trees and Ph.Ds. Nevertheless, he missed Laguna Beach, especially during the summer months. He looked forward to feeling the cool ocean breeze that evening while watching Laguna’s fireworks display with his parents, a family tradition.

Finishing his tea and toast, he decided to go for a run before the day’s forecasted heat put the kibosh on his good intentions. He laced up well-worn Reeboks, scratched Alexander behind the ears, and headed out the door. A few minutes from the apartment, he turned east on Twelfth Street. As was his custom, he jogged beneath the shady canopy of tree-lined sidewalks bordering the adjacent campuses of Claremont Graduate University, Harvey Mudd College, and Scripps College. He paused briefly at the edge of Pitzer College’s arboretum to catch his breath and drink from the bottle of water he carried. He

closed his eyes and, without warning, a tsunami of amorphous emotions washed over him. The daytime vestiges were intensifying. Determined to penetrate the fog of feelings and seize whatever lay behind them, he squeezed his eyes shut and concentrated. He focused intently, no longer hearing the birds twittering in the trees, no longer feeling the gentle breeze on his sweaty skin, no longer smelling the freshly cut grass. Unexpectedly he tumbled into blackness, but not the void of unconsciousness. No, this was the malevolent place of the nightmare. Something sinister inhabited this darkness. Something hideous. No! He didn't want to go there! He must fight—

“Hey, are you okay?” Simultaneously, a hand gently squeezed his shoulder.

The voice and touch pulled him back from the edge of the dark abyss. He raised his head—for to his surprise, he found himself sitting on the ground—and looked into the face of a worried-looking coed. He started to get up, but she tightened her grip on his shoulder.

“Maybe you should just sit there for a while,” she said. “You turned white as a sheet before you crumpled to the ground. Probably the heat.” She shook her head. “You shouldn't be running on a day like this, you know.”

“Yeah, you're probably right. The heat,” he said. “I'll just sit here a bit. I'll be okay.”

“You sure you don't want me to call 9-1-1?” she asked, reaching into her purse.

“No. No, I'm feeling better already. Really. But thanks for stopping.”

“If you're sure . . .”

“I'm sure.”

He watched the woman walk away. Twice she looked back, and by the second time he was on his feet. He waved to show he was feeling better.

But he wasn't.

The cold fingers of fear gripped him. Never before had he experienced so powerful a “daymare.” But then, never before had he tried to force his way behind the veil of vague feelings that shimmered on the edge of consciousness. Had that been a mistake? Clearly he was out of his depth, but how should he go about seeking help?

He decided to walk the rest of the way home, just in case physical exertion strengthened the episodes. He turned south on Mills Avenue and cut through Claremont McKenna College to Sixth Street, hardly aware of his surroundings. Turning west, he walked through Pomona College until he arrived at College Way. Suddenly realizing where he was, he turned north toward the intellectual heart of the university consortium, Honnold/Mudd Library. Pausing in the shade of a kiosk at the edge of the labyrinth-like North Quad, he read randomly posted notices, flyers, and announcements while he drained the water bottle. Nothing of interest. He was about head home when the brief announcement of a dissertation defense caught his eye.

“Recurring Nightmares: A Blight on the Dreamscape?”

Christine Costner, Ph.D. Candidate

10:00 a.m., Wednesday, July 5, 2006

ACB Lecture Hall 2

Recently he had begun attending dissertation defenses, eager to pick up all the pointers he could now that his own defense loomed ever larger on the horizon. And this particular presentation held the promise of being interesting on a personal level.

* * *

At the infamous Orange Crush interchange, the 57 terminated into the 5 freeway. Traffic was light due to the holiday, and soon he exited on the 133, which after a few miles became beautiful Laguna Canyon Road. How Theo loved being back on his home turf! He was tempted to push the '97 Miata M-

Edition through the curves, but he knew better. This serpentine stretch of road had witnessed terrible accidents as drivers wandered across the centerline, distracted perhaps by the scenic beauty of the canyon. He knew the roadster would hold the road well beyond the posted speed limit—he had, after all, run the Big Sur without touching his brakes even once—but he didn't trust other drivers. He had no death wish, much to the surprise of some who knew of his life-changing experience.

Approaching the stoplight at the Laguna Playhouse, he debated taking the Forrest Avenue short cut to his parents' house, but he simply had to see the water. He continued to where Laguna Canyon Road, or Broadway as it was known inside the city limits, dead-ended in a T-intersection with the Pacific Coast Highway. Before him lay Main Beach and the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean. Theo never failed to appreciate the beauty of the afternoon sun shining across the water creating millions of tiny diamonds flashing their brilliant fire.

Turning left on PCH, he tossed a snappy salute in the direction of the landmark white stucco Lifeguard Tower erected in 1929. This ritual from Cub Scout days evoked memories of a carefree childhood. His smile broadened as he cruised past world-famous Greeter's Corner where for over thirty years white-bearded Eiler Larson had leaned on his walking staff every afternoon bellowing "Helloooooo" and waving at passersby. The larger-than-life Greeter of Laguna died the year before Theo's birth, but he felt he knew the beloved man personally, having memorized the colorful stories told by long-time Laguna Beach residents. Ah, Laguna Beach! Home to those who march to the beat of a different drummer. Home indeed.

Five minutes later he pulled to the curb in front of a traditional California craftsman bungalow. Carefully maintained like its neighbors, the 1940s era cottage was home to some of Theo's happiest memories. He sat in the car for a moment, a wave of nostalgia washing over him. Leaning his head back

against the headrest, he could see the ugly gash in the hillside high above, evidence of continuing development in Bluebird Canyon. From the size of the foundations under construction, these would be multi-million dollar homes. The panoramic view would be fantastic; as a boy he had hiked all over the then-virgin hills and knew the vista well. But was the hillside geologically stable? He certainly would not want to chance it, especially after the slide of 2005. Of course, his career change had rendered moot his prospect of ever building in Laguna. Even his parents' modest bungalow was worth over a million dollars in the current market.

Out of habit, he walked around the house to the kitchen door. During his childhood years, he and his friends were forbidden to use the front door in an effort to protect the living room's gleaming hardwood floor. How much beach sand had he washed from his legs and feet with the garden hose that always lay curled next to the kitchen steps? Ascending the steps, he caught a glimpse of his parents through the window above the kitchen sink.

Nicole and Philip Gardner were in their mid-fifties but looked a decade younger. Nicole's straight, waist-length blond hair was pulled back in her trademark ponytail. She looked every bit the artist she was, clad in her paint-spattered black sweatshirt over black leggings. As Theo opened the door, she turned from the picnic basket she was packing and threw her arms around him, nearly squeezing the life from him. He kissed her on the cheek.

"It's so good to see you," she said, eyes smiling. Still embracing him, her eyes transitioned to an expression of inquisition. "Say, have you lost weight? You feel skinny. Have you been eating right?"

"I'm fine, Mom. I've only lost a few pounds." He winced inwardly at the lie. He had lost nearly fifteen pounds since the nightmares began, but he didn't want to worry his parents.

They fretted over him too much as it was. "It's the weather. Been so hot in Claremont, I just haven't felt like eating. Once it cools down, I'm sure my appetite will return with a vengeance." He offered what he hoped was a reassuring smile to support words he knew were only half-true. "In fact, the sea air here has already made me hungry."

Extricating himself more from her inquisitor's gaze than from her embrace, he asked, "What's in the basket?" He began rummaging through the picnic basket. "Any chocolate chip cookies?"

"Would it be a picnic without them?" his father asked.

Theo smiled at him. Philip Gardner's sunny countenance seemed even brighter than normal. The high school history teacher's rugged good looks had occasioned many a schoolgirl's crush. Most people said he reminded them of Robert Redford in his prime, though Nicole frequently opined that he was far more handsome than the Sundance Kid.

"So, how's the writing coming?" Philip asked.

"Slowly," Theo replied, munching on a cookie. "I'm pleased with chapter one, but the last few weeks haven't been very productive." Another half-truth. He hated hiding his problem from his parents.

"Ah, writer's block," his father said. "I experienced it when I wrote my master's thesis, and that was only a hundred pages. I can only imagine how daunting a doctoral dissertation must be."

"Maybe a picnic followed by an evening of fireworks will start the creative juices flowing," Nicole said, closing the lid on the basket. "Give me a minute to change out of my paint clothes, and we'll head to the beach."

Knowing they had substantially longer than a minute to wait—a "Nicole minute" Philip was fond of saying—the Gardner men launched into a discussion of the latest conservation efforts at Mission San Juan Capistrano, one of Philip's passions. Some of Theo's earliest memories were set against the

backdrop of the mission: Contemplating the remarkable ruins of the Great Stone Church—the “American Acropolis”—a sobering reminder of the deadly earthquake of 1812. Walking through beautiful flowering gardens and the peaceful cloistered courtyard. Meditating in the intimate surroundings of Serra Chapel. Only once had he missed the return of the swallows on March 19, but he had visualized their flight even as he lay in the hospital bed.

Nicole appeared at last, and they set off for Heisler Park, Laguna’s landmark park perched high atop a bluff overlooking the beach. All of the picnic tables were occupied, as they had anticipated, so Nicole spread a well-worn blanket on the gentle grassy slope near a picturesque gnarly tree, its low-slung branches running parallel to the ground for at least twenty feet. The subject of countless photographs by tourists and locals alike, the tree had long fascinated Theo. Exposure to the constant ocean breezes had resulted in a creation of tortured beauty.

The tasty picnic was seasoned with lively, far-ranging conversation: painting, history, philosophy, music, and politics. As Nicole launched into a detailed description of plans for the upcoming Pageant of the Masters, Theo found himself reflecting on how lucky he was to have grown up in such a close-knit family. During his teen years when so many of his friends clashed with their parents, he had never felt estranged from his. They had given him room to grow, to spread his wings, to discover himself. The only bone of contention between them had been his parents’ inclination to be overly protective. A friend in the admissions office at Pomona College referred to such parents as “helicopter parents,” a reference to the tendency of baby boomers to hover over their children even after they enter college, poised to swoop in to prevent any harm or failure from befalling their offspring—whether their children want their help or not. He wondered if his parents’ well-intentioned hovering explained the disconcerting feeling of incompetence

that reared its ugly head from somewhere deep in his psyche every time he had to make an important decision. Why hadn't he inherited his father's and grandfather's confidence and resolve? To make matters worse, his parents had hovered at a lower altitude these past four years. But that was understandable given what he had put them through, wasn't it?

As the sun dipped into the sea, the Gardners gathered their scattered picnic items and hiked down the path to Main Beach. Finding an empty spot on the still-warm sand, they joined the crowd assembled in anticipation of the evening's finale. Theo took comfort in this annual ritual. The aerial display did not disappoint.

Following the colorful show, they left the beach by way of the boardwalk.

"Theo!" a male voice exclaimed.

All three Gardners turned in the direction of the voice and saw a young couple approaching with two small boys in tow. Even in the inadequate light of the soft street lamps it was obvious that the boys were identical twins.

"Hello, Thomas!" Theo replied.

After some exuberant backslapping, the gregarious man introduced his wife and adopted sons.

"I want you to meet Maggie and the boys, my ready-made family," Thomas said, a huge smile illuminating his face. "Maggie, this is the famous Theo and his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Gardner. Boys, this is my old surfing buddy—"

No sooner had the words escaped his lips than a deep blush reddened Thomas' tanned face. Out of the corner of his eye Theo saw his parents cast worried glances at each other.

Theo broke the awkward moment of silence. "That's right, boys," he said, bending to shake the twins' hands. "Your new daddy and I went to high school together. Did you enjoy the fireworks?"

The rush of words that tumbled over one another revealed

just how much the fireworks had impressed them, especially the loud explosions of the concluding cluster. In a cacophony of “bang-bang-bang-bang” the wide-eyed twins imitated the final salvo.

“We’ll never get them to sleep tonight,” Maggie laughed, running a hand through the wind-blown hair of the nearest boy.

“They’re adorable, Maggie,” Nicole said. “Treasure these days; children grow up much too quickly.” She cast a wistful glance at Theo.

Following a round of warm farewells, the young family took its leave from the Gardners. Theo and his parents walked in silence for a few moments.

“Can you spend the night?” Philip asked.

“Wish I could, Dad, but there’s a lecture tomorrow morning I don’t want to miss.”

“You be careful driving back to Claremont,” Nicole admonished. “Holidays are the most dangerous times to be on the road, you know. All the drunks.”

“I’ll be careful, Mom.”

Twenty minutes later Theo joined the line of cars winding through Laguna Canyon toward the freeway. In the open roadster he could sense the evening air warming with each mile he drove. By the time he reached Claremont he no longer felt the effect of California’s natural air conditioner, the ocean.

Alexander greeted him at the door, and they began their evening ritual. Theo turned on the TV and inserted the videotape containing recorded reruns of *Star Trek*. For the past several weeks he had been going through the *Deep Space Nine* series. Alexander jumped into Theo’s lap eager for his nightly brushing.

Soon it was time for bed.

“To sleep! perchance to dream:—ay, there’s the rub.’ Hamlet, right, Alexander?”

The cat was already asleep.

With more than a little trepidation, Theo decided to call it a

night.

Chapter Two

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science.

—Albert Einstein

“Just a case of nerves.”

That was how Christine Costner explained to her roommate, Sarah, her inability to eat breakfast that morning. Normally she awakened with a voracious appetite and headed straight to the kitchen—after a pit stop in the bathroom, of course. Breakfast was her favorite meal of the day. No wonder Sarah was puzzled to find her sitting up in bed, a mountain of pillows scrunched behind her, flipping through the pages of her dissertation.

“Well, you’ve got to eat *something*, C.C.,” Sarah said as she leaned against the doorframe to Christine’s bedroom. “How do you expect to wow them with your presentation if you’re faint from hunger?”

“The thought of food nauseates me right now. Maybe after my shower.”

Dropping the spiral-bound pages into her lap, Christine ran the fingers of both hands through the tangle of thick chestnut hair that cascaded over her shoulders and the surrounding pillows. She must have tossed and turned all night to create such a mess of her hair. Swinging her legs over the side of the bed, she caught sight of her freshly painted toenails—each one a

different color. That had been Sarah's zany idea. *Think of your psychedelic toenails each time you get nervous during the presentation. You can't take yourself too seriously with Crayola-box toenails, she had counseled.* Right now, the garish sight was almost too much for Christine's queasy stomach.

After brushing her unruly hair into some semblance of order, she padded to the bathroom, slipped out of the long tee shirt that served as her nightgown, and stepped under the soothing stream of the shower. She visualized her anxiety washing away with the shampoo's lather, flowing down the drain. According to her major professor, the dissertation's argument was tightly reasoned and well documented. She would be fine. Fine, that is, as long as the department chairman wasn't in the audience. Her dissertation called into question the premise of his latest book. *Maybe he's on vacation, she thought. After all, he isn't on my committee and it is July, the prime month for professors to be away.*

A knock on the door preceded Sarah sticking her head into the steam-shrouded bathroom.

"C.C., it's almost eight o'clock. Better get a move on."

"Okay, Mother Sarah."

What a reversal of roles this morning! For the four years they had been roommates, Christine had been the responsible one. "Scatterbrained Sarah" lived up to her nickname. She was a *wunderkind* when it came to physics, but she had absolutely no common sense. Throwing caution to the wind, she led an eccentric lifestyle and frequently found herself in the most absurd predicaments. In sharp contrast, "Cautious Christine" (as Sarah had teasingly dubbed her) was responsible, steady, and—yes, she'd admit it—predictable. If pressed, she would have to confess that a part of her envied Sarah's zest for life.

After wrapping her hair in a towel turban-style and slipping into her ratty white terrycloth bathrobe, she wiped condensation from the mirror.

“Oh, no!”

A few seconds later Sarah opened the door, a look of alarm on her face. “What’s wrong?”

“The pimple! It’s bigger today!”

“Calm down, C.C. It’s not *that* big. I’m sure you can conceal it.”

“That’s easy for you to say. Your skin’s always flawless.” She sighed. “You’d think I’d stop breaking out now that I’m almost twenty-eight.”

“It’s just the stress of your defense,” Sarah said in a comforting tone. She stroked Christine’s cheek with the back of one hand. “You’re still gorgeous, zit or no zit.”

“You really think I can cover it? I don’t want people staring at *it* instead of listening to *me*. Oh, this day is starting out to be such a disaster.”

* * *

Brilliant! Absolutely brilliant! That’s how her major professor described the defense of her dissertation. Only once before had she experienced such ecstasy: when as a high school senior she had danced the role of Clara in the San Diego Ballet’s production of *The Nutcracker*. She had to admit that she had been quite articulate, not only as she presented the synopsis of her research (which she had practiced repeatedly), but also when she fielded questions. Even her response to the department chairman’s anticipated—and dreaded—question sounded halfway intelligent.

And what support she felt. Most of the department’s grad students had been there, front row and center, along with Sarah and her latest significant other. Indeed, the small lecture hall had been filled to near capacity. And seated in the back, much to her surprise, had been her father. Wednesdays were surgery mornings, so he must have cleared his schedule well in advance. What a touching gesture. Although he said he had to get back to San Diego for an afternoon consultation, he had handed

Christine a wad of cash and told her to take her friends out for a celebratory lunch on him.

As the congratulatory crowd thinned, a man with sky blue eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses stepped forward. She judged him to be about thirty, and she was fairly certain she had seen him around campus. After all, she always noticed men with ponytails, especially blond ponytails. They evoked high school memories of carefree summer days at the beach with her girlfriends, watching those amazing surfers. "Ocean dancers" she had called them as a little girl. How she wished she had learned to surf. Another in her long list of regrets. But this was a day to celebrate accomplishments.

"Hi. I'm Theo Gardner, a grad student in philosophy," he said, shaking her hand. "I'd like to thank you for a stimulating presentation. I learned a great deal, both about dreams and about defending a dissertation."

"Thank you."

"You also raised a number of questions for me, but I didn't want to ask them during the Q&A session. They're probably too specific to be of interest to the audience. I was wondering . . . would it be possible to schedule a time to talk with you?"

At first, she was a little miffed by his question, assuming he was hitting on her. *How arrogant! How abhorrently macho!* she thought. But before she could open her mouth to give him the brush off, she saw something in his expression. Something sincere and heartfelt—and urgent.

"A group of us are going to lunch in The Village," she found herself saying. "Why don't you join us, and we can talk over coffee afterward?"

* * *

Theo could hardly believe he had joined the group for lunch; such impulsive acts were totally out of character for him. Fortunately, he knew one of the psychology grad students, a quiet fellow named Nick who worked at the reference desk in

the library. He had handled most of Theo's interlibrary loan requests for obscure journal articles and foreign language books; over the course of researching his dissertation topic, they had developed a casual acquaintance. Theo began to feel a little less awkward as the boisterous ensemble of grad students approached the restaurant.

Walter's was beginning to fill with the lunch crowd when the celebratory group arrived. A cheery waiter pushed together four tables, no doubt already calculating the size of the tip for a party of fourteen. No sooner had they taken their seats than the waiter reappeared with a companion bearing champagne flutes and several bottles of Veuve Clicquot. Corks popped joyfully and in no time the table was toasting Christine's successful defense. Soon the letters Ph.D. would follow her name. The whole restaurant joined in the applause as if it were a birthday—and in a sense, it was.

Theo and Nick sat at the far end of the table from "the woman of the hour" where they chatted about their respective research projects. From this vantage point, Theo had an unobstructed view of Christine at the head of the table. Softly backlit by double French doors opening onto a garden patio, the red highlights in her long, wavy hair created an aura around her head and shoulders. But no amount of backlighting could diminish the glow that radiated from her face. Ecstasy! Relief! Bliss!

At one-fifteen the merry group began to breakup, and Christine paid the waiter. Judging by the look on his face when she told him to keep the change, she must have tipped him generously. After the last of the luncheon guests had hugged her and said their good-byes, she turned to Theo.

"So, how about coffee at Starbucks?" she asked. "I'm curious about your questions."

As they walked the short block to Starbucks, Theo complimented her on the remarkable poise she had displayed during

her dissertation defense.

"Poise?" she laughed. "If you could have seen behind the lectern you would have noticed my legs trembling. I was a nervous wreck."

"You hid it well," he said as he held open the door to the coffee house.

To their mutual surprise, they both ordered Earl Grey tea. Neither, it turned out, was a coffee drinker. Once they were seated at a small corner table, Theo launched into an explanation for his presence at her defense.

"I'll be defending my own dissertation next spring so I've been attending every defense I can, hoping to pick up some tips. But your topic also caught my eye."

"Oh?" She leaned forward, both forearms on the table. "Is your dissertation about dreams?"

His tea had steeped sufficiently, so he removed the tea bag from the paper cup and set it on the plastic lid he had placed on the table to serve as a saucer.

"No," he replied, "my research is in the field of hermeneutics. I study how people interpret sensory and non-sensory perceptions. How they organize the data into patterns of meaning. I'm especially interested in the theory of perception and language in process philosophy."

"Process philosophy . . ." She took a sip of tea. "That's a postmodern school of thought."

He arched an eyebrow and nodded, impressed with her breadth of knowledge. Apparently she misinterpreted his look of surprise, because a note of defensiveness colored her voice as she continued.

"Dream analysis is *every bit as rigorous* a scientific discipline as any other aspect of psychology," she said. "I've had to familiarize myself with various theories of perception and language—including the general contours of the postmodern landscape—so *of course* I understand how your research would

be relevant to the interpretation of dreams.”

A little touchy, aren't you? he thought, but said, “That’s true, it would. But my dissertation focuses on the analysis of ethical arguments, not dreams.” He paused, debating whether or not to continue. Was she one of those insecure grad students who assumed everyone was out to discredit her work? Perhaps approaching her had been a mistake. But then, what did he have to lose? He decided to continue. “Actually, my questions for you have nothing to do with my research.”

“Oh?” She cocked her head with an air of curiosity.

He sipped some tea, buying time to think how best to express himself.

“No. It’s a little more personal than that. Well, a lot more personal.” He paused, uncomfortable with what he was about to say, what he was about to reveal.

She sat quietly, giving him space to continue.

“I’ve been having this dream. A nightmare, actually.” He paused again. Then, rubbing his forehead with his right hand, he resumed speaking more rapidly. “Sorry, I’m making a real mess of this. Let me start at the beginning.”

“Take your time.” She wrapped both hands around her cup of tea as if to warm her fingers and looked him squarely in the eyes. The attentiveness displayed in her expressive gray eyes calmed him. She was obviously a good listener. Perhaps he had misjudged her, just as she had misjudged him.

“Until recently I’d never given much thought to my dreams,” he continued. “Occasionally I would remember them on waking, but they’ve never been disturbing—even as a child. My dreams seemed to be quite run-of-the-mill, ordinary in all respects. You know, typical childhood dreams like being chased, or discovering I’m standing naked in front of my classmates, or my all time favorite: spreading my arms and soaring into the sky on a gust of wind.”

She smiled. “Yeah, that’s one of my favorites, too.”

"But recently, I've been plagued by a nightmare, a recurrent nightmare. Four or five times a week I wake up utterly terrified." His voice took on a clear note of embarrassment as he continued. "In fact, I . . . uh . . . think it's the sound of my own screaming that jolts me awake."

He sipped more tea, regaining his composure in the process.

"At first, I assumed the nightmare had something to do with my dissertation because the dream began shortly after I started writing. And now the writing process has ground to a halt. I've never had writer's block before; it's maddening. I've tried to psychoanalyze myself, but for the life of me, I can't find any connection."

"Sometimes you need another person's assistance," she said, "a therapist or a friend. You discover the connection through dialogue. As I mentioned in my presentation, with the exception of those dreams induced by taking or withdrawing from medication, most nightmares are related to stress in our waking lives. The severity of the stress can range from everyday problems at work or home, to major life crises like surgery, the loss of a loved one, or a severe accident."

"Don't get me wrong," he replied, gesturing with a raised hand, palm toward her. "It's not that I don't appreciate the therapeutic value of professional assistance. I would *love* to discover a connection to my waking life so I could begin the process of psychic integration and healing. It's just that I really don't see a connection between the nightmare and writing my dissertation—or any other aspect of my life, for that matter." He shifted in his chair, leaning forward. "The nightmare seems to have come out of nowhere. Nightmare *ex nihilo*."

"Can you describe the dream?"

"Well, that's the really strange part. There aren't any images, at least not in the normal sense of the term. My *dreamscape*, to use your lecture's terminology, has always been quite vivid. Since childhood I've dreamed in Technicolor with Dolby

surround sound.” His description elicited a little smile from her. “But this nightmare is different. I can’t remember any visual images; no sounds either. There simply aren’t any symbols to decode, no Jungian archetypes to work with.”

He dropped his eyes to his cup of tea, staring into the amber liquid. *Now she’ll really think I’m crazy*, he thought, wishing he had never approached her. But he had felt compelled. Something about her had beckoned him.

Compelled? Beckoned? Where did *those* words come from? They had a mystical, even spiritual provenance, yet he was trying his dead-level best to be coldly rational and analytical. Maybe he *was* going crazy. And yet, those words seemed most appropriate to describe his motivation in approaching her.

Of course, any heterosexual male would be drawn to her—like the proverbial moth to a flame. She was, quite simply, stunning. When she had risen from the front row to take her place behind the lectern, he had been struck by her grace. She moved with the confident poise of a ballerina; indeed, he could visualize her on pointe in *Swan Lake*. In place of Odette’s white tutu, however, Christine wore an expensive looking charcoal business suit with black pumps. The skirt struck her just above the knee, and the carefully tailored jacket accentuated her small waist. Long hair held back by a black headband framed an oval face set with exotic features: large, expressive eyes; a patrician nose; and full lips painted just the right shade of red for such a professional occasion. A high forehead suggested intelligence, and artfully applied makeup testified to an esthetic appreciation of balance, color, and contour.

She spoke in the warm, rich tones he associated with announcers on classical radio stations—a sensuous alto with clear diction. In fact, the word classical seemed to capture her essence. She was what his mother the artist would call a classical beauty.

But her appearance had nothing to do with why he had

approached her. Nor was it anything in particular that she had said. No, it was something else. Something implied rather than overtly expressed. Something on the edges of her presentation, only hinted at but there nonetheless. He doubted that a careful analysis of what she had said would uncover it. No, it wouldn't be found among the dissected parts; it was in the living whole, like the soul of the presentation.

Soul? Damn! There was no doubt about it now; he *was* going crazy. But it was too late now. He had gone too far to stop. Still gazing at the reflective surface of the tea, the words spilled forth.

"The nightmare consists only of . . . of feelings, I guess you would say. Sensations. Emotions. How can I put it? It's like I'm feeling someone else's feelings but without experiencing the direct stimuli that caused that person's feelings. Second-hand sensations, I guess you could say."

Silence greeted his words. After a few seconds, he raised his eyes and was so startled by the expression on Christine's face that he nearly spilled his tea. She stared fixedly, not so much *at* him as *through* him, lips slightly parted. The color had drained from her face giving her a somewhat spectral appearance.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She remained frozen several long seconds before her eyes refocused. When her lips finally moved, the words slipped between them in a near whisper.

"Theo, have you ever had a near-death experience?"

Chapter Three

The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.

— Alvin Toffler

He felt as though she had impaled him with a javelin. No doubt his body language communicated his reaction to her unexpected question, for he set back sharply in his chair as though pinned to it.

“How . . . how did you know?” he stammered in shock.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you,” she said, clearly embarrassed that she had blindsided him with her question. She placed her left hand on his right. “I didn’t mean to be so blunt.”

“But how did you know?” he asked again. “You aren’t psychic, are you?”

“No. No, it’s nothing like that,” she said. “It’s a long story, but I suppose it’s *my* turn to start at the beginning.”

She shifted in her chair as if to signal that she were traveling backing in time. The soft swish of nylon accompanied the crossing of her legs. Surreptitiously, and with only a modicum of guilt, Theo used that sensuous bit of data to keep himself grounded in the present moment, for he found himself fighting the powerful tug of the past. He knew that if he submitted to its undertow, he would find himself adrift in an ocean of unsettling memories. Not memories of the near-death experience itself, but

of its aftermath. As an extra measure of assurance he took a few deep breaths and began to feel more calm and centered.

"I was a child," she began, "when I first heard of near-death experiences. My dad's a cardiologist, so he has first-hand knowledge of patients who've reported having NDEs. In fact, he's witnessed the phenomenon several times while working to bring patients back from the edge. He's convinced of the objective reality of near-death experiences; I mean, the evidence is simply overwhelming. Of course," she added, gesturing with her hands apart, "as a scientist he's quick to point out that NDEs don't *prove* there's an afterlife. On spiritual matters he's properly agnostic. I mean, there could be some physiological explanation that we haven't discovered."

Unexpectedly she paused, broke eye contact, and fingered a delicate gold bracelet on her right wrist that matched her necklace. Theo recognized the pattern: the Greek key. After a few moments, she looked up from the bracelet and resumed her story.

"When I was a senior in high school, my mom was diagnosed with a very aggressive form of cancer and died within a year." The words were spoken softly, quickly, without inflection, as if that might lessen their ability to inflict pain.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Theo said.

"Thank you." She paused. "Time has healed the pain . . . mostly, but her death has shaped the course of my life. The desire to learn everything I could about near-death experiences consumed me. I read everything I could get my hands on. In college I double majored in biology and psychology, and I've continued that double emphasis throughout my graduate studies." She looked him directly in the eye. "Although I'm getting my Ph.D. in physiological psychology, my real interest is studying NDEs. Of course, I've had to keep quiet about my interest in . . . 'the paranormal,'" she said, gesturing quotation marks around the dubious expression, "until I've gained the

proper academic credentials to be taken seriously. But it hasn't kept me from studying on my own."

Evidently Christine was a bit of an intellectual rebel. Theo liked that. He, too, chafed under the yoke of the academic status quo.

She continued. "I read the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* religiously. Are you familiar with it?"

"I've heard of it—haven't read it."

She looked mildly surprised but went on. "A recent issue had an article on the dream lives of those who have had NDEs. Apparently their dreamscapes are almost always positive, even pleasurable. Nightmares are rarely reported. But recently, a high percentage of subjects in an ongoing study began to report unsettling dreams. And here's the relevant part: they describe the nightmares in terms of feelings or emotions rather than images."

"That's, um, rather spooky." Theo paused a beat before continuing. "You're saying I'm part of a . . . a *pattern*?"

"Apparently."

They sat in silence for several moments, lost in their own thoughts. Theo became aware that she was staring at him, her head inclined to one side inquisitively.

"What?" he asked.

"I didn't say anything."

"No, but you're *thinking* something. What do you propose we do?" he asked.

"I'm not sure." A pause. "Could I have your phone number or email address?" Then, apparently realizing how forward that sounded, she turned a deep shade of crimson. Hiding her face in her hands, she mumbled, "I didn't mean it that way."

"Well, gee, thanks!" he said in mock dejection. "For a moment there I was flattered."

"Oh, God," she moaned. "Every time I open my mouth I make things worse." She dropped her hands from her face.

"I'm sorry. I'm such a social klutz."

"Hey, stop beating yourself up," he laughed. Taking a pen from his shirt pocket, he scribbled on a napkin. "Here," he said, sliding the napkin across the table. "Everything but my social security number."

* * *

Sarah doubled over with laughter.

"It's not funny," Christine said. "I was mortified!"

"Oh, stop taking everything so seriously, C.C. He probably thought it was funny. He certainly didn't hesitate to give you his information. Wow! Name, phone number, cell phone, *and* email address. I must say, you're quite the player when you do it unintentionally." Another fit of laughter seized her.

Christine flung a sofa pillow across the room. Sarah ducked. The pillow continued on its trajectory, knocking over the CD rack, scattering CDs everywhere. Sarah's laughter was now uncontrollable. No longer able to stand, she sank to her knees in the middle of the living room floor.

"It's . . . absolutely delicious . . . to see you . . . lose it," she squeezed out between bursts of laughter.

Christine rose from where she was sitting, crossed the floor, righted the toppled rack, and began picking up CD jewel boxes. Some of the plastic cases had hit the floor with such force the disks had been jarred loose. She berated herself under her breath. Suddenly, hands were on her sides and fingers began tickling.

"Come on, C.C., laugh. It'll do you a world of good," Sarah's voice teased in her right ear.

Sarah knew Christine's weakness; she was excruciatingly sensitive to tickling. Soon the roommates were rolling on the floor in a cacophony of laughter.

"Trying to steal my girl, Christine?"

Christine wiped the tears of laughter from her eyes and looked up at the intimidating figure towering above them. Clad

in a black leather jacket, black leather pants, and black high-heeled boots, the Goth-inspired woman stood akimbo over Christine.

"Damn! Step into the bathroom for five minutes and look what happens," the woman continued in mock anger, extending a hand to Sarah. Once Sarah was on her feet, the imposing woman used a finger tipped in glossy black nail enamel to brush a lock of hair from Sarah's face. "Ooooh, I love the KISS look. Very retro."

Sarah's tear-smearred eye makeup did resemble that of the famous rock band, causing Christine to explode with laughter again.

"What? What?" Sarah demanded.

"Your makeup . . ." was all Christine could manage.

As Sarah dashed down the hallway toward the bathroom, the Gothic Amazon extended a hand to assist Christine to her feet.

"Thanks, Kara. Is my makeup smeared as badly as Sarah's?"

"Well, you could do with some re-freshening," she smiled.

"What are you and Sarah doing tonight?"

"Going dancing at The Palms in Hollywood. Wanna come?"

"No thanks. I still have work to do on tomorrow's lecture."

"Oh, sure," Kara retorted playfully. "You're just afraid your true self would emerge in a club full of lesbians."

Sarah appeared in the hallway door, face repaired and radiant.

"Let's go, Love," she said. "Bye, C.C. See you later."

Hand in hand, they left the apartment.

Like an invisible mist, silence suffused the room that only moments ago had rung with peals of laughter. Left to her own devices, Christine knew that her life would be filled with far more quiet than was healthy. Solitude was one thing; isolation was another. Sharing an apartment with Scatterbrained Sarah had been good for her. Sarah drew her out of her shell, baiting

her with pure zaniness if necessary.

That shell had not always been there. As a child and well into her teens, Christine had been outgoing, gregarious. Very much her mother's daughter, she flitted between school, ballet lessons, and the beach surrounded by a cadre of friends. The reverse metamorphosis occurred the spring of her senior year in high school, occasioned by the sudden loss of her mother to ovarian cancer. As a coping mechanism, she had spun a cocoon of isolation, surrounding herself with books instead of people. At first, her retreat appeared to be a normal response to traumatic loss. In time, however, family and friends grew concerned when the social butterfly did not reemerge.

Of course, her new lifestyle was conducive to academic success. She made the provost's list, earning a perfect 4.0 semester after semester. She had lived at home as an undergraduate, commuting to nearby University of San Diego. The decision to move away for graduate school had meant leaving the security of a familiar—and controlled—environment, and stepping out into the unknown. Nevertheless, the time came for her to make her egress from the cocoon and spread her wings, and the tranquil atmosphere of Claremont had seemed a safe setting for her rebirth.

Rebirth is no less frightening or messy than physical birth. Being expelled from the warmth and comfort of a womb is an unpleasant process, whether that womb is physical or psychological. She lived alone the first year at CGU, unable to bring herself to post a notice for a roommate. She didn't need anyone to share expenses. Her father's generosity and the stipend she received as a teaching assistant for PSYCH 101 more than provided for her needs. No, what she needed was daily interaction with an extrovert in the hope that such a person would draw her out of herself. Within minutes of interviewing Sarah she knew she had found such a person.

Sarah's diminutive size belied the human dynamo she was.

Like the elusive perpetual motion machine, she was always active. Even when she sat still, her mind raced at light speed. She was the only true genius Christine had ever met. Had she been a musician, one would think her possessed by the spirit of Mozart. As it was, apparently the essence of Einstein had taken up residence within her. Certainly her unruly hair, the color of which changed monthly, could testify to his indwelling.

Christine, on the other hand, was no genius. She worked hard to master her field of study. And so, as she finished gathering the scattered CDs and returned them to the rack—alphabetized by artist within each musical category—her thoughts turned to the task that lay before her that evening.

Only a few weeks remained in the summer semester. During the first two years of her graduate stipend she had served as a lowly assistant to the doctoral students who taught Introduction to Psychology. For the last three years, however, she had been the doctoral student with an assistant of her own. Her hard work had been richly rewarded this summer in being given the rare opportunity to teach an upper-level class of her choosing. She had chosen, of course, *The Psychology of Dreams*.

Who would have known that translating her dissertation research into classroom material would be such hard work? The challenge kept her busy every night, but it was a labor of love. To her great surprise, Little Miss Introvert had discovered that she actually enjoyed teaching. Who would have thought that she, of all people, would be able to stand in front of a room full of easily-distracted undergraduates and stimulate their intellectual curiosity? Not only did she enjoy it; she was good at it. Very good, according to her teaching evaluations. Teaching felt natural. She could see herself as a college professor. And, as an added bonus, the teaching profession was one of the few vocations that required one to engage in constant research. “Publish or perish” was no empty threat.

But pursuing a coveted position on a college faculty would

have to wait. In the fall she would begin a post-doctoral fellowship at Stanford.

* * *

The keyboard clicked steadily. For the first time in weeks the monitor's screen filled with words mirroring the myriad of neurons firing in Theo's brain, sending their tiny electrical impulses to his flying fingers. The troubling vestiges of the nightmare that had filled the dim recesses of his consciousness had finally been evicted. In their place a new tenant had taken up residence. Or more accurately, an old tenant who had been on vacation far too long—absent without leave. Theo's wayward muse had returned.

But for how long?

Theo refused to ponder that question. Bach played on the stereo. Alexander purred from his cozy perch on the bookshelf. Writer's block had dissolved in a gush of creativity. For the first time in a month Theo felt a sense of well being.

Not wishing to jinx the happy situation, he refrained from reflecting on what had brought about the dramatic transformation—until he lay in bed later that night. Realizing that he had the unfortunate tendency to evoke what his mother called analysis paralysis, he made the conscious decision simply to let his mind drift where it would. It didn't drift far.

A collage of pleasant images appeared before his mind's eye. A poised Christine, moving with a ballerina's grace. An intellectual Christine, eloquently defending her dissertation. A joyous Christine, receiving the toast of her friends. A compassionate Christine, listening intently. A perceptive Christine, discerning his most intimate experience.

He had no more insight into the source of the recurring nightmare than he had before, but now he had hope, hope that Christine would be able to help. Apparently merely confiding in her had already made a difference, had already begun the process of exorcising the demons. Could it really be that simply

talking with her had generated the spiritual spark that jump-started his creative battery? He wouldn't overanalyze it. Following his mother's oft-quoted advice, he simply followed the flow of pleasing images that filled his mind . . . as he drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Four

The larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline of wonder.

—Ralph M. Sockman

It was not as he had imagined it.

Christine sat across from him, a yellow legal pad filled with questions resting in her lap as the reels of the micro-cassette recorder in her left hand turned silently.

No, it was not how he had *imagined* it, but it was how he *expected* it would be.

After three days, Theo had almost given up hope of hearing from her when the phone had rung last night. Saturday night. To his surprise, he found himself interpreting the time of the call as an indication that she was not in a serious relationship. Hadn't the Beach Boys sung about the impropriety of leaving your best girl home on a Saturday night? But where had that thought come from? He had no interest in dating her. Perhaps he was experiencing . . . what was it called? Transference? But he hardly knew her, and she in no way resembled Jamie. He heard his mother's warning—analysis paralysis—and let the thought go.

"Hi, this is Christine Costner," she had begun. "We had coffee—well, actually it was tea—on Wednesday," as if he needed to be reminded of her identity.

After completing a few social pleasantries associated with

telephone etiquette, she had asked if she could interview him as part of her continuing research. Discovering that they were both free Sunday afternoon, and that they both enjoyed Rancho Santa Ana Botanical Garden, they had agreed to meet at the gate at two o'clock. Never one to be late, Theo had arrived ten minutes early. To his surprise, she was standing at the gate when he pulled into the parking lot.

It was not that he had expected her to be wearing the expensive business suit she had worn the day of her dissertation defense, but that was how she had been dressed as she had made her occasional appearances in his thoughts the past three days. Clearly the temperature had dictated her attire, and Theo resolved to stop complaining about Claremont's heat. A bright red sleeveless blouse revealed nicely toned arms, and denim shorts highlighted long, shapely legs. *Dancer's legs*, he thought, confirming his earlier impression of her grace of movement. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and although a wide-rimmed straw hat cast her face in shadow, it in no way dimmed her natural radiance. *Did she always glow?* he wondered.

For ten minutes or so they had wandered along the garden's meandering pathways, engaging in small talk about the interesting collection of plants. When they came upon two benches positioned at right angles to one another just off the footpath, she had suggested that they take advantage of the shady spot. As she pulled the legal pad and tape recorder from her shoulder bag, she had asked if he would mind if she recorded their conversation. The question brought back memories of sensation-seeking reporters encouraging him to recount his experience following the accident that nearly ended his life. This was different though, he had reminded himself. This was research, complete with the university's Institutional Review Board-mandated consent form for him to sign and a research participant's bill of rights. Surely the outcome of this retelling would be different as well. This interview would be used to

further the understanding of near-death experiences, not to sell newspapers or boost television ratings. And if Christine's hypothesis linking the nightmares to his NDE proved to be valid, the interview might help uncover their source and free him from their grip.

So there they sat on a Sunday afternoon—a woman committed to the exploration of the unknown; a man about to relive the most profound of human experiences; and a tape recorder.

* * *

Christine shivered in spite of the warm summer night. She waved as she watched her father's car pull away from the curb in front of her apartment building, but her mind raced ahead to what the next couple of hours had in store for her.

Reading accounts of near-death experiences, although moving, never had the raw emotional impact that accompanied hearing someone recount his or her own experience. But listening to Theo's experience earlier that afternoon had been in a category by itself. Never before had she interviewed anyone who had undergone such a comprehensive NDE. He had experienced all nine of the traits identified by Raymond Moody, the pioneering researcher in the field of near-death experiences.

She had been eager to study the recording of the interview, but the previously-scheduled dinner date with her father to celebrate her successful dissertation defense had necessitated exercising delayed gratification—something she excelled at, much to the consternation of her live-in-the-moment roommate. Finally, almost six hours after the actual interview, she closed the door to her room and retrieved the recorder from her shoulder bag. Sitting cross-legged on the bed, she rewound the tape and pressed the button labeled PLAY.

* * *

*Interview with Theo Gardner, Claremont, California.
Sunday, July 9, 2006. Go ahead, Theo.*

Go ahead, Theo? How stupid! Couldn't she have said something more eloquent than that? What an idiot! Then Theo's voice emerged from the recorder's tiny speaker, drawing her away from self-flagellation.

This may be a bit disjointed; I haven't told anyone the story of my near-death experience for a couple of years. It's not something I talk about—not that I avoid it or anything like that. It's just that— Never mind, it has nothing to do with telling you my story. Sorry.

She pressed the PAUSE button. Hmm. Now that comment merited an additional conversation, she thought. She resumed the tape.

Okay . . . Well, it was an absolutely beautiful spring day, one of those days when you just can't force yourself to remain inside chained to a desk, you know? I had taken the morning off to catch some waves with one of my surfing buddies, a guy I'd known since high school. Conditions really weren't all that good, but it was pleasant just being out on the ocean.

Suddenly his voice assumed a different tone. The only descriptive word that came to her was "reverent." There was a hushed quality to it, as if he had entered a sacred space—something like the voice used by the tour guides who had conducted her family through the cathedrals of Europe on their last vacation together before her mother's death.

The next thing I recall is looking down on someone in a wet suit floating face down in the water. I remember thinking, "Boy, he sure can hold his breath a long time."

Unlike many of the near-death experiences I've heard about, there wasn't any dramatic accident. From what we pieced together afterward, it was pretty mundane really. I must have fallen and somehow the board hit me in the temple, knocking me unconscious. I had one whale of a bump here.

Christine recalled that Theo touched his right temple as he said this.

Anyway, there I was, suspended above the ocean like a sea gull, looking down on this body floating in the water, when all of the sudden I realized it was me down there. It didn't look like me, but I knew it was. I guess because you never fully see yourself in three-dimensions, you really don't know how you look to others. Anyway, you can't imagine how confusing that realization was. I didn't feel any pain or panic. I felt perfectly fine—in fact, I had a greater sense of well being than I'd ever felt. But I was confused.

Then I saw Thomas, my surfing buddy, come thrashing through the water. He had such a look of horror on his face that it actually scared me for a moment. He turned over the body and began to tow it—tow me—to the shore using the lifeguard hold. He kept saying, "Don't you die on me, damn it! Don't you dare die on me!" My friend, the ultra cool surfer dude, was in a state of absolute panic. I felt sorry for him. I tried to tell him that I was fine, not to worry, but he couldn't hear me. It was frustrating not being able to communicate with him.

Thomas dragged the body through the surf and immediately began trying to resuscitate it, me. An older couple in matching red and gray jogging suits came running toward us, and he shouted for them to call 9-1-1. I tried to grab Thomas's shoulder, to tell him I was fine, but my hand passed right through him. That was such a strange sensation. I felt a slight electrical charge as my hand passed through his shoulder, but he gave no indication that he felt anything.

Then it hit me: I wasn't fine. I was dead—or dying! I was witnessing my own death! But at the same time, I felt this most wonderful sensation of lightness and well being. I can't really explain the feeling. I didn't find myself in some sort of disembodied state. I had a body, but it wasn't a physical body like we have now. My body had undergone some sort of transformation. It was . . . I don't know . . . a

body of energy or light or something like that.

Suddenly I found myself in my mother's studio, floating near the ceiling looking down at her as she painted. She reached to pick up a tube of paint and in the process dropped her pallet on the floor, paint-side down. Later in the hospital when I told her about that, she turned so pale I thought she might pass out. There was simply no way I could have known about that incident unless I really had been in her studio that morning.

Anyway, the next thing I knew I was entering the tunnel that you have no doubt heard people describe. I found myself surrounded by an impenetrable darkness, but it wasn't an empty void. I distinctly felt there were other "presences" in the darkness with me. Not threatening, but comforting presences. I had the clear understanding—I mean, I just knew somehow—that they were there to accompany me. I was also aware of a vibration, an almost musical humming. And although there wasn't any wind or anything like that, I could tell I was moving rapidly toward the most amazing light.

And suddenly I was in the light. How can I describe this light?

He paused at this point in his narrative, and Christine remembered that an expression she could only label "beatific" washed across his face.

It's the most brilliantly intense light you can imagine, a million times brighter than the sun, but it didn't hurt to look at it. In fact, as I gazed at it I was pervaded by love in its purest form. Unconditional love, complete acceptance, warmth, belonging. The light isn't simply alive; it is Life itself and permeates everything as far as the eye can see. I looked out on the most beautiful pastoral scene you can imagine—towering mountains, stately trees, green meadows, brilliantly colored flowers, and crystal clean rivers flowing into a vast ocean. And music—words can't begin to describe this most

exquisite music. It wasn't merely outside me; it was inside me like some sort of harmonic vibration, the beating heart of the universe.

And there to greet me as I emerged into this world of light and beauty were my grandparents and—I know this may sound strange—but with them was Athena, my cat, my closest childhood companion. Like me, they too were beings of light and emanated the same unconditional love.

Christine recalled that his eyes glistened with tears of joy, and, if pressed she would swear on a stack of Bibles that his face literally glowed with an inner light as he recalled this reunion—like the paintings of the saints in the books of her childhood.

We talked—no that's not how I should describe it. We didn't use words; we communicated telepathically I guess would be the best way to put it. We . . . communed, yes, communed is even better, because it was sharing on a spiritual level. We communed for what seemed to be a long, long time. It was the most amazing sensation. I was like . . . like a sponge soaking up vast amounts of knowledge and wisdom. I've lain awake many nights since I returned trying to recall what it was I learned during that communion, but all I can recapture is the wondrous sense of understanding things as they really are. Of grasping Reality for the first time.

The next thing I recall is being in the presence of the most amazingly brilliant Being—for lack of a better word—who radiated pure, unconditional love and infinite understanding. Words fail me no matter how many adjectives and adverbs I pile up. No one had to tell me; I simply knew this was a manifestation of God. I felt as if I could remain in this Being's presence for eternity and never exhaust the experience. And I wanted to stay there for eternity.

God directed my attention to a three-dimensional . . . "movie," I guess you would call it, a holographic movie of my life. But I wasn't just watching it casually like you'd watch

television; I was understanding my life on the most amazing level. I was seeing my life from God's perspective. For example, although I experienced my life as it was lived, the movie was always played against the backdrop of how my life could have been. Sometimes there was very little or no distinction, and I sensed delight on the part of God and the other beings of light watching the movie with me. I felt such happiness that my life had brought them joy. Other times, far too many times I must confess, the distinction between what my life had been and what it could have been was abundantly clear. At those times, I realized that my life had caused God and the other beings sorrow, and I felt ashamed. But even during those times, unconditional love and understanding embraced me, and I would hear God asking me, "What have you learned, my beloved, what have you learned?"

But the most amazing part of watching my life-in-review was that I experienced personally, in my own subjective immediacy, the impact my life had on those around me in this world. I mean, each time I did something loving, I experienced how that act had impacted those around me—people especially, but also animals and even the planet. And similarly, each time I did something unloving or failed to do something loving when I had the opportunity, I experienced the pain and sadness I had caused. But each time, as soon as I truly understood the consequences of my actions and expressed genuine regret—and oh, did I feel regret and shame!—the one I had injured always forgave me. And I would hear God asking, "What have you learned, my beloved, what have you learned?"

Now this is important to understand: I didn't experience this . . . this judgment scene, I guess you could call it, as condemning me. Rather, I experienced it as the most amazing educational experience imaginable. And I felt enveloped by unconditional love and understanding the entire time.

And then, my grandfather said it was time for me to go back. At first, I didn't want to return, but I came to realize that there was so much for me to do. I sensed that was the consensus of all of the beings of light around me. The next thing I recall is being back in my physical body—such a heavy feeling—and Thomas beating on my chest. A few moments later paramedics in bright yellow jackets arrived, breathing heavily as if they had been running. I was back.

The recording ran for several seconds, but the only sound on the tape was the song of a bird in the tree that shaded the benches where she had conducted the interview. Finally, Christine heard her own voice break the silence.

Thank you for sharing your experience, Theo. I realize it's deeply personal, so I truly appreciate your willingness to recount it.

There was a pause before her voice continued.

Several times you mentioned that you understood things in a vivid way, or you highlighted the educational nature of an experience. Can you elaborate on this?

Theo's voice resumed a more normal tone at this point in the interview. He had a pleasant voice, she thought.

Well, I don't recall many of the specifics, but two things are crystal clear. The most important things are to practice unconditional love and to pursue knowledge. These are the very essence of Life, of Reality. The other things I recall are more like impressions rather than specifics. For instance, I'm convinced that the distant future will not be shaped by the development of more sophisticated technology, but rather by the evolution or expansion of the human mind. This may be a silly way to describe it, but rather than the future being filled with the physical technology you see on Star Trek, we will develop mental abilities akin to those possessed by the character Q of the Q Continuum. The Continuum, you see, is an extra-dimensional plane of existence populated by a race of

highly evolved beings the starship Enterprise encountered—
Uncharacteristically, Christine interrupted him.

Without Q's questionable morality, I assume?

The sound of laughter spilled forth from the tiny speaker on the recorder, his first and then hers. She smiled as she listened. It was a good sign that he could laugh in the midst of recalling such a profound experience. Clearly he had integrated the NDE into his life. Not everyone she interviewed had been able to do so. Her smile broadened as she listened to the exchange that followed.

One would hope! Q was rather amoral, wasn't he? I take it you're a fellow Trekker?

Thanks to my roommate. She's so immersed in the community that she began dragging me to conventions dressed in full costume.

Oh? What character did you incarnate?

Sarah had portrayed Science Officer Jadzia Dax for many years, so she insisted that I be Lenara Kahn, another joined Trill.

Complete with the spots?

Oh, yes!

She recalled how, at that point, she had picked up the yellow pad of questions to get the interview back on track.

Theo, have you noticed any changes since your near-death experience, or have others pointed out changes?

Oh, yes, there have definitely been changes—(he laughed)—most of them positive, I'm happy to say.

He paused as though arranging his thoughts. She recalled that at this point he had leaned forward with both forearms on his knees, the fingertips of both hands pressed together. It was a boyish, relaxed pose, she remembered thinking.

I guess if I were to isolate one overarching change, I would say that I've become more spiritual. Not religious, but spiritual. I actually find that I have trouble being around

many religious people. They can be so judgmental, so controlling, so sure they possess absolute truth. They send out such enervating, negative feelings into the world. It's sad. They want to do good—I truly believe they do—but unknowingly, they directly or indirectly cause so much pain and suffering. They conceive of God as an all-controlling Power, so their harmful beliefs and attempts to control others follow naturally.

If you attempt to be a conduit for God's unconditional love for all creatures, as I try to be now, you find yourself on a collision course with much of organized religion. That's why I find it difficult to attend many churches and other houses of worship. They grieve my spirit. I actually feel pain.

He paused at this point, and she recalled that his face reflected the emotion described in his words. He rubbed his forehead before resuming his narration.

You see, I've come to understand spirituality as an enlarging of the self to make room for others, both as others and as parts of myself. Unfortunately, so much of organized religion tends to create a narrowing of the self, which results in an exclusion of others.

In my dissertation research, I came across an early twentieth-century poet named Edwin Markham who expressed my view of spirituality in a clever epigram he entitled, "Outwitted":

*He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win
And we drew a circle that took him in!*

Christine heard her voice break in.

What a clever poem! Profound, too.

A few seconds passed before she posed her next question.

In addition to becoming more spiritual in your outlook, have there been any other changes?

Well, I have a real hunger for knowledge, an insatiable curiosity about . . . well . . . everything. So I decided to go to grad school. At the time of my near-death experience I was working as an advertising account executive, so my decision to study philosophy rather than work on an MBA struck my fiancée and colleagues as a rather foolish move. But truth be told, I wasn't happy doing what I was doing. It certainly wasn't what I had envisioned myself doing when I was an undergraduate. My decision to go back to school came as no surprise to my parents, however. In fact, they probably breathed a big sigh of relief. How could they, of all people, have produced a son who had sold his soul to the god of corporate America?

She recalled that a huge smile accompanied that last remark, and that he had leaned back stretching his arms along the top of the bench. She also recalled that a host of questions had flooded her mind as she sat there, ostensibly a detached, objective researcher. Advertising? Fiancée? Parents? She berated herself for being so unprofessional as to have even entertained these irrelevant questions. She remembered having breathed what amounted to a prayer: *O God, I hope he can't read my thoughts!* Responsibly, she had forced herself to continue with the questions on her legal notepad rather than the questions that had popped into her mind.

In addition to becoming more loving and interested in learning, have you noticed any other changes?

Well, I've noticed that my senses seem to be more finely attuned. Sounds, textures, tastes, and smells are more intense. And so, too, is my intuition. I don't mean to say that I've developed psychic abilities, at least not in the popular sense of the term, but I do seem to be more attuned to non-sensory perception.

Can you give me some examples?

Oh, God, she remembered pleading, what if he *can* read

minds?

Only if you promise you won't laugh.

He paused while she promised.

Sometimes, I just know things, especially people's feelings. I can enter a room and sense the mood of the people present. The experience is even more pronounced when I shake hands with someone. Sometimes I can even sense the feelings of animals, especially my cat when I'm petting him. Physical contact seems to enhance the ability.

Have you noticed any physical changes?

She was nearing the end of her list of questions now.

A few. Some pleasant changes—like incredible bursts of physical or creative energy—and some not so pleasant ones. Right after my experience, it was like something had happened to my body's electrical system. For example, my watch would stop periodically, even though the battery was new. Static would appear when I was listening to the radio or watching television, and sometimes the channel would change on its own. Streetlights would go out as I approached them. My cell phone dropped more calls than before. And most disturbing, computers occasionally lost data. I lost an entire account portfolio once, so I've become almost neurotic about backing up data for fear of losing it. I'm happy to say that these negative changes appear to have been short lived, primarily during the first year or so. I rarely notice anything like that now. Fortunately, I still have these incredible bursts of energy from time to time.

She asked her last prepared question.

What is it like when you revisit the site of your NDE, or do you ever go back there?

Oh, I go there all of the time. You see, the accident happened in my favorite place in all the world—Laguna Beach. I grew up there, my parents live there, and if I can arrange it, I'll live there after I graduate. The experience in no

way changed my love for the place.

Do you still surf?

The reels of the tape recorder turned silently for several seconds. Christine recalled that Theo had scratched his head at this point, as if he were considering how to answer the question.

I haven't surfed much lately, but that's because I live in Claremont now, not because I don't want to surf. But when I do surf, I don't . . . I don't push the envelope like I used to.

There was another pause, but briefer this time.

People don't understand. Just because I'm not afraid to die, that doesn't mean I have a death wish. Immediately after the near-death experience, I wasn't happy to be back. (He laughed.) I remember being angry with Thomas for pulling me back into my body. But soon I discovered that I had a new love of life. I wanted to live it to the fullest, to drain every drop from it. Life is a wondrous gift, Christine.

She pressed the OFF button. All that remained on the tape was her expression of gratitude for the interview and her request that he grant her another interview after she had time to transcribe and study the tape. Theo had graciously consented to her request and even agreed to take her to the location where the near-death experience occurred. Not wanting to appear overly eager, she had scheduled their next meeting for Wednesday afternoon, following her Psychology of Dreams class.

Sitting on the bed now she felt she might explode with curiosity and excitement. She berated herself for her earlier propriety; Wednesday was three whole days away.

