

In the beginning, God . . .
Genesis 1:1

Handwritten signature and date
12-27-97

0 - The Fool

*"Nothing is more dangerous than an idea...
especially when it is the only one you have!"*

Emile Chartier

June 3rd:

The Dream woke her again- but this time sadness, the yearning like some broken promise, descended over her. It was slowly killing her - the dream. Who was this man tormenting her in her deepest fabric of sleep? April knew.

April Leigh knew all too well!

The pillowcase, cool and smooth against her hot cheek, crumpled beneath the grip that brushed the tears that welled in her eyes. How many times had she walked down that aisle? No longer was the faceless figure unknown. She loved him now. That was not her first mistake. Nor her last. But this mistake would cost April her life.

It already had.

The Dream stirred the nether void, waking a creature that waited for its day to arrive. Today would be that day. The demon called desire was alive once more.

In recent times, he seemed farther away than ever. Now when she thought of him - his face, his eyes - the vision blurred to a smoky, gray shade of days so long ago. And while at one time she would have woken to a splendid day following such a night visit, now this dream began to depress her. Once upon a time, April's whole life had been wrapped up in this, making her feel like a child bundled safely in lamb's wool for a frosty winter morning. On this particular morning, however, April felt the wool begin to itch.

"Funny, isn't it?!" April mused. "Laugh, and the world laughs with you. Cry, and the world laughs at you. Some deal."

No answer came from the empty house around her. The only reply was the ringing bell of the telephone, shattering the silence. Although she was desperately glad to have a phone call, she wasn't quite sure she was ready to talk to anyone. Her voice creaked foreign in her ears from across the room.

The machine:

"I know what I want and you know what you want. But I don't know what you want. So . . . what the hell do you want?"

And the machine beeped.

April raised her head, tilting an ear to listen, tense in anticipation. She heard the recording that had the previous night seemed so clever it had even cheered her up a bit. Now, though, she began to hear a little too much bitterness, maybe insanity, creeping into the picture. Suddenly, she wanted to shut it off, embarrassed that right then someone was actually listening to it. As the machine whirred, clicked, and beeped ready to record the next voice on it, another silence fell. Breathless, she tightened, ready to pick up the receiver.

"Click," the machine snapped, paused, then rewound, clicking off to await the next call. It created an unnatural, uncomfortable hush.

April finally relaxed after what seemed to be a very long moment. She wished that she had answered the call. Just the sound of another human voice would have helped. Even a wrong number might have been therapeutic. Anything to penetrate the surreal that surrounded her these days could have saved her.

Had she answered that phone call, however, she would have been driven one step closer to the edge. At the moment she would have answered, after such a struggle inside, subsequently making the decision and executing the task, what April would have heard might have finally destroyed her. All April Leigh would have heard in the earpiece was . . . nothing.

That Texas-sticky June morning, a dream caused the spirit of a young woman to stare blankly at the ceiling and state,

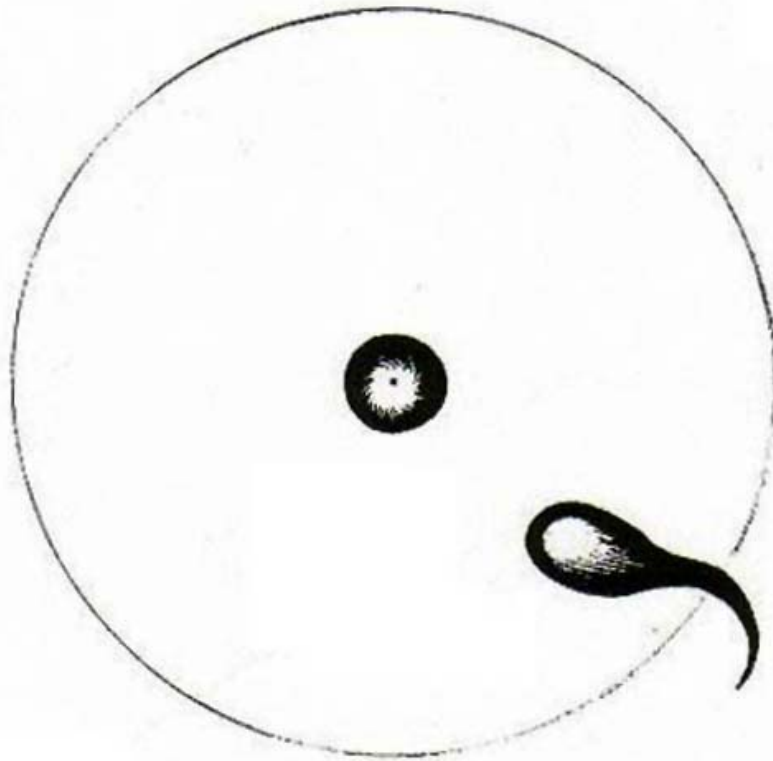
"I'm DEAD!"

"Chance or no chance," she told herself in her most authoritative mind-voice, "you are blessed!"

The voice disagreed, "You are dead!"

She was convinced.

She slept.



. . . created the heaven and the earth.
And the earth was without form, and
void; and the darkness was upon the
face of the deep. And the spirit of God
moted upon the face of the waters.
Genesis 1:1-2



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I - The Magician

"You ain't never caught a rabbit and you ain't no friend of mine."

Elvis Presley

July 4th:

From the corner, a mirror watched the room. It was the doorway for a world of strange possibilities. Alice had found Wonderland inside the looking glass. A blind boy named Tommy saw himself. In this particular mirror, a green glow began to form.

Like Alice, young April had chased a rabbit. Like Alice, April caught up with the March Hare, had even taken tea with it . . . him. But like all storybooks, this one should have been coming to a close. Either way, April wanted to put this matter to rest and get on with the rest of her life, even if it didn't include:

" . . . and they lived happily ever after."

But because of things remembered, nothing changes. No matter how much she tried, she couldn't block it from her mind . . . block him from her mind. It wasn't just any dream that she was trying to erase.

It was The Dream.

And where once her faith in the dream cocooned her safely in the web of the possible future, the place where anything possible may occur, now it tormented, haunted, and threatened to drive her mad. It pounded into her mind, captivated her thoughts, motivated her every move, scared her. Yet she could tell no one about it . . . anymore. She no longer had the energy to talk about it, anyway.

"Besides," she told herself, "it sounds crazy. It is crazy! Stop it! You're at it again! Stop!!"

She drove her fists into her temples, a vain attempt to shut out the incessant dialogue taking place in her already aching head. She closed her eyes, squeezing them shut until the pressure produced flashes of pain and colored lights on the dark screen of her mind.

It had been a month since she had seen him in the last dream that night. A month and a day. But almost ten years had gone by since she had seen him by day. And now, since the dream, she hadn't quit thinking about him.

Quit thinking about him, girl! God dam Englishman!

It was just like old times. Only worse. He no longer came to town. No more news. Where have you been?

The clock on the night stand clicked loudly as it reached 6 AM, triggering the alarm, which switched to music once she fumbled with the knobs. Although she was awake already and the alarm was anticipated, it still made her jump. Before she could groan about the routine wake-up, which would lead to a routine work day, heralding in the first day of the rest of her routine-now-becoming-pointless life, April froze.

"My song!"

April's heart fluttered, then raced wildly. Breathless, she listened transfixed. His voice told her to be patient because he was with her forever in spirit, as it always had been. As it always would be.

Then just as quickly as the thrill had come to her, it passed. The feeling sank into her stomach, and though she was no longer pregnant,

it was by sheer determination that she was not ill. The song was over.

In that split second, she felt like she was being watched. She cringed, unable to turn around to look. If April had looked into the mirror, she would have seen the eyes form, floating, watching. Shimmering green and black, the eyes laughed at her. She felt the eyes, but no longer would she look into them. She was terrified. She had never gone crazy before.

"Oh! So this is what all the excitement is about!"

How would she explain this to everyone?

"You see, I'm being hunted down by the Devil or God, or something, and I have to save the world. So, . . . I can't come to work today because I have to have a nervous breakdown."

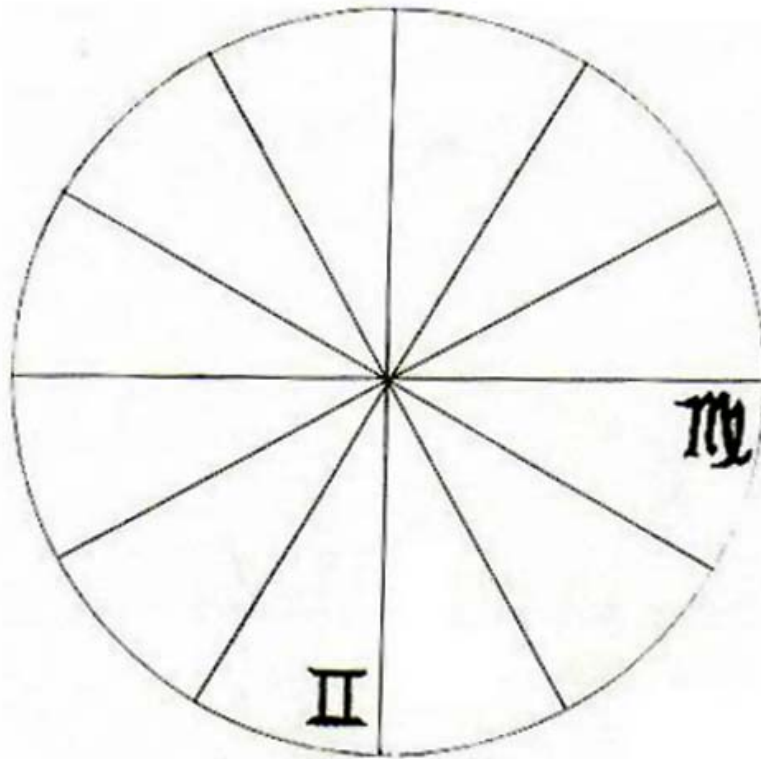
. . . calling in weird for work . . .

"Won't take much too convince them, I'm sure!" her mind-voice replied. "It would only follow naturally since they already think you're nuts."

Scenes from the Terminator movies came to mind, layers of time, perception, history. Then, as if to really piss her off, her brain conjured up another classic - Misery. #1 fan!

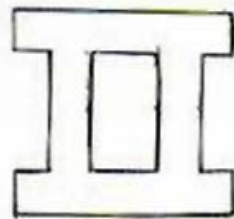
And that was the real reason why she knew she said nothing more about it. All these years and the only thing she had ever achieved was a headache and a text book case of nuts. And an illegitimate child.

"Oh, God! Why me?"



And God said, Let there be Light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.

Genesis 1:3-4



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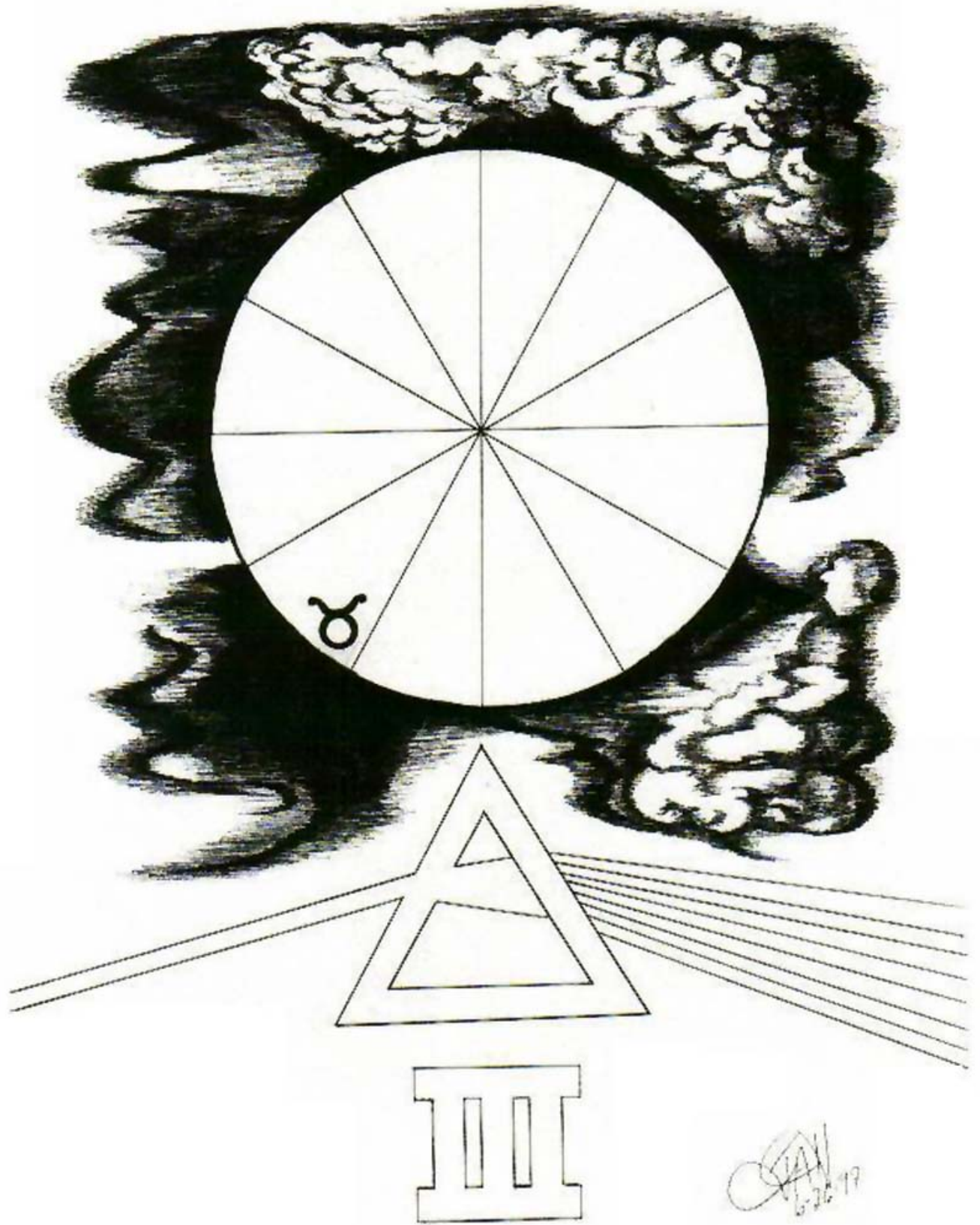
II - The Priestess

"I would set my life on any chance."

Shakespeare

August 5th:

And God replied, "Why not you?"



III - The Empress

"People look to me and say, 'It's me and you when it's the final day.

What's the future of mankind? How do I know I got left behind?' . . .

How am I supposed to know hidden meanings that will never show? . . .

Who's the prophet from the past, lights the stage and we're all in the cast?"

Ozzy Osbourne

I Don't Know

September 6th

Little children cherish fantasies, adults obsess. Maybe cinema corrupted, where Dorothy exclaimed,

"Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore!"

Maybe Barbie, the Beatles, or Bewitched re-runs set the pace. For April, part of it was definitely those prophecies from the Bible. Not the stories that they tell you about during Sunday worship, but the unspoken Truth.

It became impossible to determine when the fabric of the Eternal Now shifted. While April's world became routine, the other world changed.

"So when it's all figured out (which it never is), it should all add up (which it never does). Like a giant puzzle, it should all fit together. So why am I still puzzled? (Which I am)."

Over twenty years ago, the dream first came.

Six year old April glowed, fresh with all the life and wonder during those carefree days of summer. She and her secret twin, a girl named Sarah whose dark complexion otherwise contrasted April's fair skin, plotted the completion of World Peace, which consisted of lots of money and grand fairy tale balls to attend. Vietnam was still fresh in their young minds.

Mostly, though, perfection consisted of one theme. The boy got the girl, the girl had a baby, and the baby got a puppy. And no matter what time of day it was, when April's mother called out that was time to come home, the story would always end . . .

" . . . and they lived happily ever after."

Once, the twins found the world's first tree house / spaceship. It really consisted of one piece of rotting plywood nailed to the lowest three branches of an oak tree. Behind a neat row of suburban houses, the field was strictly forbidden. April's mother knew that older kids hung out there, smoking and sneaking beers. Her daughter, golden haired and bright eyed, might have been influenced.

The thrill of the taboo intoxicated young April. Sarah had, of course, been a regular. Red crayon scrawled her name everywhere as proof.

"Come on, sis, I've got something to show you."

Through the towering weeds, Sarah pulled her to the edge of a clearing. Two of the teenagers there were boys, smoking and drinking,

laughing at the girl. Mimicking her with crocodile tears, they slowly, painfully ripped away her self-esteem. Like a poison, its effect was deadly. She tried to hug the handsome one ("the mean-looking one," April would later say), putting her arms around him. He pushed her away.

She wanted, no, needed some attention from him. Oh, he had given her his attention, just the night before last. Late night Monday, long after dark, not twenty feet from where they now stood, he had given her some attention. Her first attention. It had hurt some, but when she got home, all she could think about was him. Oh, how she loved him! All that day in school, she had written his name in different styles, her name 'plus' his name, and the ultimate: her first/his last name name. But at home that night, she waited for him to call. The phone rested silent in its cradle. It was the first night he hadn't called since they had been going steady, for six months.

Later, she reasoned that, perhaps, he had been too busy to call, all the while it never dawning on her that he might not call at all. Ever again.

As the evening wore on, she decided to go out anyway. At the local hang-out (Big T's, of course, even May knew that!), the girl saw him with his friends and felt only the slightest chill at she latched onto him, just as it had always been. His strong, leather clad arm belonged around her tiny shoulders. She was his little sweetheart. They were a couple everyone knew was perfect together, forever.

But now something was wrong.

Just as she stepped up to him, he turned as if on cue, and walked away with his friends in tow. What had she done? And when he left, not a word.

Today, she had seen him after school walking toward the field. Now it became clear. She had given him part of her. It was sacred. He tossed it aside afterwards. Although April might not have known all the concerns (the compromise of health, possible pregnancy, its news broadcast on the devil's radio), but she did know one thing.

This was not ". . . happily ever after."

And from the look on the girl's face as she felt the hand of his best buddy creep up under the front of her sweater from behind, it might not ever be again.

She heard the word slut for the first time that day. She heard the whole conversation. But then they heard April,

"Why are they doing that?"

Her whisper startled the guys, who turned and spotted two little girls hiding in the grass. The buddy, scruffy brown headed meanness, turned toward them.

"What have we got here?" He sneered, "A little freak, with her little nigga' friend!"

He grabbed the other boy's arm, "I think it's time for a little lynchin'."

He lunged at them, "Boo!"

Sarah ran. And ran. April tried to keep up with her but couldn't. She called out for her, but to no avail. She knew that they weren't being chased. Sarah didn't even hear her. April gave up and walked home alone.

Later that night, she thought about the day. It was the first day she heard the word nigga' but obviously not Sarah's. April wondered what these words meant. She would have to ask Sarah. Or maybe Mom and Dad.

Years later when April did give it up (her virginity), she did so with precision, and a calculated coldness. It was a rite of passage, nothing more. It didn't surprise her when he didn't call. It was fairly painless getting over him. As the years went by, it got even easier.

Love 'em and leave 'em became "Love 'em? Leave 'em!"

"Marry 'em and bury 'em!" Sarah always said, even after the death of her first husband. This, of course, raised many suspicious

eyebrows. But April knew Sarah, her motives and dreams. She had been her first lover, in child's play.

Even now, though nothing was ever said, April wondered what it might have been like now that they were adults. Deep inside, she was afraid that sex would ruin their friendship. Neither believed in the perfect love. It didn't exist. But still she wondered.

As autumn blew in, she felt the chill in the air. April Leigh decided it was time to talk to Chance Lee.

But how?

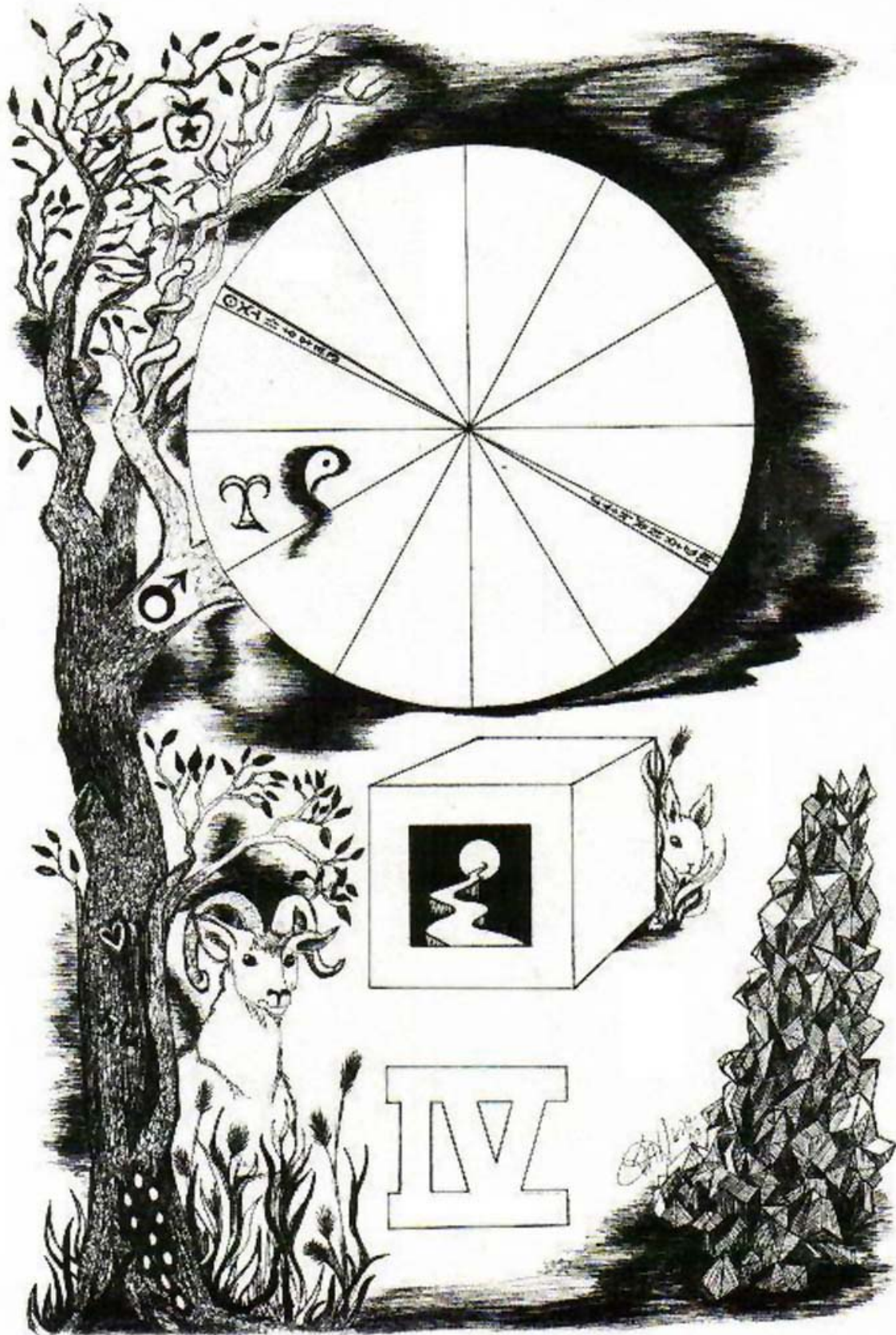
It made her feel like before, when they first met. But that was so long ago, Twelve years ago, she figured.

Back then, it felt good to send him little notes, messages of inspiration. Year after year, she rocked OM silently as she sealed each envelope. Music penetrated her soul. His music spoke to her. She knew his songs weren't written to her or about her, but . . . then again. His words fit her calculations. His story is history. On paper, he is the one! So she just decided to let him be more than anything possible, on paper. And it kept her out of trouble, mostly. It kept her at home, at least.

That was then. One day it became unbearable. The redundancy of her poems drove her to realize how much time she wasted on this, on him. Why was he so important anyway? No one else noticed him, or her.

What once was the life line of her mind, now became the anchor dragging her under. She wanted to impress him, but not a word. It wasn't as if they hadn't met. He knows me.

But did he?



IV - The Emperor

"That power which erring men call Chance."

Milton

October 7th:

"April Leigh . . ." a voice whispered from the dark horizon, or from behind her. April turned into the church's doorway, into the shadowed aisle. Three figures appeared at the altar, shrouded in a veil of smoke. Drifting toward them, she passed her mother who wept into her hands. Stained glass towered overhead, but no light shone through. The choir, hooded and anonymous, hummed a chant.

"This sure seems depressing for a wedding."

Ahead, one figure - the groom, turned toward her, hand out-stretched. The sight was one that April would never forget. "Faceless," is how she would later describe it. But where that face should have been, there was nothing. "It just faded into nothing."

"April Leigh!" the voice repeated with a growing sense of urgency. The six-year-old sleeping girl stirred, still trying to recapture her dream wedding, but to no avail. By that time, April's mother had come bustling into the room, opening curtains in her path of destruction, calling cheerfully - for now - that, "It's time to get up! Rise and shine!!"

As with many people who are considered "night people," this phrase drove itself into the part of the nervous system that controls, or doesn't, the urge to explode into a rage. ("Every year, thousands die at the hands of loved ones," which might have been prevented had one of them not opened the curtains like that.)

April tried to wake but couldn't. She was trapped between two worlds. In the real world, Mother had already left April's little pink room, with its horses and doll houses. In the other world, April was being torn from this faceless monster, to whom she had just been wed. She tried to hang onto him, as if he were her only salvation. She felt her strength fade.

For one moment she had been really happy for the first time in her young life. Then without warning, she had been thrust back into the body of a sleeping child who would be late for school at any moment. On the way to school, she stared out the bus window and thought about him. It was then that she fell in love with him.

Strange that it was no one she knew. Usually in dreams, April recognized someone, even if they appeared differently than they might in real life. It was impossible to put a name to him. It wasn't Eric, the cute boy in Miss Riggs' class, or Daniel from two doors down, or David, Ryan, or any of the boys she loved. Love is most serious to a six-year-old.

Sun streaked through the drawn shades of April's dark room of today. Nothing moved, except the flashing digital clock that replaced the one with the music alarm. April would have noted that a power surge from sometime during the night had erased the time and now was correct only twice a day, at noon and at midnight, had she seen it, but she was soundly sleeping now. There was no reason to get up. Dawn faintly lit Majestic, the town where she lived these days.

Then the room rattled as the phone rang. April jerked involuntarily. Her hand crept to the night stand and found the telephone cord, which led to the receiver. She answered it as the second ring began. Her voice cracked,

"Hello? What?"

Nothing. Not even a click. Thinking that the line was dead, April groaned and replaced it. No one called back, so she drifted back off into peaceful slumber, unaware.

The one event that April waited for all her life occurred at that very moment. Halfway across the country, a man sat alone in a hotel room looking at her picture. Her face haunted him. She wore a smile in the photo, but it was her necklace that caught his attention. It was a pendant that hung from a leather strip, shaped like the full moon but molded into a face. It was a mysterious, hideous smiling face surrounded by a heart. It wasn't a pretty piece. Certainly not expensive, either, but from the first time he saw it, he knew he would see it again.

Here it was.

In his other hand, he gripped the telephone receiver. He listened intently into it before hanging it up with his index finger. Then he sat it down beside the base, leaving it off the hook on purpose. Because it was the hotel's phone, it did not, after a minute or so, begin to blare its annoying message to alert him to that fact.

The hotel room was quiet except for the music, which crackled from the corner table where a radio blinked 12:00 glaringly. A television show flickered on a silent screen. Its shadows danced in the dark room on the walls, on the face of a young man who sat entranced on the unmade bed. Even though it was only noon, the room was completely dark. With the shades drawn, the light tried unsuccessfully to creep in but only glowed in the outline of the veil. He had been there for a long time, not moving except to fill up the already overflowing ashtray. His name, or rather he calls himself, Chance. Everyone called him Chance. Night after night, the crowds would chant his name. Stage lights blinded him, making the vast darkness beyond the hot, white glare a smoky distance from which a voice of a million voices demanded,

"Chance! Chance!"

He was famous! He was loved by millions! And it wasn't undeserved. He had what it took to reach down and pick the crowd up. His shows became magic. While many rock stars might hear their names cheered in encore when they were well off stage in the dark recesses of the wings, this was no comparison.

Night after night, Chance would stand alone in the spotlight, staring into the vast empty void beyond the light, hearing that same compelling, hungry chant,

"Chance . . . Chance!"

At first the fans would only whisper his name. Then it would grow, echoing into an almost deafening single voice. Sometimes, he would get spooked. These days, Chance was packing in some twenty thousand people a show, or more. But once upon a time, it had been sixty. Sixty thousand mouths that opened and closed like they wanted to suck him in. And swallow. And the word had spread early during the first tour, so that each crowd in each town became better prepared for the trend.

By the end of the first tour, it was a tradition. A family tradition. This, the fourth tour was no different. Every night, it seemed a little bigger. A little more dangerous. A little more hungry.

Back when it started, it unsettled him. He felt defenseless. These days, though, he could laugh. He would often chuckle and mentally calculate the price of a single ticket times the number of people per show. Multiplied by the number of shows this tour, not to mention programs and T-shirts, and he wouldn't even have to add in the revenue generated by the initial record sales and his mind would be blown. For that moment, his eyes would twinkle in a slightly mischievous smile.

The look might have been mistaken as smug, and why not, after all he had been through to get there. However, he didn't feel very smug. Mostly he felt claustrophobic.

"Chance! Chance!" a voice came from the door.

Chance didn't move. He stared at the TV blankly. The voice became more persistent.

"Chance?"

"Who is it?" Chance asked flatly.

"Pizza!"

Chance replied in the same monotone, "Pizza? I didn't order a pizza."

A silent pause. Then the voice continued, "Candy gram!"

Chance got up slowly, and answered the door without looking, leaving it open as he returned to the bed.

"Hey, what do you know, it's my lawyer."

Chance didn't even have to look to know that Greg was following him into the room. This tall, sandy blond young man was Chance's manager and friend. However, it seemed that, even now, Chance was still alone. Greg sat in a chair by the window, watching the TV with interest.

"I've been trying to call you."

Chance, still staring at the picture, replied, "Oh yeah? I've been on the phone. Sorry."

Greg noticed the phone off the hook and reached over to replace it, saying, "I see that! I hope I'm not interrupting."

Chance snatched the phone out of Greg's hand and set it back down where it had been.

"Hey, don't do that! I'm waiting for a call!"

"It must be important." Greg leaned back again, looking at Chance warily. "I think you might not have to wait for it. She's here already!"

Chance snapped his head as he looked at Greg for the first time.

"What do you mean she's here?!"

"She's here! She just got here. I had to climb over balconies just to miss her. She's in Cowboy's room now, I swear!"

Chance relaxed a little. He fingered the picture for a moment.

"Who's here, Greg?"

"Tara! Who did you think I was talking about?"

Chance shifted, relaxing, "Oh! So, she's here, is she? Maybe I should just call the police now and save us all a lot of time."

Greg sniffled, rubbing his nose, with a laugh that he tried to choke back but betrayed his face with a smile. He made no reply.

On his lap, he clutched a folder. He sat up and opened it. From it, he withdrew a stack of eight by tens that Chance had earlier agreed upon. Now would be the only time he might be able to get Chance to autograph them before he became preoccupied with Tara, or Terror, as the crew called her.

Chance saw what was coming and tried to make a break for the door, but before he could even stand up, Greg thrust them in his direction.

"Can I have you autograph, sir?"

Busted, Chance settled back down. He picked up the first picture and studied it.

"Don't we have someone else who can do this?"

"I'm sorry, Chance, but I can't condone forgery. I do have ethics, you know."

Their eyes met. Both burst into laughter. Greg was not above reproach. Chance had learned that the hard way. He still couldn't quite talk about that day. Trust was gone and it might not ever be possible again. Nothing new to Chance, or so he told himself. It was better left unsaid. This tour had already been cut short. Chance had been kicked out of towns he had never even been to before that day.

Kicked out of towns he had never heard of before . . .

Greg stood up, stretching his arms. He started to head to the door but paused to watch the television for a moment, commenting, "This is a great movie! I've never seen it before. Twice, in fact."

He continued to watch, waiting for Chance to reply. No response. Suddenly he became uncomfortable, self-conscious. Greg had seen this look before and it wasn't good. Whatever Chance was looking at came from deep inside his mind. He turned to leave, sad.

Lately, Chance didn't seem like himself. Backstage at New York's Light House arena, technicians . . . roadies . . . worked steadily to set up gear for the show that night. In an hour or so, Chance would arrive to begin sound check and everything had better be ready to go or there would be trouble. The last tour manager had been replaced for reasons undisclosed. Greg knew there was a lot of tension in the air. No one discussed but everyone knew why.

Her name was Tara, named for the Earth Goddess, Terra, and she definitely was a mundane spirit. News of her arrival that day spread like a fire in the Hollywood hills. It was every bit as destructive, too. Morale sank as time drew near. Her presence created magic sometimes and the show would shine! Most of the time, disaster. It made Chance moody. No one was safe then.

Chance left the phone off the hook most of the day but once she materialized, he couldn't avoid her. She was good. She was bad. She was here! Beautiful, stunning Tara captivated the man. Even Greg knew better than to try to stop her. Chance was no match. Something about her was wrong. Everyone could see it except him. Or maybe he just chose not to see.

Greg tried to play it off but he was sure Chance could read his mind. Small talk did little to change the mood. As he reached the door he remembered the envelope tucked in his pocket. Something inside told him to hesitate but before it could stop him, he tossed the envelope on the bed.

Chance signed the photos until Greg left. Once the door was shut, Chance caught the postmark on the letter. As always, there was no return address but he knew who it was. Like a flash, it hit him. He stiffened.

Greg might have noticed his reaction had he not escaped into the hallway. What else could he do at the point? He sensed what was inside the envelope. It was none of his business. Actually, it had been his business all along. A glorified mailman, he called himself. It hadn't come to pass but if it did, he believed that it would be the only thing to tear their friendship apart. Not only would he lose his friend but Greg could lose his job.

He didn't have many friends. Or jobs.

Chance reached for the envelope. Perfume wafted from the inside as he tore the end of it. Its contents spilled onto the bedspread. The first line stood out:

"Where have you been all my life?"

It was cliché but it hit him like a freight train anyway. Shocked, he reached for his notebook. Still open to that page, the words screamed. He didn't even have to look to know, to verify. There, in his own handwriting, was the latest entry. Not even fifteen minutes earlier, he had written:

"Where have I been all my life?"

What a question. It was the story of his life. He didn't remember where he came from anymore, which tour he was on. When interviewed, he had answers stick in his throat. Sometimes, he would read the article later and be surprised. Had he really said that? It was the pressure.

Instant success had scared him. It could have crumbled at any moment, and if it had, where would he have gone? Even though by now he had his career mapped out before and behind him, like a guide through the wilderness, he still sensed a threat.

What if the house of cards crumbles to the ground?

Who would be with him? What about Tara? Or Greg? Would they stick around if the whole thing just collapsed? He wanted to believe that they would, but . . .

As each year passed, Chance became more jaded, more thick-skinned to it all. Inside, however, he felt like a target. Years of pain froze behind his intense hazel eyes. His wide-eyed innocence faded, replaced by a look of cool indifference that now passed for charm. Sick apprehension no longer followed him on stage. He turned pro. Now his eyes twinkled, pouted or just stared into the distance, but said nothing more. At least in public.

Now staring blankly into the smoke, his eyes filled with tears, stinging, blurring the light from the TV. Blinking back the pain, he noticed the picture. It was new. Nice, too. The girl wore a silk robe. Surrounded by candles, she looked like an angel. Next to her stood a mirror. Something was in the reflection. He strained to see it. It was him! Surprised, he laughed out loud. Shaking his head in disbelief, he mused,

"This girl goes to great lengths, doesn't she?"

Reaching for the pen on the nightstand next to the clock radio, Chance knocked over the ashtray and sent it tumbling. Ignoring it, he picked up the notebook. Automatically, the words poured forth in blue ink, gliding across the white lined paper.

This song would one day go on to be recorded, re-mastered, released, performed, aired, licensed, sold to the highest bidder, commercialized, plagiarized, bastardized, loved, hated, satired, and would one day infiltrate even the daytime soap opera's list of popular background music. It was destined for better elevators everywhere.

But this, on the first day of its creation, was nothing more than a pick-up line. The question posed a sense of sadness that would forever haunt him and drag him reluctantly back to this occasion. He looked at the page before him, at words that stared back:

Where have you been all my life?

Just as he set the book down, a knock came from the door. It was familiar, causing his heart to race. His hands felt clammy, a cold sweat. It was that knock he had been avoiding but now that it came, he felt his self-control slip away. The night ahead was going to be good. He slammed shut the notebook and slid it under the mattress.

"Yeah, tonight is going to be good!"

Her scent drifted in ahead of her, as always. As he swung the door open, Tara charged into the room uninvited. Falling into his arms, she covered his face with kisses. It was great to see her. He had forgotten about the last time already, and besides, what did it matter? It was over now.

"Oh, Chance!! I'm your #1 fan! I am madly in love with you! Take me right now! Take me right here on the table, Chance. No, wait! Over here, take me over here. No, that's no good either. Damn it, Chance, you never take me anywhere!"

He reached for her, bent her backward into a deep dip, and kissed her roughly on the neck. He knew it would begin to tickle. It always did. Soon, she was giggling, squirming to get free. He never let her get away too easy.

Magic happened that night!

Chance arrived late for sound check. Tara went on her way, wild-eyed with hair to match. She'd be back. Or not. He knew better than to expect her. It was understood.

The auditorium was filling up nicely, considering that the show wasn't scheduled to start for another hour. His limousine sank into the throng of concert-goers. Faces and hands appeared in the tinted windows of the ride. The local police had to hold back the crowd. Television reporters waited anxiously at the back stage door. That's when he began to laugh.

"What's so funny?"

Greg was trying not to be ticked off as he followed Chance to the dressing room.

"You missed sound check! But at least you're smiling!"

Greg trotted to catch up with him.

"Uh, the green room is this way!"

He reached to grab Chance's arm, who yanked away and kept walking.

"You're not going to do sound check now, are you?"

"Yeah, why not?"

Greg pulled him to stage left, pointed into the light. From the darkened stage, Chance tried to estimate the number of people milling about the arena.

"Seven thousand people, dude! There's seven thousand of 'em out there."

"No, there's not! There's seven thousand and two. There's two more . . . uh, two more just, you know, came in . . . You're not amused, are you?"

Greg tried to look stern but couldn't. A huge smile spread across his face.

"Don't worry! I had Gene check your stuff so we shouldn't have a problem with . . . hey, where are you going, Lee?"

With a shrug, Chance Lee mounted the stage.

The audience recognized him immediately, went wild. This venue held over twenty thousand people, but the echo of the fans swelled, filling the hall with life. A spotlight appeared, jerkily searching for its subject. His hand shaded his eyes, a gesture he wouldn't normally do on stage, but then again, neither was this.

"Hey, New York!"

New York yelled back. This was certainly unusual, people commented to each other. Aren't you glad we came early?

"I was detained this afternoon . . ."

The crowd laughed. Realizing what he implied, he amended his statement.

"Delayed! No, I didn't go to jail, thank you for your concern! I, uh, . . . had a visitor, and I just track of time, and . . ."

"Who was she, Chance? " One tiny voice cried out.

"Ooooooh!!" screamed the others. "Whooooo?"

He looked back at Greg, who shook his head and laughed. This was going great. The media would have a field day with this. Chance turned back to the mass.

"Gee, guys, it was great talking to you! See ya!"

At that, he spun around and walked off stage.

The fans went hysterical. They were sorry now. But just as Chance began to step off, Greg met him at the stairs. With one spin, Greg

had him facing the other way again and pushed. It was sheer slapstick.

Now back at the microphone, Chance continued.

"What do you say, guys? Should we kick his ass after the show?"

Someone yelled, and everyone laughed.

"What was that?" Chance squinted, looking in the direction from which it came.

"Why wait?" Chance chuckled, looking back at Greg, who had his fists poised, ready. From the dark, they could hear his tiny voice yell,

"Bring it on!"

The concert hall roared. Greg jumped backward, into the tech that brought Greg a live microphone, just in case. He took it, clearing his throat over the P. A. system.

"Ahem, is this thing on? Uh, Chance, this is Greg. Um, there's something I have to go do . . . faraway from here . . . so if you'll excuse me . . . I'm, uh."

He shoved the mic into the technician's chest and ran like hell.

Back in the hospitality room, some of the crew asked him what was happening out there. He just shrugged, speechless.

On stage, Chance was primed! He was beginning to feel alive. As he explained to the crowd his situation, he watched people running into the arena doors at the top of lower prom, scrambling to find their seats. It was the quickest he'd ever seen a place fill, and quite fun!

"You see, I was answering some fan mail and I had a lot to say. So, I'm running a little late for sound check . . . , wait a minute. From your point of view, I'm early! What do you know, Greg? I'm early!!"

Backstage, all eyes turned to Greg. He was on his second shot of Cuervo. "We're having a little technical difficulty right now . . ."

Chance continued. "Technically, I'm not ready. So, as a special segment of tonight's show, free with the purchase of one ticket at regular price, I bring you the portion of the show that we in the industry refer to as sound check. But before that, I want to hear from the people who bought their tickets at regular price."

The crowd boomed.

"Now, just the scalpers!"

Even louder.

"That's what I thought!!" Grabbing the microphone dramatically, Chance did his best Elvis impression, "And a one, and a two, a one, two, three, four!"

Just as he leaped into action, he froze. Straightening back up, the performer looked over his shoulder. Dead silence filled the dome. All watched as he turned away from them. He started looking all over the stage, behind speaker cabinets, even offstage. He returned, appearing confused.

"Where's the band? Didn't I have a band on this tour?"

He put the microphone back on the stand.

"Show up early and for what? Sound check?! Hello? Is this thing on?"

He tapped the mic.

"I want to introduce my band to you. On the drums, is Manny."

He cupped the microphone and spoke in a low, creaky voice.

"Greg, uh, could please give a message to Manny. And the others. There's some people here to see them."

He encouraged the crowd.

"Uh, Greg? Tell them New York wants to see them!!"

A moment later three guys came running onto the stage. Once introduced, they took their places. It was a little harder to get Manny to come out of the bathroom, where he had locked himself in for the last two and a half hours. He wasn't alone this time, at least, . . . as if that ever mattered.

By the time the show was supposed to have started, the house was lit. This show was on . . .

Hours later, Chance sat alone in his hotel room. The lights were out, the TV was on but silent. Just as he finally stretched out to relax, he snapped on the radio. A voice told him the time and temperature. Then the guy said,

"Tonight's show at the Light House arena sold out. And I mean that in a nice way. And in a surprise move, Chance actually tuned up for this show."

"What the hell do you mean by that?" Chance sat back up. He almost called the station but decided that it wasn't worth his time. If April had been there, she would have dialed the phone for him. But she wasn't there, and he didn't call. Looking at his clock, he calculated it to be 3 AM in Majestic. The true witching hour.

He turned off the television. A few minutes later, the radio followed.

During the night, he tossed and turned, unable to get comfortable. He was being chased. Out of the hotel doors, he landed in the woods. Behind him, the hotel had been swallowed by the void.

"I've got to get home!!"

Leaves rustled ominously, but from which direction? A low, rattling growl came from the right. He could smell something, and thought,

That's strange! I can smell in my dreams.

That's when it attacked! At first, he saw nothing but a blur as it missed him the initial time. But when he turned, he saw her. It was a she-wolf, red-eyed and bloody from a recent kill. He could smell the blood.

I'm coming to get you. I'm already here!

He ducked behind a tree, came face to face with it. Spinning around, again he was trapped! I'm too young to die! I've got to get home! Then a thought flashed into his mind. Packs! There's more!! Others appeared from the brush. The bitch's lip curled back into a sneer, its face distorting into a grimace that made it look like it was trying to smile. Chance ran. Once out of the woods, he came to a clearing. On the other side of the field, home.

Warm light spilled from its windows, the door was open. Haloed in brilliance, stood the woman. We've been waiting for you. He stopped in his tracks.

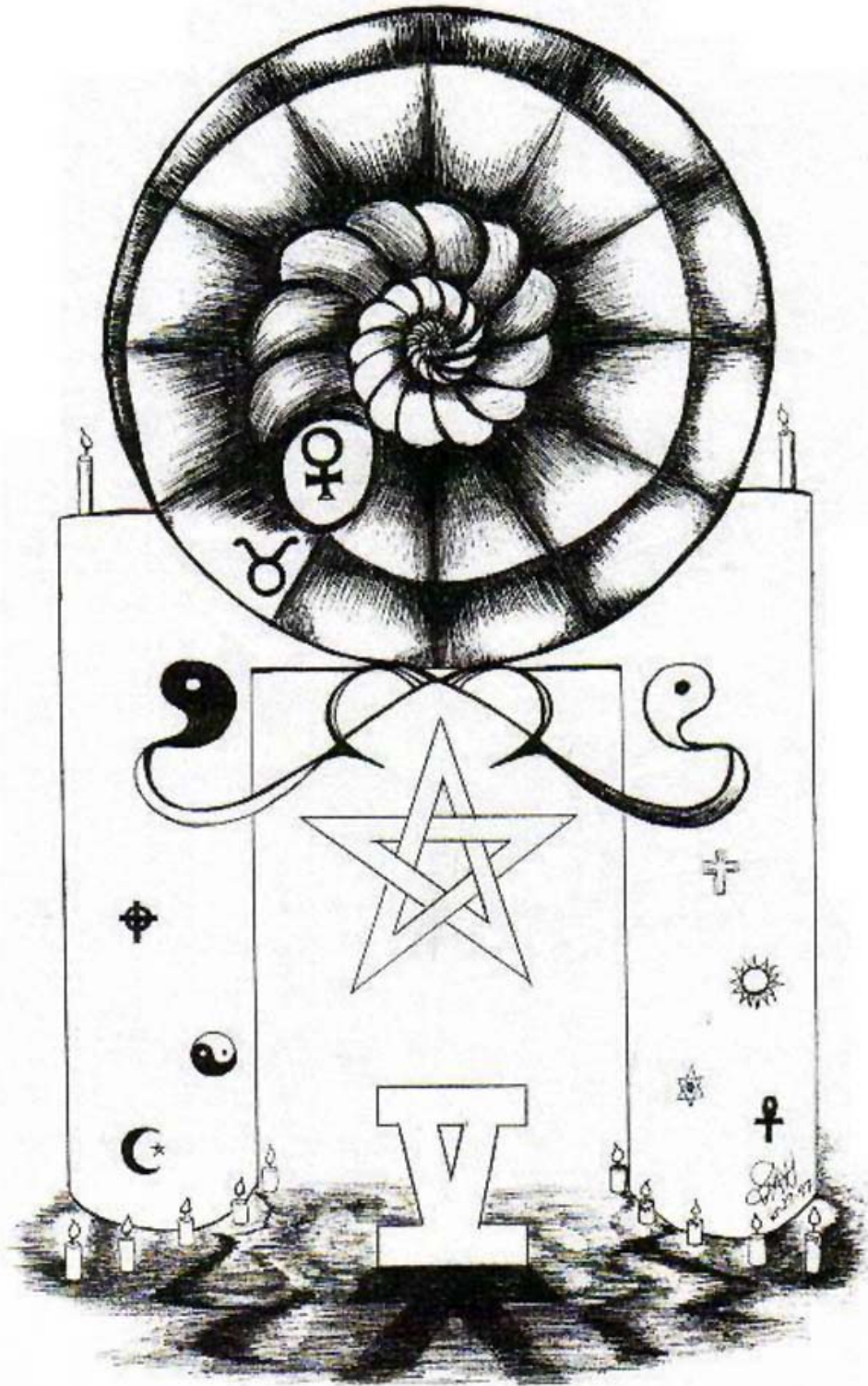
It's another trap.

That's when he saw the dragon. It hovered in the sky over the house. Behind him, he heard the dogs. Then he felt them strike. He died.

When the scream ripped from his throat, he woke in a cold sweat. Now on the floor, he sensed a warm wet liquid spreading through his clothes. Oh, God! I've peed the bed. Switching on the light, he saw the blood.

Pieces of the broken ashtray protruded from his arm. The dream faded from view. Now that he was fully awake, he made it to the bathroom to treat his injuries. Later, he would take some teasing from the crew. Fell out of bed, huh? Explain that. He wasn't sure, but he might need a couple of stitches. And some aspirin.

Far away from the hotel where Chance tried stop the flow of blood that now seeped through the complimentary towels, a veil fell over the netherworld. In the swirling fog, the dragon paced to and fro, impatiently awaiting for the return of its minion. Alive again! The spell was cast.



V - The Hierophant

"I've been waiting a while to meet you. For the chance to shake your hand. To give you thanks for all the suffering you command. And when all is over and we return to dust, who will be my judge and which one do I trust? Angst . . ."

Stone Temple Pilots

Naked Sunday

November 8:

Now that she was back in Majestic, Texas, April felt foreign. Hometown friends eyed her with envy, or was it contempt? Unfortunately, what bothered her most dawned on her one morning as she watched the sun rise over the tree line. Torn from her vision was the view. Trees towered overhead like prison bars. Now she saw only trees where once she saw the forest. No mountains here, only molehills. And no one seemed to understand that either. How could she explain flying to people who refused to even walk?

Los Angeles wasn't so far away, was it? Only 1500 miles or one phone call away. But she was here now. She didn't miss the mayhem but the chaos couldn't be matched here. Utter frenzy did have its entertainment appeal. Here, she was safe, comfortable, and bored out of her mind!

Too much time to think, to remember!

Majestic stood to remind her of all her failures, now and back then. She might have been safe but she was also sorry. This wasn't better than the insanity! Each passing day brought another gray hair, another wrinkle, another daydream. Silence seemed deafening. Scanning her new 'hood, April could see one, maybe two houses from the porch. No life anywhere!

'Cept that dog over there. Get out of here!

Back inside the trailer, she opened the windows and shades. At least summer was over. The bugs weren't bad either this time of year. Back in August, she had been so miserable! No window unit air conditioning have could produced enough cold to make her happy. Snow spitting out of the vents might have been acceptable. It was her re-initiation into Hell.

Now those were distant days. Farther away than LA. She had managed to get a job here, at Big T's of all places. Gone were all her illusions of the place. She lived farther away from the bar than she had as a child and spent the summer hitching rides to and from work. Walking was the last resort. She wasn't scared to hitchhike here. After LA, not much here could scare her. She wouldn't take rides from drunks, vans, or cars with more than one guy in it. Most of the time, she felt safe. Half the time, it was someone she knew. In LA, it was the people she knew that scared her the most. Not here!

As the sun began to set on her day off work, April sat in the quiet darkness of her living room. Natasha slept peacefully in her bedroom down the halls. In the mirror across from her, she saw that her honey colored hair was messy. Her face hadn't seen make-up today, maybe not even yesterday. And maybe not tomorrow either. It wasn't hard to compete with the women in this town. Having teeth was a big plus. This was her down time anyway. Even at work, she didn't feel pressure to look fabulous either. By closing time, any redneck loved her. Tried to.

Tonight however, this was her time! She stayed home suddenly inspired to start, re-start, an old project. Her blue shag carpet became a sea of papers, notes, and books. Candles flickered softly in her eyes. Before her, a deck of ancient cards, the Tarot, were spread out across the floor. To one side, a stack of reference books waited. In front of her, a chocolate leather, hand-bound journal lay open. Its pages now scrawled notes and memos, illustrations and poems. Its written testament represented April's life. My neurosis.

To the untrained eye, these notations seemed unintelligible. To April, these symbols contained the secret.

On the first blank page somewhere near the middle of the book, with Jimmy Page on the stereo, she re-created The Chart. Years of dedicated study resulted in this one picture, still unfinished and yet so familiar that it now seemed elementary to her. What is it for, anyway?

She knew what the circles meant, the crescents, and each squiggle. But what relevance does it have to the real world? Fourteen years ago, this flooded into her mind. Twelve years ago, she met Chance. (Symptom of the universe, a love that never dies.) Luckily, she discovered that Black Sabbath was awesome and because of her twenty year late coming, she wasn't burned out on them. They spoke to her, like all music does, but it didn't make her want to stalk them.

So why is Chance different?

In the chart, it showed.

But so what?

From time to time, a new revelation would come, its insight would be recorded, dated, and memorized. Then the pattern appeared. After fourteen years, even this became routine. She read over the chart carefully, searching for even a tidbit of new information. Nothing.

As she saw it, everything she had ever written had been so directed to him that she wondered if she hadn't met him or fallen in love, maybe this chart would look differently to her. Unfortunately, she couldn't imagine anything but what she still saw here.

Twelve years.

Tonight, she wasn't going to worry about that stupid old chart. Tonight, she was going to do what she should have done back in Los Angeles. It had to be done.

I've been thinking about this for too long! It's the only way!!

You are cordially invited to attend

The Mad Hatter's Tea Party & Charity Ball

Like so many times before, she wrote this with determination and enthusiasm. Once again, she filled page after page with details. Who to invite, what would be served, how the invitations would look. These were important decisions, but after years of practice, she was getting too good at this part of the assignment. It didn't take her too long to finish.

Then came the unusual part. She stood up to retrieve the package that she brought home the day before. She felt her heart race as she kneeled back onto carpet. From the plastic bag, she withdrew a rather large box. She ran her hands over it lovingly. It represented a lifetime of work, and a good chunk of her last paycheck. Inside the box, she possessed a thousand dreams. It was the only one of two of its kind. April made sure of that. The other, she locked away as a souvenir.

It was only natural that she started with him, after all, he was the reason she even did this. But which one should he get? She ran her fingers through the box, shuffling the only puzzle she ever bought. On top of that, what made it unique was that she designed it herself. Two-sided, it revealed all of her secrets. On one side The Chart. On the other . . .

She gave up looking for his piece. It would tell her when the time came. At this rate, at the very least, she had a nifty puzzle. This time is different!

All night into the early morning hours, April went through the stack of notebooks, retrieving names and addresses of the guests. Her files overflowed with names and numbers of the celebrities that she had come into contact with back in LA. It became a monumental task, all the while her mind raced with discouraging thoughts. Thoughts of embarrassment and failure surfaced throughout the whole night, but by dawn, she had completed enough to realize that this project lived.

Several blanks existed in each invitation, such as date and place of the event but otherwise, she felt satisfied with her efforts. Blowing out the candles, she decided that she needed to rest before the baby awoke. Creeping softly past her sleeping daughter's bedroom, she paused only long enough to watch the faint rise and fall of the child.

Startled, she turned her head quickly just to see a small figure fade into the shape of a chair draped with laundry. Oh my! I need to get some sleep!! She chuckled under her breath, and sighed. It's been ages since I've seen something like that! But she didn't really want to conjure up those old memories. Ghosts were better laid to rest.

From her bedroom, she noticed a glimmer of light in the hall. Exhausted, she had to force herself to get back up. In the living room, a single flame burned brightly. I thought I blew this out! She puffed it gently, then waited to make sure it was extinguished. Smoke wafted upward, fanning like a ribbon. She smelled the burning wax but with it came a sweet smell. Closing her eyes, she tried to place it. The scent was very familiar.

Stretching, she gave up and returned to her bed. A moment later, she was out.

The trailer was motionless, except for a shadow that floated over the furniture, across the floor, and to the journal. It coiled around itself into a orb, which spiraled downward until it touched the page. Then it disappeared. First one sheet rose, then another until The Chart appeared. There the entity drew itself into the picture. The book slammed shut.

Chance dreamed about the past, but not his past. Night visions flashed relentlessly across the screen. War and peace, heaven and hell, love and betrayal. Just as he solved one problem, another arose. Why are these my problems? His mind saw hidden cameras, the beast computer, the world of human slavery. Books burned by the believers, who suffered silently behind their walls of fear and shame. Intolerance, indolence . . . nothing ever changed.

But I don't want to be . . .

He pushed away the world and the world went dark. Coming to the surface once again, he focused on the television. Oh Jesus! I spent an all-nighter with Mr. Optimist. He switched off Jimmy Swaggart.

Now that he was up anyway, he decided to look at the package he had gotten from Greg that morning. All day long, he stared at it, anxious about opening but too intrigued not to do so. Now seemed like a good time. In it was a dark leather journal. Inside, page after page of hand written text. It fell open to the chart in the center of the book, as if years of use warped it to that page.

Just like Mom's National Geographic magazine collection.

He read the slip of paper that fell to the floor.

No way! I'm not going to do that!

But he couldn't help himself. Walking away didn't help, nor did television. His mind nagged endlessly. Twenty one minutes later he lit the candle and sterilized the needle. Ow! His finger gave up one drop of blood. He dotted it onto the page, right in the center of the fore head like instructed.

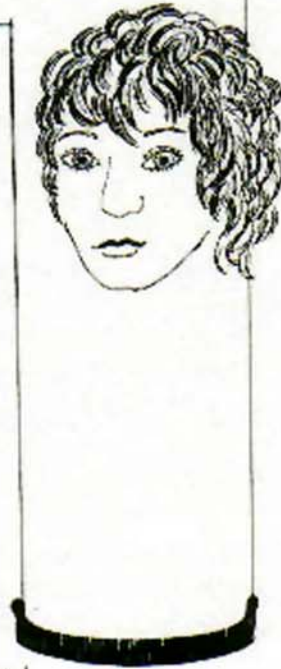
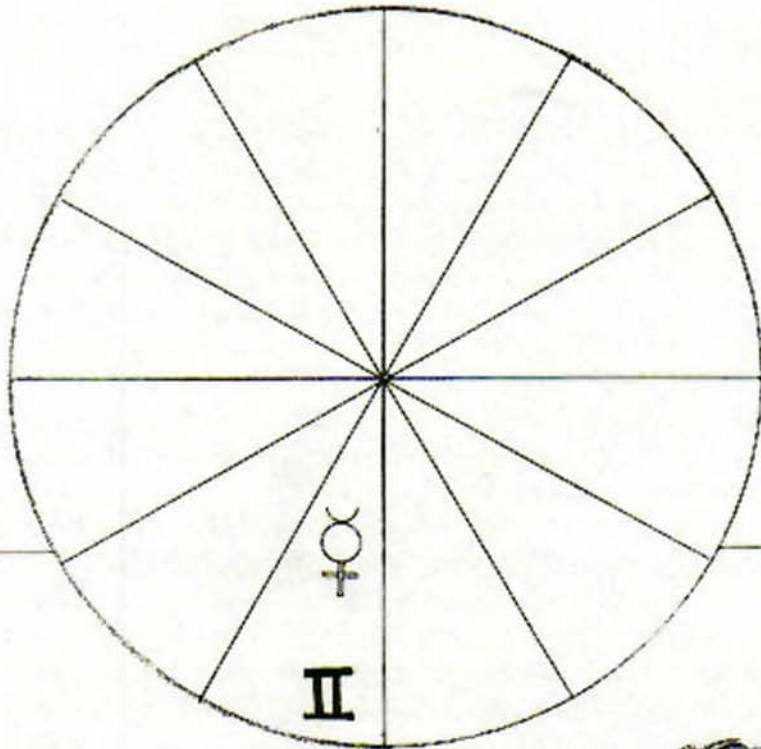
Now what?

Nothing happened so he went to the bathroom to doctor his finger. When he came back, he noticed that the candle had blinked out. The smoke reeked like burning wick so he reached over to retrieve the air freshener.

There, that's better!

Sleep came over him, so he went back to bed. The Los Angeles sun would blaze in his eyes in a few hours. Looking at his clock, he figured that she would be seeing it shortly. Dreams were sweet but unremembered when he did finally rise for the show.

April dreamed of a man that she needed to find. Gods and dogs, all of them. She was summoned to church. Find the priest.



VI

QAW
7-399

VI - The Lovers

"This is everything that I have in my life - all the stupid junk I thought would bring me luck in finding the bastard. It's time to write a letter. I ain't got no ink besides lipstick and blood. Somehow, that's very fitting!"

Winter Steele

Liquid Television / MTV

December 9th: Yesterday had been especially rough on April, as a storm blew Majestic unseasonably rough and hadn't let up a bit.

Thunder quaked the tiny trailer, mercilessly. Sleepily, she went to the baby, whose tears streamed down her red, flushed face. Lightening flashed dangerously close. Counting the seconds between the flashes and the crashes, she knew it was heading her way.

As Natasha, whose first birthday was a little over two weeks away, attempted to feed herself, April prepared for the oncoming storm.

Batteries, get the jugs of water, and, what else? She told the toddler how to get ready for bad weather in Texas. Having a kid sure comes in handy when you talk out loud to yourself.

She tried to locate the manual can opener in case the electric opener went out during the storm.

I guess that would make it a can't opener, wouldn't it?

After breakfast, a quick scramble of eggs and toast, the two settled down in the living room. April watched the weather reports while Natasha scribbled on her banner, which was intended to hang in the girl's bedroom. She steadily worked on the S of the huge printed paper, which read N A T A S H A.

Mostly, though, the baby wanted to chew on the crayons.

Today, she would finish the first draft of the invitations. All she needed to do was fill in the blanks. But, she still didn't have the information yet.

No matter, it'll come . . .

When the lights went out, around ten that morning, it scared both of them. A thunderclap boomed, rattling the house, which sent tumbling the pictures that had been on the mantle. Four fell but only the picture of the Virgin Mary (Madonna and Child) shattered on the brick fireplace. Now she's crying! April felt along the edge of the broken glass, secretly hoping to cut her finger. It didn't. That's when she thought about the journal.

I wonder if he got it.

She put Natasha down for a nap and that gave her time to think about all the crap that ran constantly through her mind. Science or religion, politics and life in the universe, would rise to the surface, flit briefly through her vision and then sink back into the quiet recesses.

If nothing exists in a vacuum, then why do I have to empty the bag?

Numerous times, people witnessed her streams of visions, and sat transfixed by her words for hours, even days. They came and went, marked by the meeting with the strange little woman who talked too much. Later they recalled that what she had said was rather important, but which now slipped the mind. One person understood her if anyone did . . . May. It's too bad that she stayed out there. April knew that her younger sister loved California, and while she wouldn't have dreamed of wanting her to come back to this dingy, boring little town, I just pray that she's safe.

While the storm raged on, April let her mind drift back to when she and May went to that first show. She hadn't really wanted to go but if she didn't take her younger sister, Mom and Dad would have. Social death to any teen. All May talked about that month was how Chance Lee is coming, listen . . .

May wore out the forty-five record that she bought, and was still saving up for the album. April had plenty of cash but wasn't convinced by the pleading of her sibling. The album would have to wait.

The day of the show, some of May's excitement rubbed off on April. She felt the chills run through her body as she dressed for the show. She dressed carefully in an outfit that Mom would have hated, had she been there. Luckily, she and Dad went out to dinner that night. May oohed and aahed over it.

Clad in black, April looked like lady evil, lace and leather. Her lace shirt hugged her breasts, then tapered into the full length black skirt. Underneath she wore silk stockings with thigh high black suede boots, and nothing else. The March air caught her by surprise, as it was her first time to go bare. May wore jeans and a t-shirt with his picture on it. April hurried out to the car before she got busted. May read the map and controlled all stereo functions. Of course, she brought the tape she made by holding the cassette player in front of the radio. On the way to the show, she listened to the first song he ever made . . . over and over.

At the theater, the crowd was bustling, trying to get into the building. April and May locked up the car, a 1966 Mustang with pony interior. The crowd looked pretty tame, but by 1985 crime had hit the suburbs. They followed the crowd through the parking lot.

Outside the main gate, a gnarled, hunched woman sold roses. April fumbled through her purse, pulling out a dollar for the yellow rose. The yellow rose of Texas. As she turned to walk away, the woman called out to her.

"You're going to need this one!"

When April turned back, the woman held out a red rose tied with a tiny white ribbon. April shook her head, "No, thank you 'mam, one is enough."

"No, girl, come take this one to the man inside. You're all dressed up for the party. You need to take a gift to the host! Or didn't your mother teach you right?"

The rose lady wouldn't take any money for it, so with a shrug and a giggle, April entered the concert. Their seats were toward the back of the room, disappointing April immediately. It wasn't that far away, but since the venue was rather small, she felt like they were in the cheap seats. But down in front, she saw two seats, first row. Then she saw a whole row.

The first act magically appeared on stage, amidst smoke and lights. Halfway through the third song, she decided to go down front. She dragged May down the aisle, who protested the whole way. By the time Chance came on, it was clear that they had found their seats. By his third song, April stood up to go get a drink. As if that was the cue, everyone rushed the stage. April and May scrambled for position, and landed front and center. The show was on . . .

I was sitting in the doorway, looking at both worlds,

You came right through me. You weren't like other girls.

I had never seen you before that day,

Not really sure, so what more can I say?

Who were you to me?

Out on a limb, I let myself go,

Who were you then? How will I ever know?

I don't know who she is to me.

I haven't met her yet.

She might not even be for real.

But I know that I'll never forget . . .

Momentary magic

Out on a limb . . .

Waiting for the call, when did it start?

And when will it all come to an end?

And the crowd sang in unison, Momentary Magic . . .

Chance's eyes met April's.

By the fourth song, her heart was pounding. He was the one running back and forth on stage, but she was perspiring. She stood transfixed while all around her screaming fans jostled her about. In her left hand, she remembered the rose. She held it out for him. A moment later, he came back and gently took the rose from her. He kissed her hand,

"Thanks for coming to see me!"

May screamed in her ear.

Lightening crashed again, startling April. She looked at the television, brought silent by the storm. Nothing on TV today.

After that first show, April remembered waiting in line for a t-shirt. She put it in her purse, making sure no one followed them too closely. Some people jumped others in the parking lots for their shirts, or so she had heard. Outside, the two stepped up to cross the street when a white stretch limousine pulled slowly past. April froze in her tracks.

Inside the limo, Chance watched the crowd outside. He expected attack, but people were more intent on beating the traffic than noticing the car. That's when he saw her. Their eyes met, but how? These windows are tinted, aren't they?

She crossed the street behind the limo, which pulled to the intersection and turned left. Across from the theater was a parking lot, which was emptying out rapidly. She and May approached the stairwell, which led to their car. Before May went through the door, April stopped her.

"Wait a minute!"

The limo had made another left and was slowly cruising in front of them on the street across the lot. At that light, it signaled another left.

"May, see the car? Do you think that it might be Chance in there?"

"I doubt it."

"Well, they are watching us, whoever it is!"

Both girls stopped to watch. Now the car headed back toward the theater, having made the circle. April waved. Suddenly, the car veered wildly to the right, made the right turn without signaling and with a screech of tires, it disappeared into the distance.

April smiled, secretly hoping it was him.

Back in the car, April asked May, "What did you think of the show?"

"It was awesome! What did he say to you anyway?"

April sensed jealousy, "Oh, I don't know. I couldn't hear him, really."

May stared out the window, "You're so lucky! Did you see? He put your flower on the piano. What do you think happened to it?"

"I don't know. Somebody probably threw it away."

Back at the hotel, the band piled into the lobby, fighting for the elevators. Security had been alerted but the motley crew dissipated before anyone could react. Chance led eight people to his room. Inside, the party began. Clothes came off, and the alcohol kicked in. Two girls later, he noticed the rose.

"Who brought that in here?!"

No one replied.

"No really! Who brought that rose in here?!"

Eight blank faces turned to him, but no one spoke. Greg sat upright, looking through one bloodshot eye. The girl next to him slept.

"Maybe the maid brought it for you, Lee."

Chance didn't argue but he knew that rose. It still had the ribbon on it.

Who are these girls?

"Greg, I'm going to your room. Gimme the key."

Chance packed up his stuff and left the room. The last things he grabbed were a bottle of Stoli and the rose.

At home, April had gone straight to her room, having to sneak quickly past her parents' room, evading a sighting. Mom hated when she wore her favorite clothes. And this outfit was the best, the worst.

Stevie Nicks ain't got shit on me tonight.

Shutting the door behind her, April put on the t-shirt. It smelled so new. In the mirror, she looked at his face. Then she lit a candle and smoked a joint. Snapping on the stereo, she heard a re-broadcast of the concert. Quickly, she slammed in a cassette and pressed the record button. May had passed out in her clothes, so she knew better than to wake her. She can hear it tomorrow.

Music swelled in her ears, the headphones hugging her warmly. The silent room glowed in candle light, hazy from the incense. Her eyes glimmered in the mirror, like his. She studied his face. Then the song came on.

I was sitting in the doorway, looking at both worlds . . .

She moved rhythmically to the beat, when she contemplated,

I wonder if you can hear him say it.

"Thanks for coming to see me!"

Her heart skipped a beat. It's there!! She laughed, exhilarated, and hugged the shirt, No, thank you!

That's when it started.

By dusk, the storms had subsided. The power came blinking on, making April clap. Right away, she put on the first album *As Fate Would Have It*. The first cut on it was *Momentary Magic*. Chills ran through her, standing her hair on end. She listened to that version, then followed it with the live album. There, right on the album, it said it:

"Thanks for coming . . ."

That night, Gramma (Mom) came to take Natasha home with her. The stillness of the house left April daydreaming endlessly. She forced herself to get back to the project. A month had gone by without any work, but since she had no deadline it was easy to slack. This time, she felt like she made progress but it was still the same old song.

Envelopes and invitations mounted in the finished box, but there was still so much work to do that she had to distract her thoughts to keep from becoming discouraged. The memories returned.

After April had gotten a buzz, she got an idea. Slipping out of the shirt, she posed topless momentarily in the mirror. Her nude body curved, shadowed in soft light, and she wondered if Chance would have liked it. Amused, she sat back down on the bed. Flipping over the shirt, she read the upcoming dates for the tour. The itinerary was right there! She got a wild idea.

She found an envelope. In a week and a half, he'll be in New York . . . Hello, I need the phone number of the Light House . . .

In a matter of minutes, she had what she was after.

The first envelope she sent had to be simple. She just wanted to say hello and remind him that she had been there. But what should I say? It had to be perfect.

I LIKED YOUR SHOW!

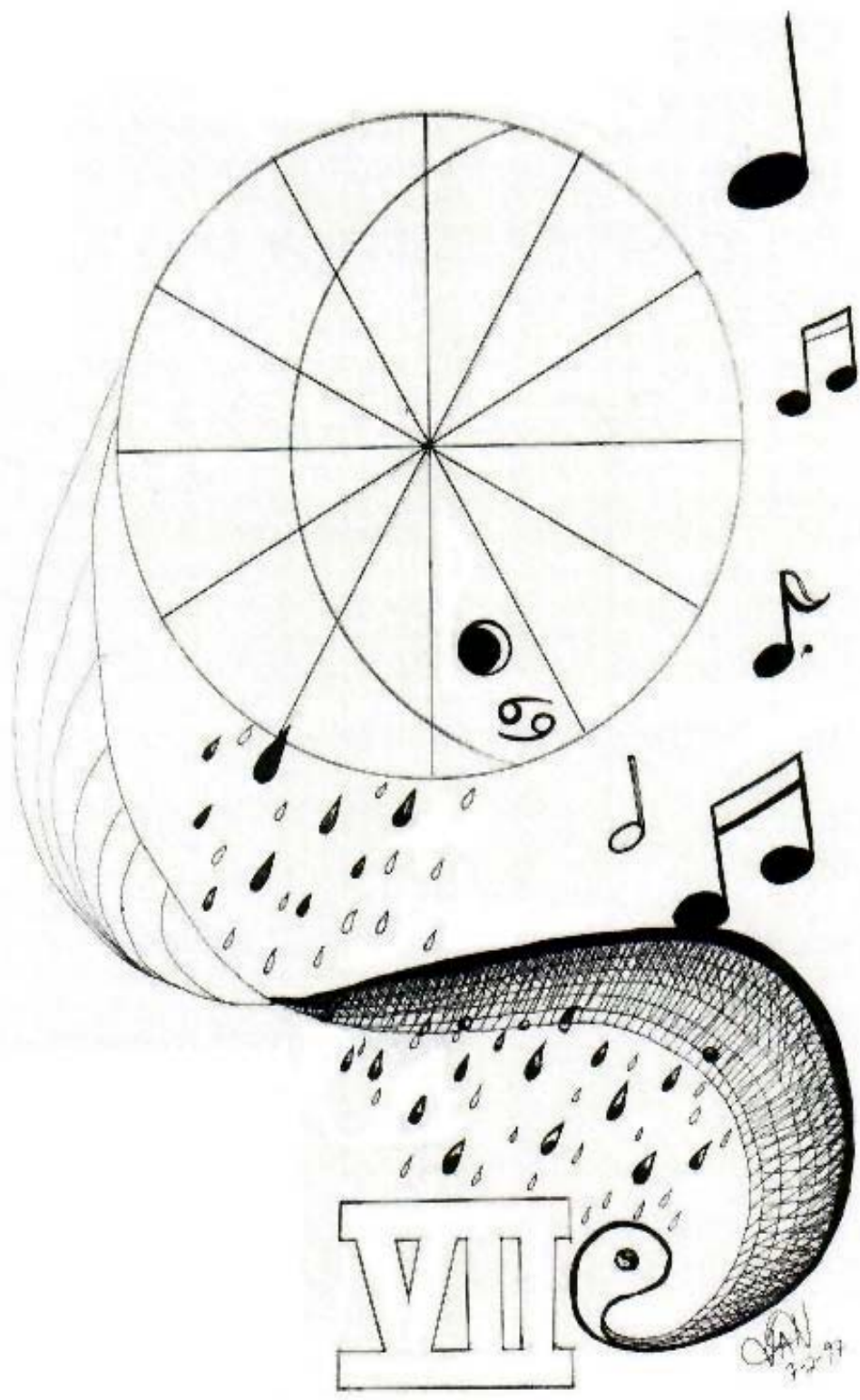
You are really sexy!!

Thanks for coming!

She sent it the next day.

She would have stopped there, except the dream came back. Six nights in a row, she floated down the aisle. On the seventh night she saw Chance. Behind him at the altar, she saw something else. A dragon.

The next day, she and the baby hung up the banner in Natasha's room.



VII - The Chariot

"To avoid complications, she never kept the same address."

Queen

Killer Queen

January 10th:

Beautiful, stunning Tara!

Beautiful, dangerous Tara. No one knew where she might be found. She never took them home. For months at a time, she would vanish. Then one day she would breeze through, brimming with excitement, full of stories from her adventures. To some, it might have seem grossly exaggerated, fabrications of fantasy, but those who knew Tara knew better.

She moved through life, stealth and sleek. Her long, nightshade mane fell wildly around her shoulders, down her back, framing a face so sensational that strangers stared. Even women caught themselves doing so. And, of course, there were the men . . .

More important, though, she was rich! Tara wielded money like a weapon. Anyone could be bought, . . . or sold. Growing up in Beverly Hills, she knew wealth, privilege. Power, corruption, greed, inequality, she recognized her lot in life very young. And no matter how much money came, it didn't erase the dirt.

Now she resided in the new estate. The rich and powerful moved away from the old neighborhood, replaced by the influx of the newly rich, immigrants. At one time, having a sheik or prince living nest door would have been an honor. But these days, the news of crime and immorality permeated this respectable community, forcing many of the good people to relocate farther down Sunset Boulevard. Her family went west, settling in Bel-Air.

Tara went east.

If the vibration of Beverly Hills resonated at middle C, West Hollywood sounded at a D. East of the well-manicured lawns where the children of the hired help would never play, Sunset turned nasty.

Tattoo parlors dotted the boulevard at night, cruised by the steady throng of the wild. Tourists feared this scene but always came, The Whiskey, the Roxy, the Rainbow. Ask for Mario. During the day, boutiques and bourgeois sidewalk cafes were filled with laughing people hoping to be seen by that one person driving by, most duly impressed. Past Fairfax, the nest section began to exhibit the strangeness that lay ahead. Bikers, rockers and hookers mixed appropriately enough, for the most part left alone by the boys in blue. At times, the police would stage busts, which would clear the area for a few minutes at a time, but ever since that King thing, the LAPD had been on the defensive. They had been offensive enough, or so the world said.

Then came Hollywood! Beautiful, stunning Hollywood. Beautiful? At one time it was the Mecca of desire, attracting the famous and the rich to its glamour. The glitter of fame and Fortune brought the huddled masses. Excitement radiated from the fresh-faced tourists and insanity gleamed in the eyes of the locals who were ready to help them part with their money.

Her streets were filled constantly with cars driven by the anxious who were in the way of the obnoxious. Exhaust, so thick now, veiled the sky in a muddy haze. Helicopters, banned from the air space over Beverly Hills, appeared constantly here. At night, they circled the neighborhoods using a spot lighting technique that would have made Hitler cream his jeans.

The back streets lit up by night, casting circles of light onto the sidewalks from the few remaining lamps. Small groups moved through the shadows like apparitions. Some were ghosts, but mostly the people who roamed until dawn were the hardcore. My kind of people! America witnessed the horrors of street life here during the day-time talk shows, but few understood that today's guest really does live under the bridge!

Tara wanted to go under the bridge.

"Why?"

"Why not?" She asked, conditioned to answer one question with another. It gave her time to think.

"Because," Ghost replied, " it could be dangerous!"

Had someone said that to him he would have laughed right in their face.

"Please, Ghost! You're the only one I can trust. I want to see this for myself. Come on," Tara pouted, batting her eyes.

While she knew this technique always worked, her mind raced in another direction. On the inside, another voice dominated her mind. It uttered its constant stream of obscenities so loud that quite often Tara was surprised that no one else could hear it. Even now, as she giggled in that perfected pitch, her mind-voice grew disgusted with the little creepy bastard.

On the surface, she seemed so attached to Ghost. She was one of many fine women in his entourage. She wasn't a regular and she had money, too. Big tits and drop dead gorgeous looks. Just his kind of woman.

Come on, you prick! I ain't got all night. I can do it without you, so you better make your choice now.

"But why?" He asked again.

"Because, I told you why! I saw them on TV and I want to help. Little kids homeless, living under the bridge . . ."

Now she bounced, as if no became maybe, jiggling her breasts noticeably. Ghost, the huge hulking biker, tossed his helmet to her, even though the bridge was only two blocks over. No one walks in LA.

She went under the bridge and came out with a couple of young runaway girls. The fifteen year old girl was new to the streets. Her sixteen year old companion had been there for two years. After a quick meal, the four left the diner, hailed a cab. Ghost followed closely behind on his motorcycle. The energy level down-shifted through West Hollywood into The Hills. Past Bel-Air, the night cooled into blue ocean.

Ghost knew where she lived, more or less, but he hadn't been there. Nor would he tonight. Tara checked the two girls into a seaside room in Malibu. She slipped the older girl a little something for the two of you. They disappeared down the hall.

"Now what?" Ghost pondered aloud, half expecting see ya! Instead Tara took his hand, and led him back to the bike. She pointed at his helmet. He cranked the motor while she fastened the bucket to her head. She had a plan.

The next day, with fake passports in hand, two young American girls set sail for France. Ghost and Tara split the money.

April managed to get a car, good luck or magic. She asked enough people for a free car, she actually got one. With a little work, she had wheels. Her mobile stereo blazed with Chance's Momentary Magic first. Wind in her wings, she felt alive again.

The Fate you create is your own she remembered some movie stated once, the bad guy, I think.

But it was true. She believed that all things had purpose, relevant to the spiritual growth of the soul. If it isn't meaningful then it's meaningless. She practiced the art of understanding and it came easy to her. Unlike most, she could see the wonders of life in all things. It wasn't a very popular position. Big T's wasn't exactly the center of enlightenment, and if she did go back to church, she'd say something and everyone would move away from her on the bench there . . .

Being a hermit was what she did best.

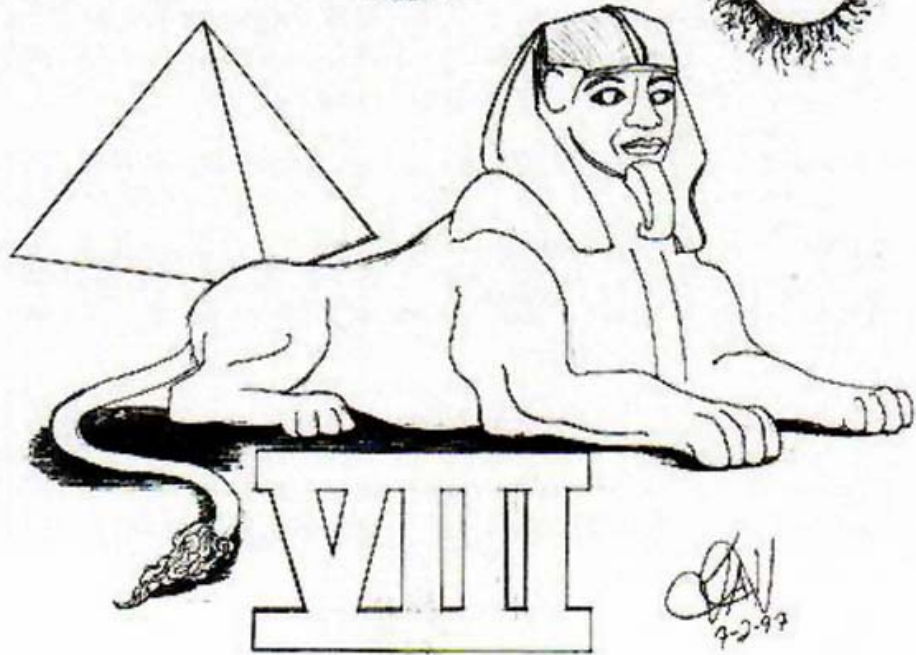
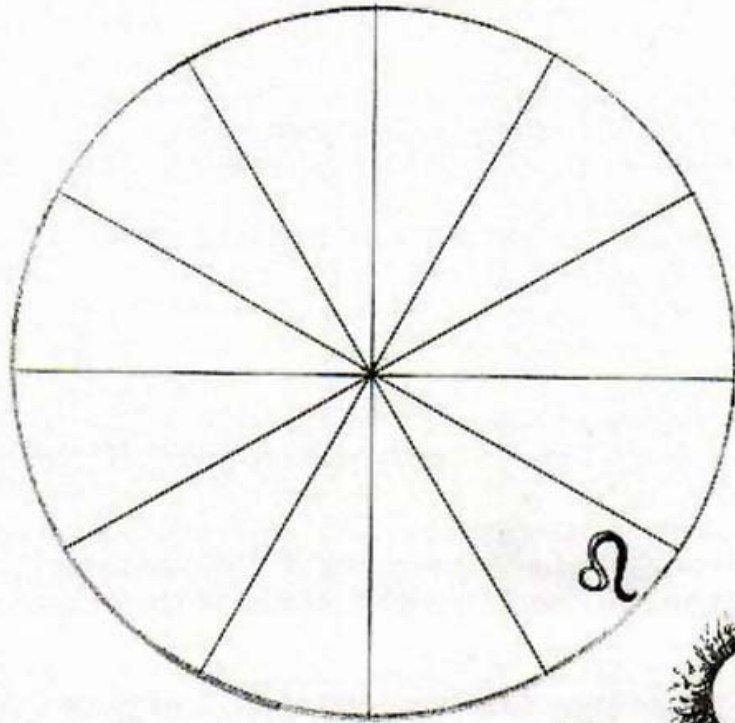
But now she had a car.

Chance drove past the hotel, seeing the biker couple in the parking lot and without a second look, he turned toward home. He'd only have two days before flying out again. Better make 'em good.

After Tara arranged the trip with Ghost's connections for the documents, and her friends, she slipped him a couple hundred bucks extra for his trouble, and summoned a cab. She was gone again..

Back at home, Tara laughed as she entered her new estate. Malibu was light years away from her family, and though they knew she bought the house, they hadn't managed to drop by yet. Just as well . . . they are the reason I moved. She wondered how the girls were doing, but decided against calling. She'd see them tomorrow.

Tonight, she had more important things to do. Chance was back.



Handwritten signature
9-2-99

VIII - Strength

"Obsessions are like fire and water.

They make good servants but bad masters."

Wilson

Home Improvement

February 11th:

Sunset was jumping, now as always. Home to the homeless, the boulevard fluttered newspapers in the wind. The strange and the beautiful roamed the midnight alleys, attracted to the weirdness. Jesse James, for example, fit right in.

His eyes darted up and down the road, waiting for the action to wander past. Suddenly a pink corvette zipped by, the blond inside waving to him. He tossed his head acknowledging her, then spotted the girls heading toward him. Too late to run now! He cleared his throat.

"Hey, ladies, you're looking good tonight. Buy you a drink?"

Tara put her arm around the little red-head next to her. "This is my new girlfriend, Star. Say, hello, Star."

She timidly whispered as she spoke to Jesse, who didn't like what he was seeing. He figured Ghost must be nearby if she was in this area. Tara wasn't ever too far from him, and trouble followed them both. The third girl stared at Jesse, making him uncomfortable. He hoped she would leave or something, but she just stood there. Too much history between them.

Tara turned to her, sensing hostility, and grabbed Jesse's arm. She led him away from the girls, whispering in his ear,

"You got to help me ditch the other chick. I don't know her, but she can't go with me and Star. Ghost is waiting for us and he doesn't want her there. Can you keep her here."

"No way! I know her and . . ."

"What's her name?"

"Well," he lied, "I don't know her that good. I just . . .uh, . . . I got some business, you know. You understand."

"Shit, I'd do it for you! Well, what am I going to tell her?"

Tara couldn't have told the truth, it wasn't in her nature, so she made it up as she went along. She motioned to the girl.

"Can you do me a favor? I've got to go connect real quick, so we can party later. This guy is kinda paranoid so I'll have to alone, with Star, it's her guy . . ."

Tara walked back over to Star, putting her arm around the girl's shoulders again.

"Meet Ghost for me at The Rainbow and tell him she and I will be right back."

Tara took leave, taking Star with her down the boulevard.

Jesse watched the two walk away, acutely aware of the one they left behind. He ordered another beer, not quite sure what to say. She wasn't just his ex-girlfriend, was she?

His eyes wandered away from hers.

The girl watched them stroll away, waiting until they were out of earshot. She rolled her eyes with a sneer, "Tara must think I'm an idiot!"

"So . . ."

"You, too, huh?"

Looking around for a clock, Jesse mumbled, "I've got to go!"

"Yeah, run away! You're getting good at that!"

"What the fuck do you want?"

"You know April had a kid, don't you?"

"You know, they figured out what causes that now . . ."

May sat next to Jesse at the bar, leaning her back into it so she could watch the world go by. If you sat here long enough, you could see everyone eventually. She ordered herself a drink.

"Don't you need to be going somewhere? The Rainbow, I think . . ."

"Fuck you!"

"Well, fuck you, too!"

"No, I'm just pissed!" May slammed her shot. "Tara just told me to meet Ghost at the Rainbow. A few minutes earlier, she was going to meet him herself, with her new girlfriend, Star. I must be an idiot . . . is there a 'duh' written on my forehead?"

His silence only agitated her more, "What is the deal with you people out here? Is everyone here crazy, or what?"

He finished his beer, standing up to leave.

"I see you have enough money for beer, but not enough for your kid, huh?"

When she was finally alone, May thought about the people in her life. And how the people in her life really sucked! Everywhere she turned, another bullshit story, another lame excuse for friendship.

She watched Jesse walk away quickly, knowing damn well he didn't have anywhere else to go.

But at least I can still get under his skin! "Sometimes, being a bitch is all a woman has to hold onto."

His long dark hair, framed a beautiful bronze face. It was clear she still had feelings for him. She hated him at the moment. May was well aware that the opposite of love wasn't hate, but apathy. It was mind over matter.

If you don't mind, it don't matter.

She could see that someday she wouldn't care at all about him, but that wasn't going to be today. For now she was content to feel.

Then she thought of April.

And Chance.

That's when she decided to score. A few minutes later, she was too high to care. It was the only time she was ever happy anymore.
And the thought of that made her sad.

Moments later, she was more worried about where the next rush was going to come from than any other issue. Eventually, she was at the Rainbow, standing outside waiting for someone. Anyone.

If she ran fast enough, maybe she could outrun her memories. No one has problems here. This was the city of dreams, enough to go around for everyone. So, why were dreams so close to nightmares?

It is the nature of the beast.



IX - The Hermit

*"I returned, and saw under the sun,
that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong,
neither yet bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding,
nor yet favor to men of skill;
but time and chance happeneth to them all."*

Bible

King James Version

March 12th:

This what she had written to him:

One dreamer's holy vision, "Save now!" we declare.

Could anything good come out of this place?

Trend lesson, soul to bear.

Strangers in the world now. So close and yet so far.

Traveling through all the spirals of life

We are not what we are . . .

Each soul guides another . . . the sole intent to shine

The mysteries flow, above and below,

a river of Jordan turned wine.

When I was just a little child, I played my foolish games,

So when do I know when to let the past go?

I have a dream with no names . . .

April knew that it had gotten bad at her house. Looking around at the mess, she had to laugh a bit. Since May's disappearance, Mom cleaved to Natasha, leaving April with more free time than ever. But being in Majestic however, gave her little opportunity for excitement. So mostly, she made phone calls.

The floor was hidden , covered by six inches of important papers,

. . . except for the trash, which isn't so important.

She had boxes of nice clothes with no place to wear them. The project had grown disorderly, files spewed their contents onto the carpet. The trash hadn't been taken out because of stray dogs that shredded it if she took it out the night before and she never got up that early anymore. It was getting warmer these days, but as it was still cool enough not to have developed the summer stench yet but soon. Gnats were forming in the garage. It was becoming less Alice in Wonderland, and more Alice's Restaurant.

She never entertained here, so it hadn't been a problem yet. She loved to be around people, not necessarily having them around her. Her mother and father avoided going inside, not wanting to know. Tight-lipped, they said nothing. Although their minds conjured up frightening scenarios that came nowhere near the truth, one thing was correct. They didn't want to know.

Age crept up on her while parts of her body went the other way. She had more important things to do than sit-ups.

The dishes, for one!

She no longer wore blazers, or tight skirts with slits that went all the way up her thighs. No stockings or high heels, except during sex, which meant she never got to wear them at all. No hairdresser, no manicures, and only the occasional use of make-up left her plain, and in her eyes - boring. She left the French roll at the offices of the Hollywood Reporter. She felt too fat for the Rainbow dress, and it was too hot for the Whiskey a Go-Go boots. Here, the cows wore the leather.

Things had been so different back in Los Angeles.

Friends, only blocks away, became strangers. She caught herself still talking aloud even though the baby wasn't around much. Only these days, she had answers to her endless stream of questions. At night she dedicated herself to the project and by daylight, the carpet had grown another inch.

Her mind was getting better, not any less obsessed but easier and much more fun to live with.

"If I had to have an obsessive-compulsive disorder," which she self-diagnosed from the late night commercials and daytime talk shows, "why couldn't I have had the neat house thing?"

She waded through the paperwork, stashing and trashing with one purpose in mind - to remind herself that the house of lord could get pretty ugly when the maid was away.

"Lord, this house is dirty!"

The living room light, once burnt and now replaced, made her aware of the dust and ashes that covered the four walls with a fine powder. Webs dangled from the corners, waving slightly as the heavy air permeated every room as she worked. In the mirror, she saw that she was as neglected as her home. Solitude had done its worst, which she knew once she looked into the mirror darkly. The new day's sun could no longer dawn over some one else's horizon. She began spring cleaning, clearing the traces of winter from the garden, and packing the blankets away for another year.

As the sun set heralding the coming of night, the last thing she did was change the light bulb on the front porch, which illuminated the path to her front door but none of the forest around her.

If she could have, she would have brought home enough bulbs to light the entire neighborhood. But for now, her neighbors would have to fend for themselves.

Her pale skinned adored the night, even though her sun-streaked hair radiated by day and her friends complained that she was never awake.

I'm not sleeping tonight, so where are they now?

House in order, she was prepared for the days to come.

To look at Chance, one might have never known that he was a millionaire several times over, at least that's what his accounting firm

told his business manager, via checks from the record company. At 34, he still looked and dressed like he just finished a baseball practice, except in public. These days, scheduled appearances were fewer and farther between. He had put his trust into a system he barely understood. He hired lawyers to watch over his other lawyers, who represented him.

Oh, God, can I really be letting myself be 'represented' by a lawyer?

These days, he looked like a grown-up, when he dressed for adult games. His fawn-colored hair no longer trailed down his shoulders, to his back. Innocent eyes, once hazel, were now jaded. His broad shoulders were more attuned to designer jackets, and ties, once shunned, now flourished in his collection.

Looking at his weary face's reflection, he tried to remember when he became a man. He tried to recall when he put away his colored pencils, and instead, picked up the ink pen and signed over his life, black and white, somewhere on the dotted line.

His new image was getting old, and for one fleeting moment, he wanted the 'out of the blue' hair color he had as a teen, when alternative was mainstream. But he had to laugh, knowing that he couldn't go to his attorneys office with a mohawk, or the first piece of legal advice he'd retain would be, "Grow up!"

The last time he had gone, someone thought his was one of the names on the front door. It had made his tie a little tighter that day. His briefcase seemed slightly heavier. If it walks like a duck . . .

He remembered a joke that April told one night at the Comedy Store on Sunset:

"You know those phones they have in jail, with the glass walls? I see some of you have been there! So . . . I was talking to my lawyer the other day, but I couldn't hear him, I couldn't understand what he was saying and all I kept thinking was, 'Boy, I can't wait for him to get out!'"

The audience had paused before laughing because they had to think about it to get the irony - an often deadly consequence. By closing time, the crowd would be too drunk to think, too loud to listen. By then the only good material came from the hecklers. However, these faceless audience members secreted away entire routines of the performers, pens flying silently over napkins and notebooks. He watched her act be stolen away the moment she spoke.

Comedy was a cruel world full of petty, jealous people and no amount of sniveling would change that.

That's what copyrights are for!

At least in those countries that recognize this protection.

But for the rest of the world, bootlegging was a common practice. Even he bought his own album for two American dollars in Indonesia. The cover art was different and on the insert, someone had put the words from each song. They weren't necessarily the right words, but they were words.

His next release contained not only the lyrics, but also the inscription, "If you're going to steal from me and quote me, at least get the words right!"

This had inspired him to write a song, using the same idea translated into as many languages he could get. Half-finished, it remained sealed in darkness between two sheets of notebook paper, forever filed in the ever increasing to-be-done category.

Back then, he watched her from the dark recesses surrounding the naked stage, where the dreams of young hopefuls died regularly. No longer did she send the tickets, the times and dates of her performances, and no longer did she appear unannounced at his. She just exited stage left one night and slipped away.

Just the thought of her slipping away caused him to reach for the phone. No one was home.

"The machine here. That's it! No TV, no money, no family jewels, antiques, not even a penny jar. Just me, the answering machine . . . and my answer is a very definite maybe!"

(beep)

He listened to her outgoing message, like always, but this time, the song on the radio was one that he knew she liked. Or she had back then . . . With a deep breath, Chance increased the volume and put the receiver to the stereo. He grinned like a little kid, realizing that how long it had been since he prank-called someone.

She'll get a kick out of that!

She came back inside, feeling good about the day. April cleansed the world around her and it made a difference. As a Virgo, she had a hard time with some tasks. If she couldn't do it perfectly, she wouldn't do it at all. Therefore, until today, the counters were clean but the closets were a nightmare. Today, though, she made a difference.

An hour later, she noticed the blinking light on the machine. She didn't listen to it for another hour. By then, the sun was long gone.

"Wow, I didn't even hear the phone ring!"

When the message started, she could hear the faint music in the background. At first, she didn't recognize it. Then it got loud.

. . . you will know, Synchronicity. If you act, as you think, the missing link. Her forehead furrowed, she was baffled. Listening to it again, she still couldn't figure out who left such a strange message. She popped the tape out of the machine, put in a new one and put the song away. She'd have to think about that one later, figuring that someone from work was jacking with her.

By midnight, she had the place arranged. It improved her mood considerably. The voice on the radio said that we were going to go back a few years for this next song. Then the airwaves resonated, "With one breath, with one thought, you will know synchronicity . . ."

She lit a candle, and sat back to think. Tomorrow, she believed she would hear back from the Majestic city council on her permit request, which would allow her to hold this size event in the town's only stadium, the Colosseum. The building held almost twenty-five thousand people. If the proposal was approved and the permit issued, she could start with the media campaign.

She wanted to be optimistic but . . . as a believer in Fate, she dubbed herself a Fate-alist.

"What is the most important time of your life?"

She knew it was time to finish what she started.

Instead of dwelling on it, she decided to re-read her song. She wrote it halfway through that first tour, sent it to some place in Philadelphia, at the venue itself, assuming that someone would get and deliver it to him. She did that for the rest of Momentary Magic. By the second tour, Chance had stopped printing the dates.

The letters scared him

She figured that it had scared him, anyway. It wasn't easy reading material. Once she began to look into the symbolic side of the relationship, she began to see signs of meanings that couldn't have been possible. The big picture played itself out before her very eyes, and became clearer each time she looked.

It scared her, too.

The light at the end was okay. It was the tunnel she feared.

She tried to remember where she came from, what her visions had been. April had to know why she carried with her the baggage of a minor infatuation. Her initiation began in the Horoscope section, next to the funny pages. Forces beyond her control guided her receptive mind until she was wishing upon a star.

Star Light, star bright . . . first star I see tonight . . .

Except for the sun, of course . . .

Virgo, sign of the Virgin, became her first neurotic impression, the naked virgin. Erotic. She realized why she grew up thinking that she was reincarnation of the Virgin Mary. Weekly church services had seen to that. Life after death, life after life. The story of Jesus made her cry, and those movies . . .

Mary, merry, marry . . . it stuck in her head. And she told no one. I would die to save the world. Mary had a little Lamb . . . These thoughts plagued her.

Discovering later that she was a slut, the little virgin (technically) decided to re-invent her previous incarnation identity as Mary of Magdalene. Her standards were more attainable. But all she learned from the old movies was that popular opinion was debatable. They . . . could be wrong.

. . . they say there is strangeness too dangerous

in the theaters and bookstore shelves.

And those who know what's best for us,

must rise and save us from our selves!

As she delved into the occult side of life, she noticed even more. That's when the dragon began to stir in its sleep. She had opened the gateway to prophesy, and the countdown sped up. Innocently browsing the oracle, she pinpointed the one. Or so she thought.

Chance was born in April, that was the first clue. After that, she let her fantasy play itself across the pages of her journal. Only recently had she ever shared this information, and then it had been with him. She copied the pages into the one she sent. She tried her best to verbalize the ideas therein, but her mind couldn't translate exactly what it said to her. He'll just have to try to understand it for himself.

Chance was Aries! That made him the Ram. The Lamb. It had become clear to her by then that the Bible seemed to follow the ages of the astrology. By the time it got to Aries, Christianity emerged. Mary had a little Lamb.

Then came Madonna, which didn't have much to do with it but she liked to sing 'like a Virgo' when asked, "What's your sign?"

"It's a sign of the times."

The way she saw it, she was at the end of times, or that's what they say, whoever 'they' are. She might be seeing the end and yet no one else seemed to notice. Waiting for years, April said nothing but wrote it all down. The dragon, now awake, waited for her to surface. She knew who she believed to be the one.. It didn't.

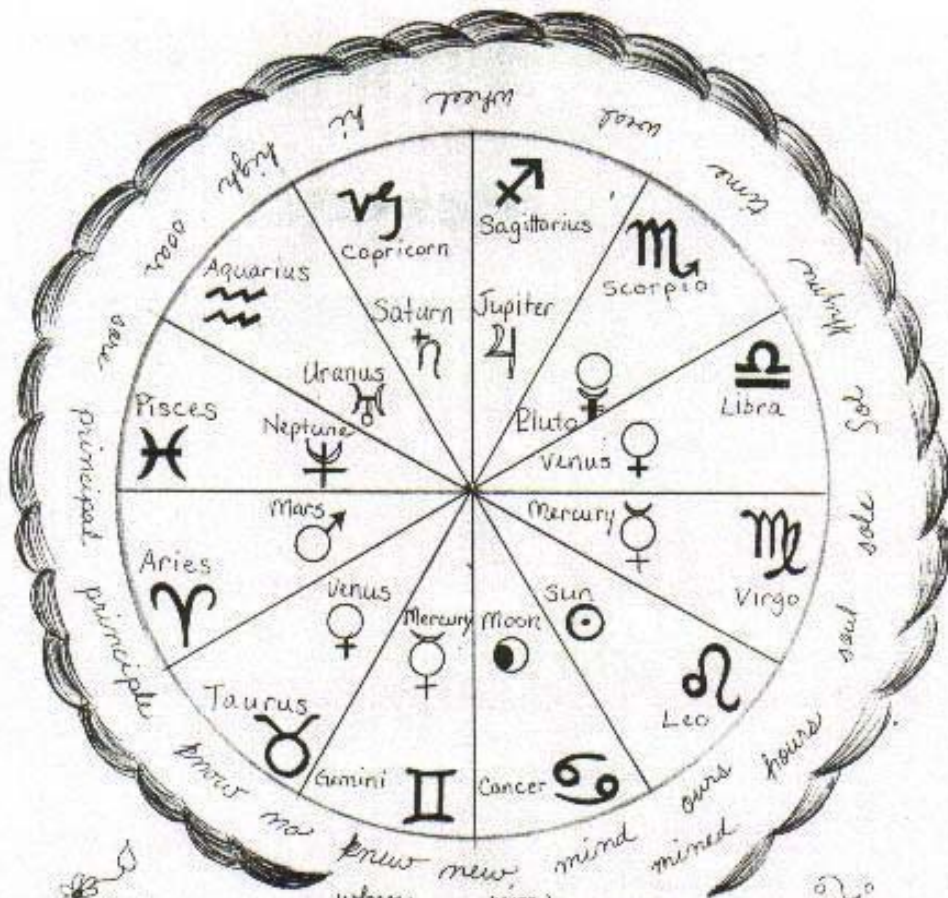
The symbol is not the reality . . . the idol mind is the Devil's workshop.

"Ignorance is bliss!"

. . . wisdom of Solomon . . .

Solo, I was so low until I spread my wings and learned to fly.

. . . but I got nowhere to fly to . . .



Adam	atom	when	win	world	whirled
Eve	eve	can't	cant	whole	hole
Son	sun	herd	heard	presence	presents
altar	alter	piece	peace	capital	capital
prophet	profit	ax	acts	insight	incite
sign	sine	sex	sects	whine	wine
eve	you	verses	versus	where	wear
lamb	lam	guessed	quest	what	watt

X - Wheel of Fortune

*"And if you go chasing rabbits, and you know you're going to fall,
tell 'em all a hookah smoking caterpillar has given you the call.*

Go ask Alice, when she just small.

One man on the chessboard get up and tell you where to go . . ."

Jefferson Airplane

White Rabbit

April 13th (Good Friday the 13th):

April knew what she had to do now, and she was/wasn't looking forward to it. All of the information stored in the boxes had to be pulled and utilized. It wasn't going to be easy to do. Each invitation had to be dated, a puzzle piece in each sealed envelope. A thousand points of light . . .

She managed to swing a deal with a caterer but it required this and that, which depended on someone else. It wasn't such a problem yet because the event was almost a year away. But she had the date, and the place.

Easter was Sunday, so she chose to mail the whole package on Monday. The first ones were delivered two days later, on Wednesday. By Thursday, the phone calls began.

Skeptical assistants queried her repeatedly for the first week, but sounded sold by the time she got off the phone with them. Physically drained, she recorded the information onto an answering service that used her home number, giving out her new number for more information. The calls still poured in.

Yes Oui` Si` was born.

This umbrella organization became the promoter of the next big charity event. Thus, The Mad Hatter Tea Party & Charity Ball was alive. She found the response overwhelming. Television crews were scheduled to do interviews every day for the next week. She broke out the good clothes, which were tight by then, so she began to run again. The woods were beautiful this time of year.

The first interview went easy enough:

Q: Why did you choose March 24th?

A: Because of the March Hare. Alice followed him down the hole.

Q: Which charity will be chosen?

A: We've selected . . .

The second interview was tougher:

Q: Who are you most anxious to see attend?

A: Uh, . . . me? I've had this dream since I was little and I guess dreams can come true . . . crossing my fingers.

Q: Has anyone not responded that you had hoped would by now?

A: Yeah, Elvis . . .

Overall, the Mad Hatter Project became instant news. She ran into few snags, until the bills began to pour in. Suddenly, she had to come up with money, quick. She wasn't sure how to set up accounts for charity promotion, so she deposited all the check into an account she called Yes Oui` Si`. There the money sat. Until she was sure, she chose not to touch it.

On a whim, she submitted a short story called The Last Concert, written in high school for a teacher who accused her of plagiarism. What's plagiarism? The teacher had said it was good, where did you get this story? April had taken it as a compliment. But as she sealed the envelope addressed to the magazine, she wondered, maybe that teacher thought I was too stupid to write.

Either way, it sold. She paid her bills.

The last time April felt this good was that day in the hills. Chance owned a house in the hills, two houses, actually. One was in Malibu, overlooking the ocean up the hill, not on the beach but overlooking all of the estates. He liked the ocean better than the beach.

The other house was off Sunset, up the tightly wound roads, past the madness, or above the madness but still in it. The night of the riots had convinced him to relocate. She didn't know that then.

All she knew was that he lived in the hills, and she was going to find it. It wasn't very hard. Since it was LA, the notoriety of celebrities made people happy to point to a house and tell a stranger all they knew about the place or the person who owned it.

She was embarrassed to ask.

But that was how she met Ghost and Jesse, two ragged bikers that chugged coffee at the next booth at breakfast that day. They had started the conversation, by offering a cup of coffee or head. It hadn't turned her on. Small talk led her around to asking about tourist information, star maps.

"Who are you looking for? I know where they all live, don't I, Jesse?" Ghost pronounced it in Spanish, like essay.

Jesse asked, "Who are you looking for?"

April swallowed hard.

She started to blow it off but then realized that it really didn't matter what these guy thought of her anyway. Maybe they did know. Just as she started to answer, they got up from the table to leave. Ghost put on his leather jacket, reached onto his pocket and tossed a couple of dollars on the table. He nodded good-bye to April,

"See, you around!"

Jesse pulled a twenty out of his wallet along with his card. He handed her the card.

"There's my pager number, in case you want to go hang out sometime. I'll catch your coffee, okay?"

"Thanks! I'll see ya'll around."

"Ya'll?"

She was used to the ribbing about her Texas accent, "That's right, ese!"

Alone, at the table, she began to regret not asking the question. Surely, she could find the place, but how? Her thoughts raced through her options, but nothing felt right. Besides, what am I going to do there anyway? It occurred to her that maybe she should get a star

map and at least look at it.

A few minutes later, she finished her coffee and stood up to leave. She left a tip on the table, checked with the waitress to make sure the bill was paid, then went to the bathroom. On the way, she passed a phone booth, but she knew he wouldn't be listed. She checked it anyway.

Outside in the driveway of the rock and roll diner, she slid her sunglasses down onto her nose. The morning sun glared off the windows of the parked cars, blinding her momentarily. That's when she realized that it was them.

"Hey, I got you," Ghost had his handlebars angled to where the mirror reflected into her eyes. She put her hand up to block it.

"I thought you guys left!"

"We came out to burn a joint. Want to do a line?"

She replied, "Sure. 'So, do you come here often?' Did I do it right?"

Ghost rolled his eyes, "What are you? A fucking comedian?"

"People laugh at me but fucking hasn't been part of my act yet."

"Maybe you ought to. It might be funnier."

She wasn't too offended. These losers weren't exactly her target market. And they didn't appear to wield too much clout in the entertainment industry. But she bit her tongue anyway, just in case.

"So, who are you looking for, anyway?"

"Well, I'm not really looking for him. I've met him before back in Texas, and I heard he lived somewhere around here. Just curious."

"Well . . . are you going to keep it to yourself,?"

She cast her eyes at Ghost's, which twinkled handsomely. April noticed for the first time how good looking he really was under his brutish exterior. If she wasn't careful, she might think about him later. While it might have been good to distract her, he wasn't exactly the wisest choice of men to dwell upon.

"Chance . . ."

"Chance to what?"

"Lee . . . Chance Lee."

Ghost smiled at Jesse. He didn't answer right away. He just chuckled as he fumbled with the bungee cord which strapped his helmet to the bitch seat. Handing her the helmet, Ghost mounted the bike.

"Get on. I'll take you."

April stepped away, "Uh, back the truck up!"

"Do you want to see where he lives or don't you?"

Si` . . . see . . . sea . . . C

She handed the helmet back, shaking her head. What do I say now?

"My mom warned me about people like you."

"Your mom doesn't know about people like me!"

April convinced Ghost, with Jesse help, to let her follow them in her car. Ghost relented.

"But we're not going to stop. I'll point it out but then we're going to bail."

"That's fine. I just want to see it."

"Why? Are you his number one fan? You want to have his baby?"

"Yeah . . . of course! Don't you?"

"No, but his girlfriend does! I'm sure she'd put up a hell of a fight with you. What do you think, 'esse?"

Jesse smiled, "You know it! She's your girl!"

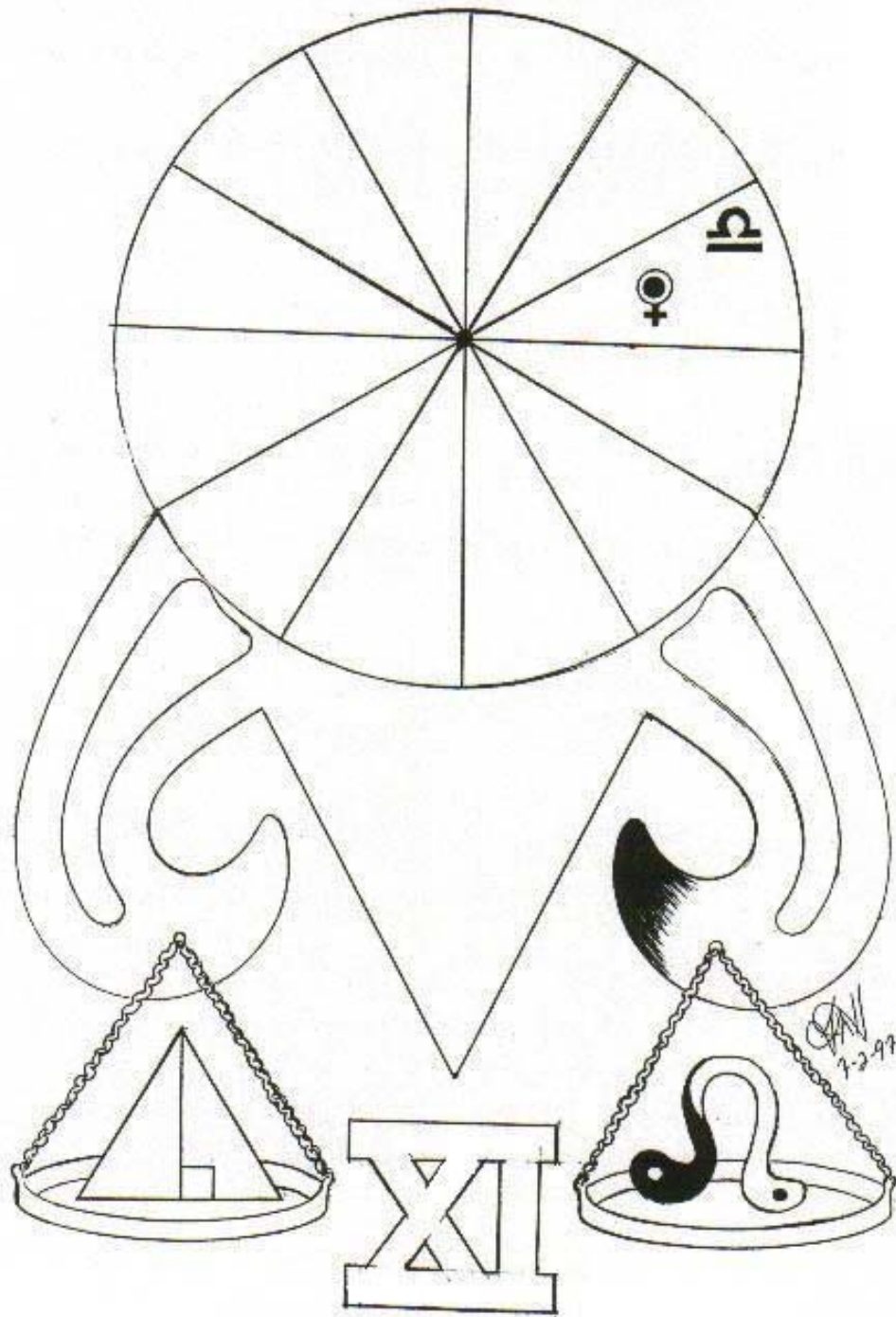
April squinted, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing."

Ghost turned over the motor, stood the bike upright, and strapped on the helmet. Jesse James followed suit. She took that as a hint.

In the car, she pulled slowly out into the street behind them. It would have been easy for them to lose her in the traffic, but they seemed to wait. Her hand automatically opened her blade, tucking it in the pocket of the driver side door, out of sight / still in reach. Just as promised, the guys slowed in front of a house, and with a quick goodbye, they were gone.

She felt her luck was changing.



XI - Justice

" You know, sometimes, not always, we actually do get what we want, right?

After all, life is a synchronicity of chance.'

'Yeah, whatever . . . '

Ellen Degeneres

Mr. Wrong

May 14th:

It isn't fair, she pouted, glancing over at his house. A month and a day had passed since her arrival on the scene. Seen . . .

"I haven't seen shit!" she told herself.

Twice a week or so, she had made her way to the empty lot beside his house, never going any closer than fifty yards to it. She didn't want to alert attention. I don't want to be told to leave . . . On these days, she listened to music, sometimes she drank wine, wrote poetry, played. Party of one, smoking!

But nothing! No one ever came, or left. At night, the curtains had been open, but no one ever appeared inside. The lights went on and off is if on a timer. I'm wasting my time here! This can't be his house.

She watched the ocean ebb and flow. April tried to pretend that what she was doing achieved something, but her mind voice disagreed. Each day spent was not wasted . . . or was it? Digging in the dirt with a stick, she pondered her existence. Weighing the consequences, she figured that if she spent this many years obsessing, then it would take half as many years to forget. If she stopped right then, she could purge herself of the fixation in a little as three years.

But April hadn't let it go back then. In fact, it had only gotten more ingrained. By now, it would take six years to break the addiction to the fantasy.

That's when she heard a voice say, "You get what you deserve."

What if you deserve good?

What comes around, goes around.

You reap what you sow. So?

Karma . . .

College had taught her that principle, but in ways that were unintended. All the facts and figures poured forth, but were rearranged to fit in with her weird beliefs. It did little to help her grades. Her neurosis, however, grew in leaps and bounds.

In physics, she learned the 'to every action, there is an equal but opposite reaction.'

I love him . . . he hates me . . .

In electronics, she read $P=IE$ (power equals current times resistance) or the force of the source is equivalent to the number of people inspired by the source multiplied by the controversy that arises due to the fact that the SOURCE EXISTS. Pi p equals 3.14159265+,

symbolized by the sixteenth letter of the Greek alphabet, used in mathematics to represent the ratio of the circumference to the diameter of a circle. But the dictionary defined it as a jumbled mixture of anything but especially of printing type.

The Chart. The Pi in the sky . . . the wheel in the sky keeps on turning, don't know where I'll be tomorrow.

"I don't know where I am today!"

At least she had remembered to bring a dictionary with her.

The wind caught the pages, gently tugging them. She laid her arm over the open book, brushing her hair back with her other hand. Where was it? She scanned up and down the page until her eyes fell onto the word.

chance, n. [ME . . .] - (definition 1) . . . apparent absence of cause or design. destiny; fortune: often personified;

as, chance could not rule the world.

2. A happening; fortuitous event; accident; as, to meet a person by chance.

She amused herself like this for a few more weeks that year, without any success. One night, she buried the present.

The Present . . . the past.

After that, she didn't return for a long time.

This May was different. April was sure of that. Plans for the Tea Party were going smoothly, except for one detail. Chance still had not responded to the invitation. Granted, it was still ten months away.

Lots of people haven't responded.

She concentrated on the ones who had. Mostly.

By now, it became necessary to organize Yes Oui` Si` into an institution, where people could meet and volunteers would work.

Not in my house!

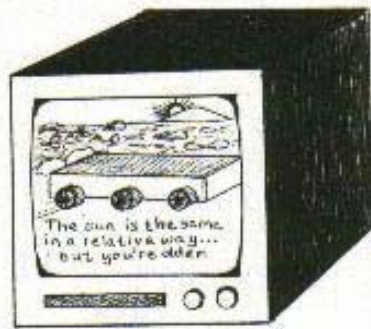
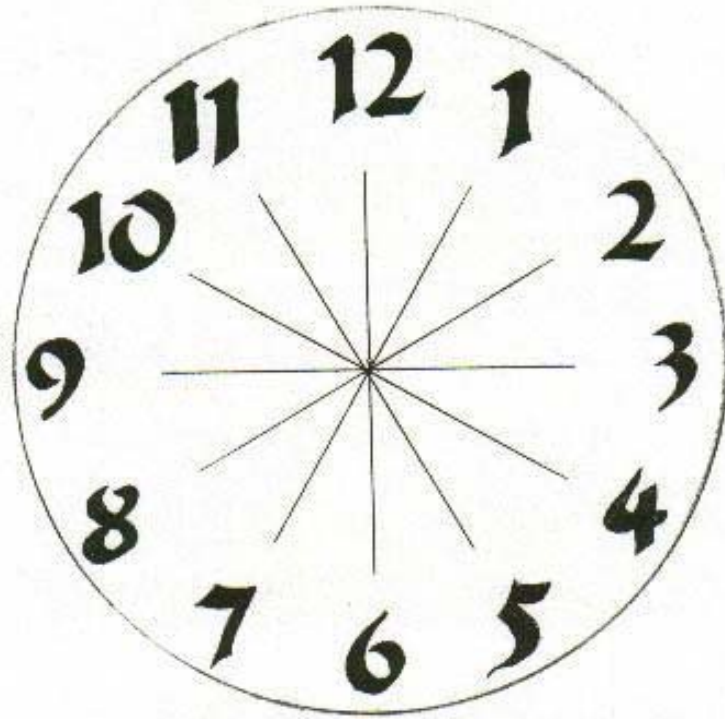
She located office space in the warehouse district downtown, donated to the cause for the next year. No lease, no rent - just utilities, which were sponsored by Big T's. College students interned willingly, and press releases brought a multitude of advertisers. Already, she had received three hundred, thirty two RSVP's, impressive but not quite a third of the guest list.

She was sure that May would have been instrumental in arranging this event, but in her absence, April dedicated herself to diligence in her sister's honor.

Once she does show up, she'll be soooo impressed! And besides, May, this is all your fault anyway. If you hadn't taken me to that show, I wouldn't be so obsessed. See what you made me do?

"I guess I get what I deserve, huh, May?"

But, did May deserve what she got?



XII

Handwritten signature and date: 9/1/99

XII - The Hanged Man

"The image on the tarot card is asking me,

'Can't you see the answer's are inside of you.

Cut the ties that bind . . . ' "

Velvet Hammer

Hanged Man

June 15th:

By now, April could step back from the whole project. Although, trying to be objective, she still found herself overwhelmed by its success. The office came alive with activity. April no longer handled the incoming calls. That task was handled by Kelly, the girl who wandered in three weeks ago. She had been a godsend. Now, there was always help around, since people flocked to Kelly anyway. Soon, April reunited with all those friends from high school. Ambivalent feelings returned. She wasn't quite sure she really wanted to see them, but it was different now . . .

The Mad Hatter Project made it different. The media brought with it celebrity treatment, giving her an air of power. Some guy from school asked for her autograph. This is a trip! April tried to take it all in stride, but it was hard not to overwhelmed.

That's when the paparazzi found Majestic. Her trailer to be exact. She woke up to voices, clearly distinct voices, and for a moment, she believed Oh, no! The ghosts are back. Once she became cognizant, the bewildered woman sneaked a look out the curtains only to discover the sea of reporters.

Uh, oh! What have I done now?

A knock pounded on the door. She chose not to answer it.

But what do I do now?

Switching on the TV, she expected to see her house. It wasn't anywhere. She left it on the channel with COPS on it, just in case. She thought about calling her neighbors.

What would I say since I don't know them? 'Hello, this is your neighbor and I was wondering what is going on at my house right now. No, I'm home right now but I don't know what's going on . . . Which one? It's the house where all the people are standing outside in the yard.

No, I can't ask the people in my yard . . . Hello?'

Fame has its price, she found. From that day on, everywhere April went, the press was sure to go. When the phone rang, she bravely answered it, ready to find out the buzz.

"Hello? . . . hello?"

Nothing.

Oh,well, so much for that.

She had to wait until the second call to find out that the office of the President of the United States had called to confirm his attendance.

Whoa! This is too big.

She put some make up on and went outside for the confrontation. She spent the next hour and a half answering questions, in between calls. It wasn't planned, but the frenzy took the story world wide. And the world noticed.

The beast of darkness saw through the veil that separated it from the world, a sign foretold by the ancients. Now fully aware, it tried to pinpoint her. She held the key. Calling forth its minions, the serpent spoke its secret tongue, bidding the followers to act. Steadily, patiently it maneuvered pawns, waiting for to strike.

April had to sacrifice her privacy once this day came. She felt the eyes of the unseen world upon her, and for the first time since she started this, she wasn't alone. Ever . . . Now even in the trailer, she sensed a constant surveillance.

I'm just being paranoid she tried to tell herself but that did little to allay her fears. Maybe, I should have some company.

"Hello? Sarah? It's so good to talk to you!"

That night, she and an old friend chatted, something they hadn't done in years. April invited her to come over, but Sarah was busy at home with the family. The family . . .

That sounded strange coming from Sarah. All through their childhood, Sarah had seemed like part of April's family, mostly because hers had been lacking. Her mother hadn't exactly been there when needed, always working April had been told. Her dad was long gone. She couldn't even remember being inside Sarah's house. Maybe she had but just forgotten.

Hanging up, April felt sad. She didn't want to think about what Sarah had said. "Oh, I heard about it on the news! I was so excited for you. I've been meaning to call but . . . you know."

But April didn't know. It seemed that everyone else called. Why not Sarah?

Chance had some qualms of his own. Rumor had it the once the tour was over, Greg would be gone. Then there was the question of business decisions, which made everyone suspicious. Money wasn't necessarily the issue, but loyalty and trust usually added up to that. Unspoken issues clouded every aspect of the tour these days. Tension mounted, but no one seemed to understand why.

It all began on November 8th. Tara had been anxious to get him to come to New York the Big Apple, but he hadn't counted upon her motives. He thought that it was a shopping trip basically, but Tara seemed convinced that he would go. That night, seven months ago, he had finally decided to agree. The journal arrived earlier, and upon studying it, he had wanted to run.

A quick getaway may be just what I need.

The drop of blood stained the paper, bright red my color, and the next day, he and Tara flew across the country, into a nightmare which still affected him to this day. Ambush television was at its worst.

Part of what made Chance famous was not his music, nor his films, but family legacy. When he was 'discovered' it hadn't been at one of his shows, or through the television . . . tell-a-vision. It had been at the convent. His mother had been excommunicated for that little accident. She had been a nun.

She wasn't supposed to have none, but obviously she had.

This wasn't what made news either. It was when the story broke. Tabloid TV descended upon him when his father became the Pope. From that moment on, Chance Lee would never be sheltered from the world again. But this news was old news, too.

What Tara did, brought him face to face with the man.

Not her! It was Greg.

She had only boarded the plane with Chance.

It was Greg that set up the meeting.

As the cameras rolled, Chance met the man said to be his father, a man who denied it readily, adamantly. It had been a disaster. Scandal now rocked both the secular world and shook the very foundation of the Holy Roman Catholic Church itself. On November 11th last year, Chance's life was no longer his.

Three strange days . . .

The tour crumbled. After that catastrophe, the alienation came. Greg and Chance never discussed it beyond Greg's apology. The unspoken words poisoned the aura of every aspect of the tour until it became painfully apparent that the end was near.

Greg had taken a chance, and it back fired. What had he been thinking? At the time of planning, it had seemed right. The tour needed publicity, and the opportunity arose. The church hadn't been made aware of the event, since obviously it wouldn't have sanctioned such a meeting. Neither had Chance been warned. The ill-fated meeting would never had happened if it hadn't been for Greg.

Greg was another pawn.

He had sacrificed himself, and for what?

April opened her journal. Right in the chart, she witnessed a bright red drop of blood. The first house, Aries, was where I told you to put the blood, Chance. Why is this in Virgo? Wait a minute! Why is there fresh blood in my book?

"Guess he got the journal!"

She tried to laugh it off, but chills made her hair stand on end. Dipping one finger into the drop, she tasted his blood. It was sweet.

This can't be happening!

She couldn't share that with anyone. Who would believe her anyway? How deep into the story would she have to get before she could have explained even the events that led up to that drop of blood. It was an all or nothing kind of anecdote. Nothing short of all would have sufficed, so she told no one.

Except Chance.

These days, she waited for a response from him, but no word ever came.

Chance, now back in Los Angeles, was remembering how alarmed he had been when the letters first came, back then when it all started. Overnight stardom brought with it so much attention that when her stuff first arrived, he hadn't paid much attention. But each message became more complex and esoteric that for a while, nothing she sent made sense.

By then, he was hooked, so intrigued that even the laughter from his friends over the weird chick's fan mail became irritating. At that moment of realization, all secrets revealed to him by her were no longer open for discussion. Not even with Greg. It was Greg that noticed the change first. After all, he delivered the packages. The last one had been earlier today.

Greg eyed it for a while, quite aware that it was from her. It was mailed some time before but with their travel schedule so erratic, it had become lost in the shuffle. He hadn't opened it even though it had been sent in care of him. Chance was touchy about her. Sight unseen, he delivered Chance's invitation to the Charity Ball.

Chance had noticed Greg's silent interest but intentionally dismissed it. He didn't want to talk about it. They both recognized the girl's art. It had been going on twelve years, at least. If anyone knows what this girl is about, it would have to be Greg. Chance missed those late night bull sessions. And all Greg knew was that Chance wasn't talking much these days.

So many things that can't be said . . . and so little time to not say them.

Then, as he thought about the girl, he tried to remember why he didn't want to see her. Something way back then had stopped him . . . but what? He remembered how it felt to be the center of attention, how the fans seemed to affect his impression of them, and what he became. Everyone catered to his needs and it had twisted his perspective of SELF but that didn't explain his perception of that girl. Why did she make him hate her? What had she said that scared him? Why was she so persistent?

What's in this damn envelope?!

He ripped open the seal, and out tumbled a piece of puzzle. Her eyes . . .

April had chosen his piece finally, carefully, the choice, once made, seemed obvious. What else could she send? She figured that's how they met, that first sight. "Their eyes met from across the room . . ."

Chance flipped the puzzle piece over. On its other side, part of the chart. He went to retrieve the journal from the box. Dragging it out of the corner of the closet where he had buried it last time he looked in it, the super star of April's dreams revealed The Box. To look at its cardboard veneer, one would might have overlooked its secrets hidden within.

Cloaked in this carton, Chance kept her mysteries nearby. No longer was this matter approachable. Even if he had ever wanted to really meet the girl, all this made it unlikely. What she wrote wasn't normal. If April was Pandora, this was most certainly her box. He recalled each time they had met, and how he had pretended to be nonchalant. Completely aware of her presence, he tried to shield himself from her psychic attack.

Ignore it, and it'll go away . . .

But she hadn't and here was the proof.

The journal was the newest entry in her file, which gave him more insight into her THING, whatever that was. As far as he could tell, she had included a code which allowed him to decipher letters that were ten years old for the first time. Through the night, he retraced the journey. Now things seemed to clarify, but just as quickly as the realizations flashed, they faded. Now all that remained was the memory, unconsciously etched onto his soul, for as he tried to recapture the occult statutes, he found them lost.

On the pages before him, the symbols opened like windows, exposing their cabalistic truth before blinking back to nothing. He couldn't ever quite remember what he was supposed to remember. Something about this whole episode felt wrong. It wasn't supposed to feel right. The truth had nothing to do with how either Chance or April felt. This had little to do with them anyway.

They were just a couple of pawns, too.

Alone, each in their private world, for one moment, they both looked into the eyes in a picture of the other and thought . . .

What the Hell am I doing?!



XIII - Death

"Now seems like too much love is never enough.

You better seek one another road 'cause this one has ended abrupt.

Say 'hello' to Heaven . . ."

Temple of the Dog

Say Hello to Heaven

July 16th:

For once, it seemed as if they had traded places. April basked in the warmth of public awareness, while Chance sat more alone than ever. Only three months until the last date, he sat one night in the Netherlands, smoking his pipe in room 101 of the Kurhaus hotel, Den Hague. It was one of his favorite places even if the Dutch audience was smaller than he liked. The show earlier that evening had been good enough, but the magic wasn't there any more and he knew it.

He became comfortable with the idea of early retirement, even though the prospect unnerved him. Maybe he'd ask Tara to marry him and they could start a family. High on the hash, he decided to call LA, but she didn't answer the phone. He hung up, disappointed.

The girls in the lobby might have been a suitable distraction for his solitude but remembering the night of the rose, no groupie had ever not been judged by the standard that moment. Compared to that feeling, no one had ever satisfied his need to be wanted, to be adored, worshiped like the crowd had made him feel back then. The look of love in a young girl's eye had made him feel special, vulnerable. So perfect had those fleeting moments been, he couldn't jeopardize ruining it. That was his main reason that he was paralyzed to her numerous advances. She had to remain a perfect stranger. His fantasy of her must not be tainted.

And besides that, she's kind of weird . . .

He still hadn't RSVP'd, nor did he have any plans on doing so. By this point, the Party was everywhere he looked. It felt like a trap. He knew that she wanted him there, but who else did she 'want' there. He wanted to know if he was just one of a thousand people that she had a THING for or was he the 'special guest.' The invitation, tucked into the pocket of his suitcase, seemed starkly simple for what he was sure had to have been 'special' for the girl.

Maybe not though.

At that moment, he decided to investigate it further. But how? How could he research the project without raising suspicions? He'd have to get a private investigator in the States. But who? He couldn't ask Greg, or Tara. He jotted ideas into the tattered notebook.

Guest list, I'll need that first. I could just call the people I know on it and they can tell me what they know about her. I'll play it off as just another potential guest, and if she's got a history with them, then that's it. I'll know!

"If she does, then I'm not going to go!"

Chance let that decision become the parameter, the guide by which he would make his final decision. He realized that he'd have to act quickly, even though the concert was not until March. The fact that he was requested to make his appearance before the Queen, as the character of the March Hare, correlated with the date of the event. But maybe, everyone invited felt seduced the same way. Maybe she stalked them all.

If she does, then she's got too much free time on her hands. Wouldn't that be funny, though?

He could picture the revelation:

(during an interview at the Mad Hatter Tea Party)

Q: What made you agree to attend this particular event?

A: Well, the girl asked me to come after singling me out of a thousand guests, and by years of persistent groveling, she finally convinced ME to pay heed to her pleas.

I guess you are surprised to find out that I am the one she did this all for. I am the ONE she chose.

Q: What do you mean? She does this all the time! Hey, Bob, come here. Tell him! How long has she been sending you crap? I've been getting stuff for eighteen years, newcomer.

He wanted to feel special, but in all the articles he read, not once did she mention him. However, she never discussed anyone. The whole event was supposed to be a big surprise, but in reality, April wouldn't know who showed until the day of the Tea Party. She let the PR people of the guests publicize celebrity attendance, if they so chose. No one was allowed to mention which part they would portray from Alice in Wonderland or Through the Looking Glass.

The 'special guest' had to remain a surprise.

In her mind, she knew she would be surprised, too.

One way or the other.

April fought off discouraging thoughts, especially since she hadn't heard back from Chance. Ever . . . Now she became embarrassed by her obsession once again. The media was ignorant to the truth of the matter. Now, was she becoming tempted to reveal a little of her secret thing to them just so one of them would track the guy down and ask him, What the fuck?

Luckily, she maintained her composure through each interview, fighting hard to keep silent. And she never let them ask certain questions. She wore the illusion of mystery, with answers disguised within answers that she knew if they really looked, they would see the big picture. To the uninitiated, she was vague. To her, the answers were her little private jokes. Each one screamed the truth, yet no one even realized.

May would see it! She was there!!

But where was she now?

May wasn't well these days. She had fallen into the bottomless pit of addiction and hadn't hit bottom yet. In February, her path crossed Jesse James, dredging up those painful memories of betrayal.

How could they do that to me? My own sister!

She didn't call home because she had nothing to say to any of them. How could Mom not understand how upset she was? Or April for that matter? Jesse James, she could understand. But April?

He hadn't been the first one either!

Marsha, Marsha, Marsha . . . she heard Jan's voice.

April had taken them both!

First Chance, now Jesse, too.

May didn't want to feel this way about the people she loved, but the drugs she turned to for comfort only magnified the conflict within her. The higher she flew, the farther she fell. She had known that Tara was trying to ditch her on Sunset that night with Jesse.

How stupid does she think I am?

Tara and Star had been on the way to meet Ghost, so why did Tara really think that she would believe that he would be at the Rainbow?

Sure, she was interested in Ghost, but he wasn't really her type.

Jesse was more my type. April's, too, I guess.

Homeless and wandering through her drug haze, she hadn't heard the news. Her junkie friends weren't up on current affairs either. The squats she frequented had no electricity, any TVs had long been pawned. It was easy to lose oneself here. Time had no relevance, no future, therefore - no past.

What day is it? replaced, "what time is it?"

Not that she really cared. She drifted through the never ending scene change, the roller coaster film projected across the screen of her life. Angels and demons mingled with the user's reality until paranoid fantasies played themselves out. One wasted guy stared out the window while another locked himself in the bathroom for the day. While some would watch them, others never even noticed. Each person was on their own trip, and May traveled the wrong way down that dead end road.

Who the hell is Tara, anyway?

May knew nothing about her at the time, but when she ran into Tara once just now, again the pain surfaced. Seeing her face triggered the latent hostility. She spoke first.

"Hey, girl, I remember you!"

Tara smiled politely, "I'm sorry. Do I know you?"

May could read her face, which seemed sincere, but you never know. She chose not to remind her. Instead, she said casually,

"Yeah, we've met before. You're Tara, right?"

"And you are?"

"I'm May."

Judging from the tracks on the girl's arm, Tara judged correctly the state of this one's addiction.

Clean her up a little, some new clothes . . . Where have I seen her before? She couldn't quite place her, but she seemed so familiar. Tara met a lot of people though, so when she couldn't place the face, she gave up trying quickly. Then she remembered Sunset Boulevard. Jesse James . . . and that girl Star. I wonder what ever became of that one.

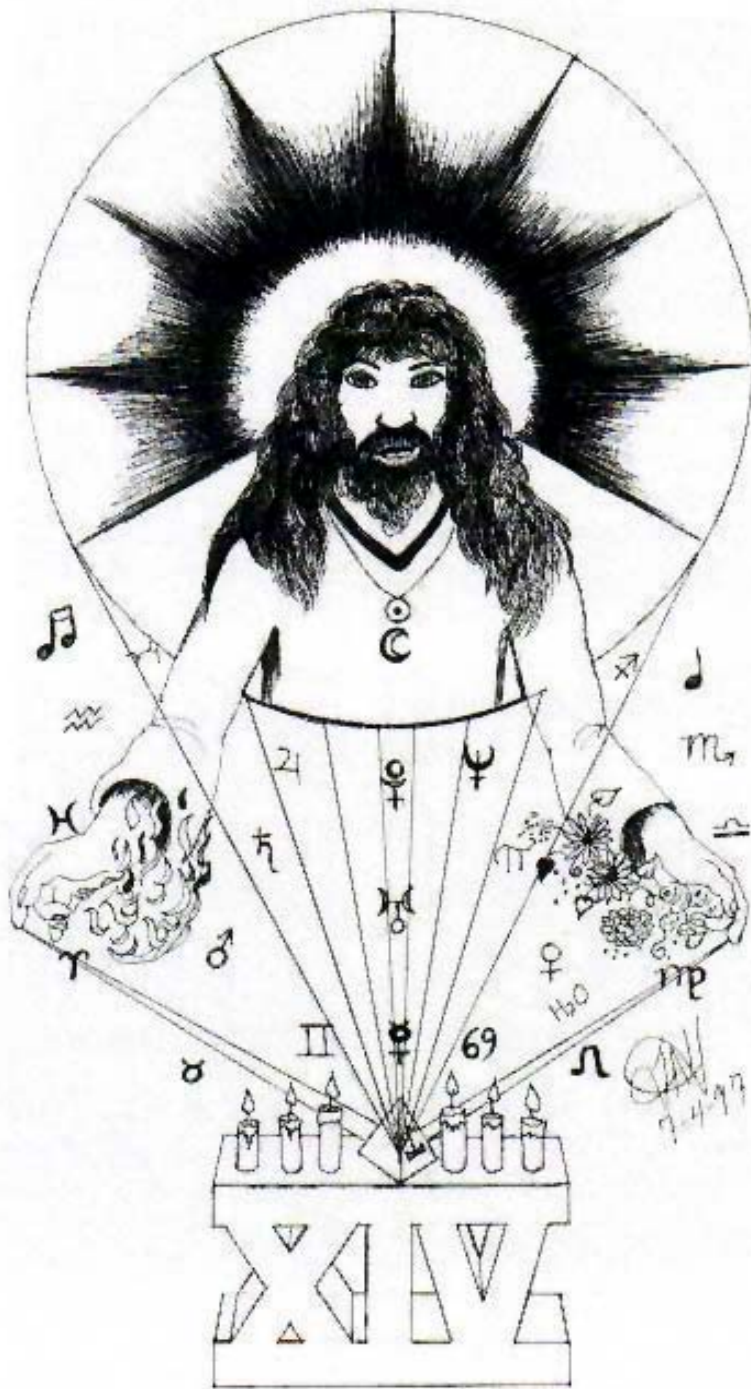
Now that she remembered, she said nothing to reveal this. She could use it later if necessary. She'd have to ask him about this May chick, but then again, Jesse had said he didn't know her. Jesse was lying, wasn't he? I wonder why.

Tara wondered what she could get for this girl. She took the first step.

"So, I'm starving . . . Let's go get something to eat, my treat!"

May hadn't eaten in a couple of days, and with no money, had no plans to do so anytime soon, therefore when the 'free lunch' was offered, she jumped at the opportunity. Tara knew she would. They were all the same.

Not much was said during the meal, each lost in their own thoughts, intermittently smiling, but awkwardly silent. Neither recalled the first time their paths had crossed. And for May, it was a good thing they didn't.



XIV - Temperance/Art

"Every person, all the events of your life, are there because you have drawn them there. What you choose to do with them is up to you."

Richard Bach

Illusions

Messiah's Handbook #14

August 17th:

The balance of power shifted, until one day, April was on top and Chance was on the bottom. He wanted to be out of the limelight, and for the first time in a long time, she radiated. The Texas heat wasn't so bad this year. There was too much to do to complain about the weather. Her birthday was coming soon, but no matter how old she was getting, nothing could mar her mood. Today she felt good.

Life is getting better and better and better . . .

Film crews arrived that morning to cover the making of the Mad Hatter Tea Party & Charity Ball. April performed brilliantly, due in part to the adrenaline, combined with years of performances on the stage.

All kinds of stages . . .

College paid off again. For the first time, she actually used the stuff that they crammed in her head. It felt great, . . . even better than sex. Almost . . .

She counted on her fingers, seven months until . . . The last time she had a countdown, it ended with BABY. Now almost two, Natasha grew everyday, discovering her world. In a way, the Party was April's baby. Her creation, nurtured, now had a life of its own. On the other hand . . . She had more time to worry about it beforehand, but once the Party was over, it was over. Natasha was just getting started.

The fact that we can contemplate the Spirit means that the Spirit exists . . . at least in our minds.

"Where did that come from?" a reporter asked April at lunch, referring to the quote on a painting that she titled: THINK.

It was the head of a man, eyes closed with the top of his head hinged open so that all the thoughts of Man poured forth. No need for words to comprehend the significance of the world around him.

"It has a subtitle: I think I am, therefore I said I was. It's a much catchier name, but I don't create art for its commercial value."

The reporter didn't find the humor, so she stopped talking and waited for his next question. He noticed the diploma from the university. Uh oh, here goes with the quiz.

"So what did you study in school? Let me guess . . . art."

"Quarters and the occult."

"What?"

"I studied broadcasting some, science, readin', writin', 'rithmetic. I was supposed to anyway. College was the best six years of my life."

"So, you weren't a very good student?"

"Maybe not but I sat near some!"

April watched him squirm uncomfortably, almost ending the interview at that moment. He wasn't having fun and was becoming a real buzzkill. But then she remember how it might look on film, so she tried to soften the mood.

"Okay, I'll stop being funny or I'll start being funny. . . whatever you want."

He leaned back in his chair, "So, when do you announce the participants?"

"Announce? Who said I was going to announce anyone beforehand?"

"Don't you think it would help ticket sales to advertise who'll be performing."

She heard this question before so she reiterated, "That's the surprise of the whole event. Surprise! What I mean, it's more important to talk about the money were raising, than about who will be there. Right?"

"I don't believe that your motives are strictly philanthropic."

"What do you mean?"

"What is you real reason for doing all this?"

Uh, oh . . . this interview is over!

"Well, if you think that I am doing this for some personal gain, I would have to agree with you. Every act we accomplish in our lives has a subjective quality to it. Whether we admit to the selfishness of it or not, or we even recognize our true motives, doesn't matter in long run because they become merely a means to an end. And in the end, if we help some people by having a little party, then I'm sure they won't care why I decided to do it. . . . what was the question?"

He didn't like her answer. After he took the cameraman out, she relaxed. I hope he isn't . . . Surely he doesn't suspect . . . He couldn't . .

Two months before the end of the road show, the crew seemed to be planning their futures, while Chance just sat and nodded as he listened. No one asked him what his plans were, which was okay since he wouldn't have had an answer anyway. Now that they made it to London, he spent most of his free time wandering the twisted streets that snaked through town. He watched children as they played in the grounds of his old school, trying to remember some of the past.

The only memory that came to mind was the day that the world found out who his father was. People crowded him, determined to get a piece of the action. Questions were fired at him by ugly, hungry faces. Unfamiliar strangers called him by name wherever he went. School mates threatened him, always cornered and confused. Sneering older kids spit at him and called him the devil.

"Your mama is a . . . whore!!"

"Bet she did it missionary style!"

"You're going to Hell!"

Turning on his heel, he left the scene of the crime. Seeing the boys in the play yard still gave him chills.

Sure kids are mean . . .but what about . . .

The church hadn't responded well either. Some of the grown-ups had made it clear that they weren't welcome any longer. He and mama didn't go much after that. Religion didn't do much for him once the scandal broke. His faith went on the back burner. He found refuge in rock and roll.

By the eighties, Chance had formed his first band. The five piece group practiced 'religiously,' so they claimed. He accepted their jokes. They were mostly in good taste if that was possible. They even kicked around names like The Alter Boys, and State of the Church. He couldn't agree with that. He tried out a name on them.

"How about Chance Lee, the one man band . . . you're all fired!"

"You can't fire the unemployed! Besides, I thought the word was excommunicate. Call up your dad, we'll ask him," they had said back then.

Now he laughed to himself, "It's fired!"

His new band were professional musicians, not grade school friends. After the first album, it was clear that they had to go their separate ways. The tour of the States had overwhelmed the boys. Only the strong survived.

"And here I am London!"

The crowd thundered, making him feel welcome. No stranger in his homeland anymore. This was the final leg of the Psychic Checkmate tour, which he saved for the end. He wanted to finish where he started, the United Kingdom. In a way, he tried resolve past issues, but became a bit smug when his old buddies turned up backstage. Some of them hadn't been very nice, and it felt great hearing them kiss his ass.

And boy, they can kiss my ass, too!

He was ready to retire!

Tara was back in Malibu, at home, when she started thinking about Chance. The years that they had been together, she hadn't really appreciated him like she should. It was impossible. Two different kinds of people, she figured. But their backgrounds had been similar. She, the daughter of the couple that produced and starred in the number one prime time comedy series, and he, the son of the Pope. Both knew what it was like to be thrust in the spotlight, much too young, for reasons not of their own making. In a way, they were two of a kind.

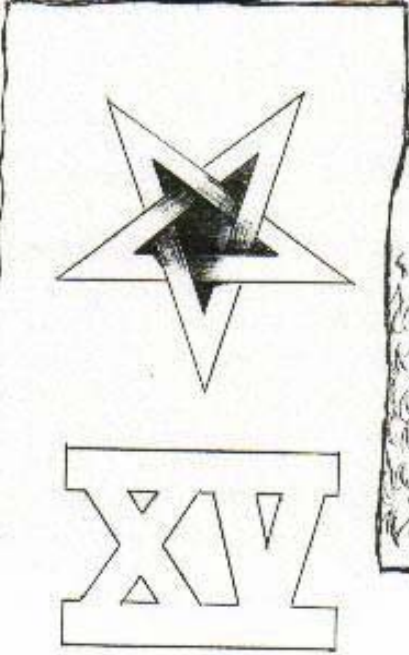
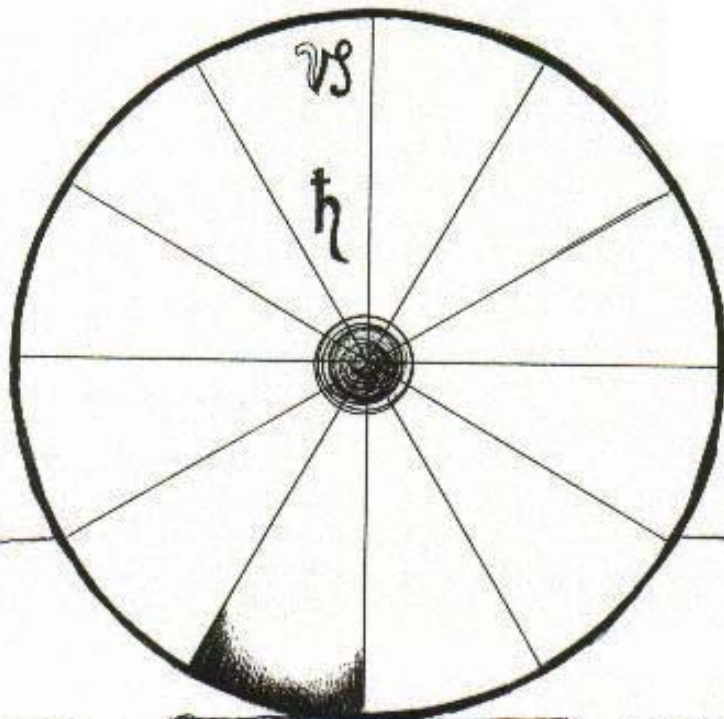
She wasn't ready to quit running the streets and she wasn't sure how Chance would feel if she did. As a result she never talked about 'the future' with him. Neither did he.

Why is that?

Now that the thought crossed her mind, she began to wonder.

What would it be like to be with him?

As the day progressed, that nagging question didn't subside. Tara could feel her anger rise.



SPH 9297

XV - The Devil

"Alright now!

Won't you Listen?

When I first met you . . . didn't realize, I can't forget you or your surprise.

You introduced me to my mind and left me wanting

you and your kind.

Oh, yeah! I love you."

Black Sabbath

Sweet Leaf

September 18th:

The Deceiver stirred. A pair of stygian orbs appeared through the haze, which crept silently along the floor of hell.

No rest for the wicked.

Its scales clicked against each other as it moved, pacing the chamber listening for the word. Subtle, almost inaudible murmurs came from the east.

The time is nigh . . .

Or . . .

"His Highness is nighness," April mused.

Night came early on days like this one. Storms brewed, threatening millions around the world, and the people held their breath, waiting for the end of nature's fury. Some thrive during a tempest, facing the storm head on; others hide.

While winds tore, untold numbers of rain-drenched lives apart. The relentless attack of raging weather devastated the cities but believers survived with their Faith intact. But there were scores of others who had long been lost to the World. The imaginary lines grew wider every age until no harmony is heard, only the single voice.

Mi . . . mi, mi, mi . . . Me . . .

"This is your voice, the one that speaks through you . . . to you," she tried to tell Tara. May knew what April had taught her about the secret side of life. It had been a while even if she hadn't been extremely high at that moment. She found herself hanging with Tara more and more these days, which was odd since Tara didn't do drugs, but constantly had them nearby. She didn't know why, but since the supply never ran short, there was no reason to go elsewhere. For the first time, May had become the teacher. Tara listened intently as the words poured out of May with grace and influence. For once she felt as if her views were being valued, appreciated. She shared with Tara the cryptic knowledge.

Tara heard a voice. She heard it for so long that she assumed it was her own thoughts. She never even realized that it was a man's

voice in her head. Even when, in her mind, she debated with herself, it didn't seem strange that any opposing argument was posed by a distinctly female voice. This was, perhaps, because over the years, this voice spoke less often. That was until she thought of marriage, and then about Chance.

The machine cranked slowly into gear, but her biological clock became a ticking time bomb tucked neatly in one dark recess of her mind. And the voice spewed its poisonous rage into the echo of her head.

Shut the fuck up, you stupid little bitch. I didn't want a sermon, I wanted to know if I could get pregnant. After what my . . . that . . . that stupid motherfucker did . . . that stupid dead motherfucker did . . . What does it say about that, huh? What card tells you that I'm about to smash your non-shutting-up motherfucking mouth? If I wanted to talk about God, I wouldn't taken out the restraining order against the Witnesses. I'm going to beat your ass with the Bible belt if you don't shut the fuck up!!

All Tara said was, "Does it say anything about a baby?"

"Would you like it to say something about a baby?"

She smiled sweetly, "Maybe."

"Well, let me see . . ."

She wandered through her playing cards when the message went beyond the pale. Tara watched the color drain from May's face. Tara liked to see that look normally but under the circumstances, it didn't seem like such a good time. May stared into the deck's wisdom, said nothing to break the spell. Tara's mind screamed.

April felt the chill drift past her, not from within but like a cold pocket of air with traveling plans. She recognized it immediately.

Oh, boy, they are back, and now what do I do?

Squinting, she tried to discern what she knew to be present. It was very faint and after a while she gave up trying to see her visitor. She prayed for spiritual, and physical, protection just the same.

Now that the Party is alive and well, I can go back to my daydreams.

The first thing she unearthed was the journal. Immediately, she turned to the chart, automatically without having to look, because just as she opened it, something flew out, right past her left ear.

What the hell was that?

She didn't find any bugs in the room, so she went back to her task. Since the storms, she hadn't been able to go to work. Big T's was closed for the duration. Working a little on her comedy jokes, she wondered if for employment, she could start her own 976 number.

It could be an occult line, THE PSYCHIC SEX LINE . . . you call me and I tell you what you are wearing. Besides, if your psychic friends were that good, they'd call you.

Then she kicked around the idea,

I could be a surreal estate agent . . . for the afterlife . . . for people who have bought the farm?

She could hear distant groans of forgotten hecklers for that one. She scratched it out. Then another came to mind.

A guy called me up and asked me what I was wearing, and I lied to him and made something up, because I didn't want him to see me naked.

"Maybe, I shouldn't use this one anymore, now that I'm back in Texas," she considered.

A guy came to my door the other day and said, "Hello, mam, I'm Jehovah's Witness."

And I said, "Really? What's he up for?"

(Bill Hicks: If you don't like what I say, then forgive me!)

That's when April realized that maybe she could a stand-up set at the Party. Her face flushed at the thought.

I could, couldn't I?

Me . . . mi . . . mi, mi, my, my . . .

"Oh my . . ."

Tara left the wasted girl with plenty of incentive to stay put, as she decided to act upon a directive from the twisted portion of her logic. Not a mile up the road from the hotel by the water, she drove past her estate, and directly to his.

I bet he's got another girlfriend . . .

At least for her sake of mind, she figured that she should check out the possibilities. After all, he had given her a key. It wasn't like she was breaking in or anything. He was in Europe, told her to keep an eye on the place. Obviously, he had nothing to hide!

Right . . . nothing to hide.

Letting herself in, she cleared the security system with her code, and took a diet soda from the fridge. As she wandered aimlessly from room to room, she mulled over the photos, the awards, the platinum/gold records on his walls. Family photos did little to warm her heart, until she saw Chance's baby picture. She remembered why she came.

Starting in the first room to the right of the entrance, she ran her hand over the wall as she went counterclockwise through the interior from floor to ceiling. In her pursuit, she searched through each drawer, into every crevice, and left no stone unturned. She paused at the chessboard, remembering how much he liked to play, but she hadn't the patience to learn the game, or so she said.

I hate to lose . . . it's a stupid game anyway.

Her eyes noticed the painting, the man behind the chessboard sat waiting for the game to begin. His top hat was the only thing that showed, and his eyes. In his eyes were all the mysterious etchings that April could muster the night she painted it. A mushroom cloud formed behind, and had Tara been familiar with Alice . . ., she would have been able to understand the caterpillar with the bong. She just wrinkled her nose at the oddity of it.

Tara knew art, and this wasn't it. She tried to locate the painter's signature on it, but it was missing.

I wouldn't claim it either . . .

What she didn't understand that April's signature was all over it. If she had just listened to his music, she would have seen it then. But try as she might, she found nothing to suspect. Not even one phone number in his Rolodex that wasn't backed up with a professional contact in detail. Each card listed only people that she recognized. That was how she over looked it.

May sat alone, partying again, but with a sense of trouble now. That card reading wasn't Tara's, it was May's. She couldn't speak at all for the shock and horror. It wasn't very pleasant. Gave her nightmares for weeks afterward.

She never spoke of what she saw.

Tara went meticulously through each room being careful not to noticeably disturb any of his belongings. She wasn't really prepared to go through his attic, or the stuff sealed in storage. Bad times in the attic . . .

In his bedroom, she went to the bed where they made love, picking up his pillow. She recognized his scent. Silk sheets beckoned and she couldn't resist climbing in. With one hand, she unbuttoned her blouse. The other went south. In the mirror over head, she watched her nipples grow erect as her violet lingerie camisole fell open. Soon she removed her panties. She managed to open her eyes in time to see herself climax.

Love enveloped her for a few brief moments as she lay their day dreaming about Chance. Soon he would be back for good. She wanted him all to herself, and from the looks of it, that fantasy would become real soon. The tour was almost over.

Seek, and ye shall find . . .

She tried to ignore the impulse, but she forced herself to get up. She straightened the bed and went to his closet to wear one of his shirts, which read Undefeated across it. In the corner of the closet was a stack of blankets with a painting leaning against it. Tara almost didn't see what was there.

Tara had given up on her mission when she heard the directive even louder. Something was under the blankets. It seemed to move as if to catch her attention, or maybe it was the light playing tricks on her eyes. But she found what she was looking for.

She pulled the container from its hiding place, dragging it to the center of the room. Standing up straight, she hesitated opening it. After rummaging through countless drawers, she had located keys to locked trunks that she thought sure would hold some little secret possession, which would betray his innocence but for the last two hours, nothing had emerged. This was different.

I know I shouldn't be doing this, but . . .

She couldn't resist! Moments later, she sat cross legged on the rug, sifting through the contents. At first, she removed one letter and read it, careful to replace it exactly. By the third letter, her anger overwhelmed her.

Tara picked up the box, and took it outside. On the well manicured lawn, she set it down and stepped back. By the light of the full moon, Tara's eyes flashed wildly, insane with jealousy. Out came her lighter. With a fatal blow for justice, she set one corner of the box aflame.

April walked into her living room, having put the baby down for bed. Once there, she finished putting up the baby's toys spread on the floor. When she turned out the overhead light, there danced a single flame on the shelf next to his picture. Cold chills encompassed her, making the hair on her arms tingle.

I didn't light that!

She was glad that she had noticed it, as it might have burned down the trailer. It wasn't normal for her to burn that candle without purpose, but maybe she had. If she hadn't been exhausted, she might have let it burn. With a quick prayer, perhaps a little more inspired than usual, she licked her fingers and snuffed out the candle.

The moon hung low, full and stark, on the Malibu hills. Silent except for the low rumble of waves crashing below, Chance's estate stood witness to the events. Tara laughed maniacally, as the tiny spark grew to consume one flap. Just as it hit the main portion of the box, she heard the voice.

Stop!!

Without a second thought, she jumped on the box, failing to slap out the growing embers. She eyed the garden hose, picked it up, then changed her mind. The only thing she could do in that case was strip off her shirt and smother it. Burning herself a little, she was more relieved that she hadn't waited a moment too late to change heart.

But why? It's not like I can put it back in his closet. Oh, shit . . . look at his shirt!!

She laughed hysterically as she viewed the damage. The box hadn't caught fire enough to burn the belongings she was happy to see. But now it presented a dilemma.

What do I do with the stuff.

Only one option, she realized that she would have to take it with her.

Take it home . . .

She stuffed the tattered rag into the container. That was when she noticed that she stood naked. Face turned upward to the full moon, she smiled and closed her eyes, bathing herself in its light. Stretching her body, Tara almost danced in her movement. Then as if she heard a noise, she stopped and listened.

I better get the fuck outta Dodge!

Dressing quickly, she straightened up the bed perfectly, went to the closet, re-folded the blankets, and got dressed quickly. Outside, she shoved the evidence into the trunk. She went back into the house to reset the alarm when she remembered something. Back up the stairs, she went into the closet and removed the empty clothes hanger.

I wonder who is at the security company tonight. I bet I can get this little excursion erased. Let's see . . . what dope do I have on me?

Back in the car, she found what she might need. The first stop was to Chance's home defense provider where she found an old friend, Lou Cifre, wanna-be Private Eye. After her second cup of his coffee, she posed the first of her two propositions.

He gladly removed the incriminating record, which he explained would remain in central processing but would be erased from the daily accounts, therefore Chance would be unable to obtain them through his bills or through the general information call upon his return.

Tara had never been there . . .

Her second request intrigued him considerably. She knew Lou would do anything required to 'get the job done.' It was nothing to him. He had no ethics and little morals, so all she had to do to guarantee complete loyalty was pay more than anyone else offered him, and send Ghost to deliver the first cash payment.

"I'm going to go home tonight and think about how to approach this situation I've come upon, and will let you know soon exactly what this assignment will entail. You just realize that you will be paid generously for your discretion. You have nothing illegal to worry about to accomplish this mission, but if you ever mention this or any other meeting we have, I will personally kill you."

"Oh, hell, Tara! You know me!"

"I know, that's why I came to you . . . first!"

"Who else could do it for you better than me?"

"I know! That's why I'm here."

For the first time in a long time, she felt cheerful. For some unknown reason, he made her feel welcome, comfortable and as a result, the endless profanity in her mind subsided. She stayed for the next few hours, surprised when she forgot all about the box, which only came to mind when Lou brought it up.

"So, what did you steal?"

"What? Uh . . ."

"What did you steal from Chance's house?"

"Oh nothing . . . I just . . . uh . . . Why would you ask me such a question?"

"Because you stole something," he laughed.

It was evident to him, for two reasons. This job taught him the business of theft. That and his past. He only believed in two reasons that anyone would erase security entrance into a residence. One was infidelity. Taking something strange home and trying to cover one's tracks wasn't likely since Tara had a bad-ass house nearby. The more likely, however, was theft. He'd seen it all before, though, so unless she 'shared,' he might conjure a half a dozen other reasons.

Little did he realize at the time, he was right on both accounts

At midnight, she left. The moon was completely eclipsed at this point, which she failed to notice. She was too intent on getting to her house. Her drive home gave her time to stew, anger brimming to the surface, and attempts to relax and calm down failed. Deep sighs did nothing. Closing her eyes at the red lights in a momentary meditation didn't either.

Maybe some music . . .

She reached blindly into the glove compartment for a tape, and putting it into the machine as she made the left, she heard the end of Chance's song Momentary Magic. At first she pushed the eject button, and removed the offending music. Then she said to her faraway lover, So, Chance, what do you have to say for yourself?

The music faded from the first track and the second song faded in slowly, chimes and cymbals, or signs and symbols as April wrote in her journal. She had sent it to him in Chicago. When the second album had those words in its lyrics, April nearly fainted.

But Tara listened to the first album, unaware of that reference as of yet. Tonight she would see more than that.

I'm definitely onto something here! Her!

April went to bed that night oblivious to the danger the brewed in the west, unaware, too, of the eclipse, which shone silhouetted in the sky over her house. Storms were churning in the netherworld, but no clouds formed in the sky until Tara opened the carton inside her house.

After lifting the three remaining flaps, she paused, gazing into IT.

I'm not going to like this!

She fixed herself a cup of tea, and put on Chance's second release. This one was called After the Magic . . . , which she tried to figure out.

After the magic, what?

"Exactly!" was his only answer to that question he ever gave.

She thought of her own ending. After the Magic is Gone! In a way, it was. This album only went gold, compared to the platinum for the previous work. Maybe it had only been momentary magic, huh, Chance?

She had laughed inside with that unspoken bit of truth. The critics had been harsh.

But to April, it spoke for itself. She knew that it wasn't fair to judge it so, since it was a quickly released follow up to the first. The way she explained it was that a first album is the body of work that the artist has created over the course of his/her lifetime, all the best stuff. The second album then is either work that didn't make it on the first or it has been produced between the two releases. Ironically, April was listening to it when at the same time, Tara pressed the button to play After the Magic . . .

Tara, ready for what she knew she must do, pulled the box to the overstuffed black leather couch. It was sure to be a long night ahead. Next to Chance's collection was an empty trunk. She flipped through the envelopes, looking for the cancellation which would reveal date and place of origin. Into the new vessel she placed the finished letters in order with which the postmarks were filed.

Chance must have been pretty attentive to this. On her stereo, she listened intently to the words. What exactly had he meant by the lyrics? She assumed that it was her that some referred to, but what if they weren't?

By the end of the first page, she knew.

After the Magic . . .

Trk. 1: Put the Game Away

(3:24) written by Chance Lee,

I watch you slowly take away the dream I've never known,

Far beyond your rules, I live one of my own.

I can never be with you, my path another way,

but if I ever hold you near, please put the game away.

I don't need the fantasy, don't twist my twisted life,

Although I need a lover, I cannot have a wife.

Don't ask why I'm not around, or not to go away,

I'll remember what you said, but I'm not going to play.

When the song had come out so many years earlier, Tara had taken this song personally. It made her think twice before 'playing any games.' She had wanted to ask him about it but she never talked to him about his music. He had said that was one of her better qualities. Besides, inevitably every interview would contain the 'what does it all mean' angle. She didn't talk shop, secretly assuming all his answers as they related to her. For the first time, she wondered about this theory.

Tara thought of the chessboard. The Picture!!

"So, Chance, who is it? The big picture is getting smaller all the time, isn't it? What else have you got to say, huh, Rockboy? Mr. Superstar?"

The next song played on:

If I went down your dusty road and found that you weren't home,

Where would I go from there? Where else could I roam?

So if I choose to stay away, and leave you all alone,

It is because my love for you must remain unknown.

In my mind's eye I see you perfectly,

I can't believe that I believe,

that you believe it's me.

Synchronicity, we'll see . . .

So, don't look at me so carefully,

don't say too much too soon,

Go outside and just look up,

The Sun's eclipsed the moon.

On that note she went outside through the back door, and just as she suspected. Eclipse!! Just as I figured! Tara had a knack for such mystical encounters. She conjured up all kinds of crossroads in the universe. This one made her relax. The rest of the letters were easier to read after that.

April's night was far from peaceful. Visions flickered through her dreams, contorting her body as their images recorded themselves upon her memory records. The dragon was coming . . . your Highness . . . no wait, not you!

With the creature came the knowledge. We are coming from the East . . . Prepare ye the Way of the Lord . . . the beast, from the east .

"I'm coming for you!"

April sat upright, jolted awake by the voice of the revelation.

Christ, the anti-Christ is coming!

"March, in like a lion, out like a lamb. In like the Lamb, out like the Lion."

Oh, man, I can't believe that I am thinking like this. What if they both come as the same person? There, I wrote it down, but that doesn't mean I believe it necessarily . . . East, man, I have to remember what the dream just told me. Where's my pen?

Greenwich Mean time is east, isn't it? Right where Chance was born . . . She tried to stop herself from going down that dark road, but she had it right there on the paper before her. Two charts side by side caught her attention.

Chance in an Aries, so there's the sun. Now, I read somewhere that the rising sign was what a person was in the last lifetime. Oh my God, he was a Pisces!

"This is the dawning of the age of Aquarius . . . age of Aquarius . . ."

She studied the charts, and more became clear. If I turn it this way, and look at the connections. I can't believe that it's all here. My rising sign is Sagittarius, which is ruled by Jupiter, Jove, . . . Jehovah . . . Jah.

"Father, Son and Holy Spirit . . . the alpha and the omega . . . as it was in the beginning, is Now, and ever shall be. World without end, amen, ah men!

Was it Voltaire that said, "It is no more surprising to be born twice than it is to be born once."

"God is dead - Neitze

Neitze is dead - God"

This is what she wrote:

The apple (computer), which caused Adam (atom) to split from the garden, rots - nearing the eve (Eve) of destruction. The sun (Son) touched the world (whirled) a little more (moor) each day, due to a whole (hole) bevy of problems.

In 1948 (1984), the reformation of the Nation of Israel began the clock, the countdown to extinction. Big Brother predicted in 1984 was prophesied in 1948, oh well, Orwell. Driver's licenses were modified to include, not only a hologram photo but also three other little tools of identification. The magnetic strip seemed simple enough but the barcode, which people had grown accustomed to over

the past two decades, now appeared on the back of the ID cards.

Id . . .

. . . and the number of the Beast shall be . . . no man can trade without the mark . . . the number . . . what number?

Man shall not trade without the number, the number of the beast shall be,

. . . Social Security. You have to have a number to do anything . . .

April wrote it all down as it came to her. She remembered about the chips, the microchips that had been placed in each license, were capable of being picked up by satellite transmission. Triangulated from above, watched from below. Three satellites were already in place. And in France, they kept a computer that had so much memory, it could easily maintain a file on each and every person on Earth. For the record, they called it le Bete' or in English . . . the Beast.

When 1992 saw the creation of the European Common Market, April saw the reformation of the Old Roman Empire. Tick . . . tick . . . tick . . . On one hand, there was Kuwait, the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, or the Garden?

On the other end, Greenwich.

First with the binoculars, then with the telescope, then the microscope, You're going the wrong way . . .

The Defiant Ones - Sidney Portier's character stated, ". . . can't blame them for what they don't know."

But with all the cameras in place, how couldn't they know what they were doing. Humans were creating the Perfect World.

Because the microchips weren't always on the person who it was intended for, Research and Development departments around the country secretly worked on other possibilities. Some of the experimental chips went innocuously into the individual during surgery. These subjects hadn't been told, but were monitored for side effects. Strokes tripled

Children under the legal driving age constituted a problem. The law allowed up to the age of five as a grace period to apply for the SS# card. But in malls all over the country, thousands of children were marked. The signs read,

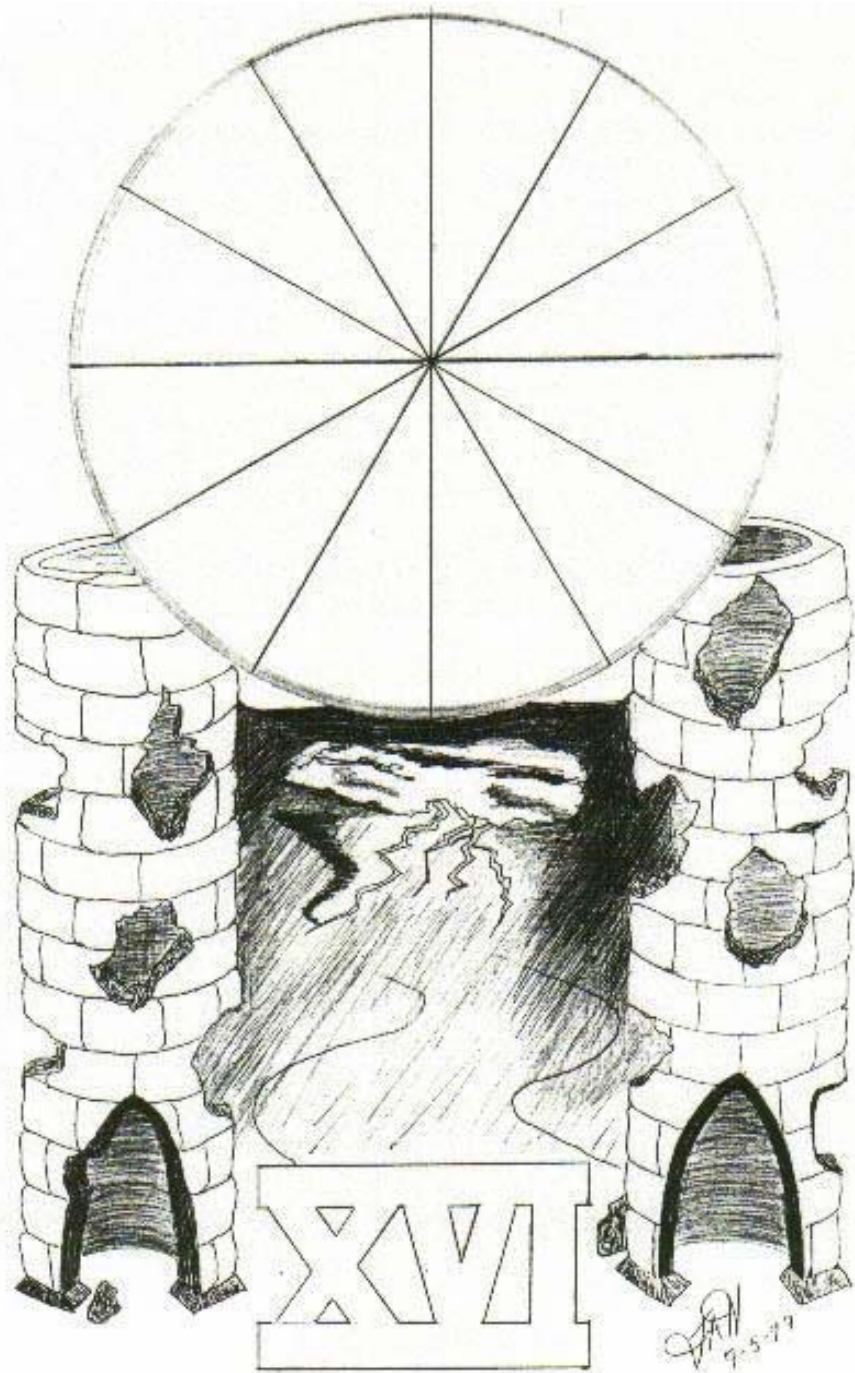
Ear Piercing - free with purchase of earrings.

Just like animals in the wild, their tracking had begun.

Legalize drugs and the gang-bangers have to get jobs. Just say N2O!

Maybe my imagination is a bit over active!

"Maybe it isn't!"



XVI - The Tower

"If I had known it was going to be this small, I'd have said we should all go back to the hotel, put on the CD and get drunk!"

Chance

Tower Theater

October 19th:

Greg's office buzzed with activity, stemming from the wrap-up of the current tour. People milled around, speaking in hushed tones about the impending hiatus. The ninth floor overlooking Beverly Hills reeked of anxiety. Greg himself sat sullen in his office, only donning a smile when he stood at the door where others could see him.

Tara, however, knew when she crossed the threshold of his sanctuary that the smile faded, and the fear returned. On one hand, she felt the apprehension. Everything was changing so quickly, and no one could predict the consequences. Greg knew he would be out of a job soon, or so rumor had it.

On the other hand, Tara has started the rumor. Much to her delight, it had taken on a life of its own. Now looking at him sitting pensively behind his stately desk, she couldn't muster enough sympathy to convince him that things would be okay. So, why try? Besides, it was all she could do to keep from laughing in his face, anyway.

You think just one of them would have figured it out!

Tara walked to the window, surveying the vast land that stretched into the horizon. Once her back was turned to him, she smiled.

I really do like him . . . I do.

She just couldn't explain why she had told those guys in the crew that Chance was going to fire him after the tour ended. Tara didn't really expect them to believe her but as Fate had it, it had been a slow news day backstage and the rumors abounded. By the time the story reached Greg himself, it sounded possible, even probable, especially since each person added to it speculation. There were many factors that could lead to his termination. When put that way, Greg would have fired himself, too. But Chance said nothing to Greg.

As the final weeks arrived, his suspicions grew. Here he was, only moments away from unemployment, and his best friend hadn't said a word about it. He figured that maybe he was getting no notice so he would continue to work hard, giving his all for the final dates, and then when it was over, Chance would pull him aside to break the news to him. That way no one gets hurt, you know. The show must go on.

The relationship grew strained.

Chance picked up the vibes quickly, knowing that something was amiss but he waited to see if Greg would confide in him or not. They were close, real close. His friend knew he was there for him. Doesn't he? After all, Chance often claimed that without Greg, he would have never left his hometown in the first place. It was Greg that discovered him in the first place, musically that is. It was Greg that got him on the charts. But in the end, it was Chance that the public wanted. In the end, it was Chance.

Tara knew this. She sensed that these two were inseparable, and it made her feel left out.

"Well, Tara, I guess this is it! You finally won!" Greg's voice shattered the silence with a Truth so loud that it reverberated throughout her mind, and would many times in the future. For a moment, all walls had been torn down. For the first time, someone had seen through her. All the lies, the deceptions, the bitter motives that ruled her life . . . had he discovered them? Maybe he knew how, secretly, she envied his relationship with Chance. It wasn't based on power, or sex, or even money. It had been based on trust, a sensation that Tara had been stripped of by her family.

How could he know?! Tara's mind raced, but she remained silent, waiting for the Truth to crumble around her. All she could see was the possible future, where all lies and alibis collide like a cross between Judgment Day and the old TV show This is Your Life. Breathless, she anticipated Greg's voice to continue. Hearing nothing, she began to panic. Finally, she felt like the criminal from the Poe story whose own conscience forces him to cry out,

"I DID IT! That's right, it was me!"

But no! Tara was too smooth for that. Adopting her best Scarlet O' Hara manner, she turned to face her accuser with her bright rebuttal,

"Oh, Greg, what ever are you talking about?!"

Without looking up, Greg spoke low, "You won, Tara!"

Hesitating, but unable to resist, she asked the deadly question, "What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

"The bet! You won! You remember the bet we made, don't you?" Greg looked her squarely in the eye, with a glimmer of the sparkle that reminded her of the past when it was a permanent fixture. It was good to see it there, even if it faded as quickly as it appeared.

Then an image floated to the surface. Not quickly, like some memories, but it came back piece by piece until it formed the big picture.

She realized that what Greg was referring to had taken place on the first tour. It was on the bus that they made the wager, but for what? Tara pressed to recall. It wavered on the brink, but she couldn't quite see it yet.

"I owe you a dollar!"

Suddenly, it came back.

Greg and Tara had been drinking together, trying to sort out a dilemma that had arisen. Greg had scheduled Chance to appear on that TV show that he knew would make Chance uncomfortable. It was risky. If Chance discovered it prior to taping, he would never have agreed to it.

Greg knew that and yet, when the opportunity arose, he weighed the consequences carefully and set the date. He could lose his job over it. By the end of the day, if he wasn't careful. But he hadn't.

The event would be the catalyst, marking in history the new phase. The public begged for it, and he delivered it to them. He hoped . . . prayed . . . that Chance would understand. They had discussed it before, but when it came right down to it, could Chance cross the borderline? Oh, he could sing about it or laugh about it, but come face to face with it? Become it?

"Oh, no!!!" he would laugh, waving Greg away. Chance claimed that he would have no part of it, but there had been all those late night conversations when he revealed that . . . maybe . . .

"Why should I?" Chance had asked. "The media already calls me a sell-out. Why should I give into their whims?"

Sure, he came from a famous background, but he could manage to succeed despite that. Just his being born rattled an empire, virtually brought down the house. After all, how should he feel about being the first recognized bastard son of the pope?

". . . or Pop, as I like to call him when we get together," he'd quip, "which isn't very often these days since we've never met."

And, of course, the event made history.

Tara remembered. Greg had gotten drunk and sworn her to secrecy, which seemed reasonable enough since the idea was so fabulous. She volunteered to help. Of course, she wouldn't miss something this priceless. But as they discussed it that day on the bus, Greg worried endlessly about losing his job over it. So much that Tara made him a bet.

Greg took the bet, figuring that if he did lose his job, he'd come out a dollar ahead. And she wagered,

"I bet you take this boy to the top of the fucking industry, you'll be stroking them (your egos, that is), he'll turn to you and say, 'Later, dude!' "

Tara and Greg had laughed at the idea then, and even now, ten years after, they managed to find humor in the apparent irony of it. Chance was on top. Greg was losing his job.

Then, without warning, Tara's stomach knotted as she realized her part in fulfilling the prophesy. Unable to make it to the door, she grabbed the trash can. Lunch came back. Greg recoiled in disgust and laughter. It was truly the funniest thing he had seen all week. He didn't mean to laugh . . .

Tara accepted his apology gracefully, but the remorse which made her ill was gone. She felt vindicated.

Later that day, she would verify the pregnancy, but for now, she only seethed inwardly, smiling outwardly. Her mind voice spewed it barrage of obscenities at Greg, completely forgetting any connection to his soul. Those moments of contact were becoming fewer and fewer between, and they both knew it. Tara was hardening to the point of complete isolation. Soon she would be a hard core sociopath. Greg might have been worried about Chance, as he always was when it came to Tara, but this time was different. He was worried about himself.

As well as he should be! Tara thought. No more would she feel remorse. She heard the laughter before and never again . . . Besides, it was meant to be. Greg said it himself when he brought up that crap!

"So where's my dollar?" She actually heard herself ask.

He gave her one, as if resigning himself to the inevitable. The next day he was gone. Chance was devastated but not surprised. He knew something had been bothering Greg for a while and if he needed some time off to sort it out, then Chance agreed. But it was odd that he didn't say anything to anyone.

"Kind of rude, if you ask me!" Tara would later say.

Funny thing was that she knew she was a bitch, good at it, too. Obviously, her money kept them coming back for more. Or for . . . No one ever said it but she knew. Even Chance once wanted her for her money.

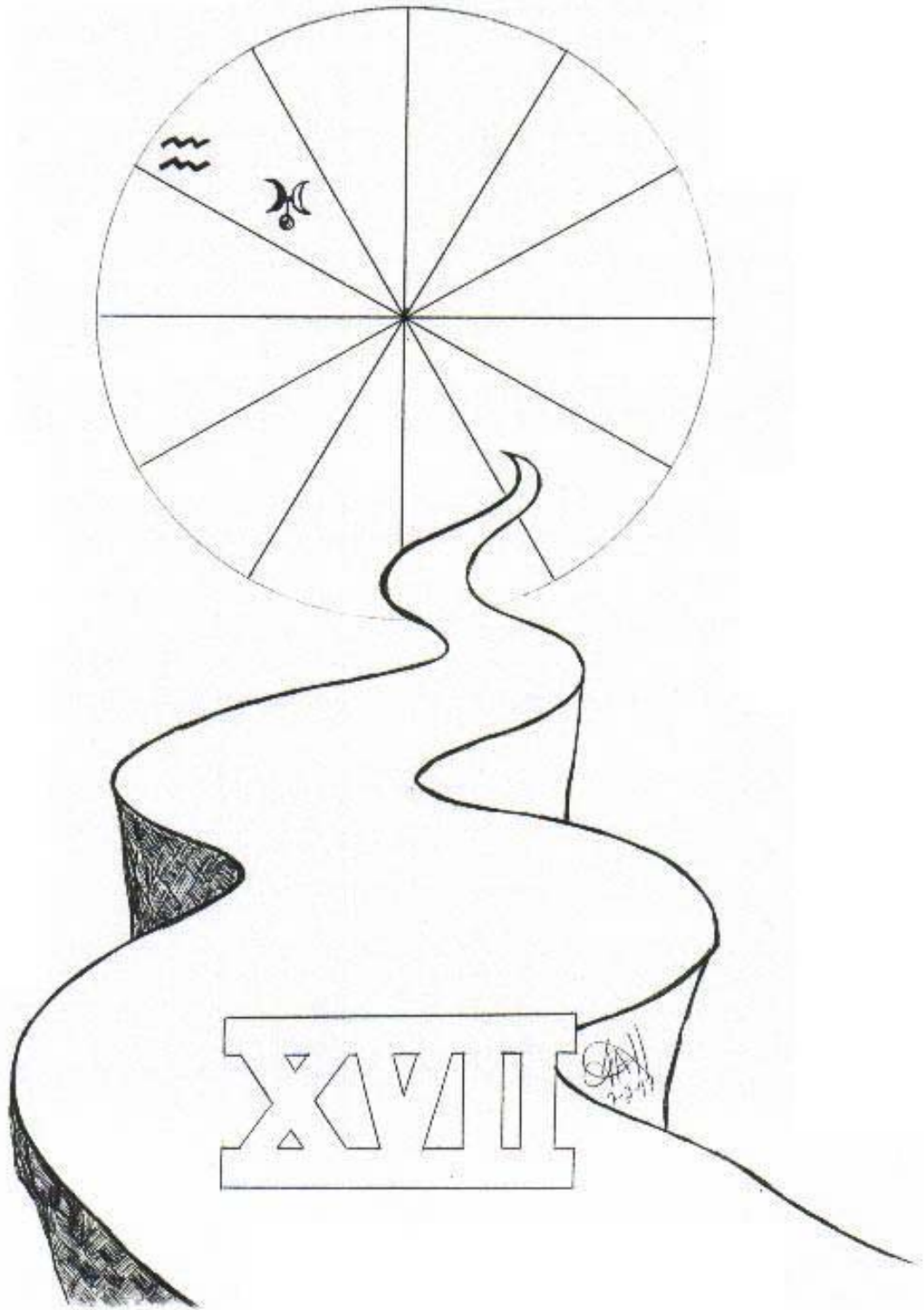
Who do you think paid for the first tour? The record company? Ha!!

But now, he was rich.

It wouldn't surprise me if he dropped me like a bad habit any day now.

She began to look for hints that might confirm her suspicions, and found a whole box of them. Now every comment, every joke became a personal attack aimed at driving her away.

She couldn't leave forever though. What if she didn't come back, and no one noticed. That was her reason for dropping in and out of any scene so dramatically. It always surprised the boys when she made her grand entrance surrounded by her entourage of wild beauties. Tara knew how to pick them! And the guys actually began to look forward to her visits. They never realized how tanked she got the girls beforehand, nor how many visits to the street it took to enlist them. She didn't even have to pay them, but she bought them all the same.



XVII - The Star

"It's seconds, minutes, hours, days inside a maze.

Ya keep your feet upon the yellow bricks, you got it made,

'cause every piece of the puzzle fits the master plan,

in this pre-fabricated, formulated land.

It's every piece in its place.

Red light, green light, Simon sez.

Take a tiny step forward and ask again."

Scatterbrains

That's That

November 20th:

High above the ocean, on Crestview Road's immaculate lawns, stretched a row of stately, intimidating mansions. Because this was considered a 'growing community,' undeveloped lots still separated the American castles that dotted the hillsides.

This feels so much better here!

Chance pulled aside the curtain and gazed out at the sea. It had been weeks since he drew back the shades, and even though night had come, the light of the moon bathed the room. He paused, searching the horizon. Once, this vista had been his favorite feature of the place. In the beginning . . . but now the air-born dust from the blinds made him realize some deeper part of his torment. Something was missing - the view.

Man, I didn't think I'd be this lonely. I thought that coming home would make everything alright . . .

The phone quit ringing. Unaccustomed to the silence, Chance spent the day wandering from room to room, pacing nervously for no apparent reason. He considered phoning Tara, but recently he felt uncomfortable around her. She had changed. It was impossible to understand her these days. Her mood swings were more erratic than ever, creating far more stress than he could handle, especially from the woman he considered as his wife.

Well, not exactly WIFE, since she says she's not the marrying kind.

Tara had made that clear from the very beginning. It was part of her appeal. For once, a woman had 'out-manned' him, with surprising results. Confused by this, he had actually asked her to marry him a few years ago. She had laughed in his face at his proposal.

"Chance, you know I'm not that kind of girl!" she had declared.

The subject never came up again.

All those women who had ever mentioned commitment came to mind. All the suffering he knew he had inflicted by cutting them off crashed unmercifully back. And now, alone in a house built for a family, Chance discovered what true loneliness felt like. But it wasn't until he looked out over the vacant lot next door that he realized what bothered him the most.

No longer did the shadow trace its outline on the crest of his view. When he had moved, the specter had followed him here to the coast. He recalled with a rush of adrenaline that first sighting of number one fan, a sensation which had both scared and exhilarated him. Even now, his heart pounded.

How long has it been?

At first, when that girl began 'stalking' him, he had been amused. The letters were a form of comic relief, softening the edge of the first tour. It wasn't that he was laughing at her . . . exactly . . . but sometimes, it was funny.

Strange, but interesting.

However, when the notes became more cryptic, Chance found them difficult to decipher, causing him to worry.

Interesting . . . but strange.

Unable to read the text, he decided to file them away . . . just in case. In case of what? Many reasons loomed, not the least of which were protective . . . just in case.

Quite often, Chance would discover some new piece of information which allowed him to 'read' another portion of her writings that he hadn't understood previously. It opened his eyes gradually to the hidden side of the world each time he went through the collection. It reminded him to retrieve the most recent additions.

His journal remained in his still unpacked suitcase, which stood as a monument of his transient existence. With his journal in hand, he went out on the balcony. He could smell her perfume from the paper, forcing him to recognize the fact that he actually regretted knowing she wouldn't be out there . . . waiting.

Waiting for what? Did she really think I might go out there? 'Hey, you, come on over!'

All those nights trapped inside by the girl-next-door now seemed like his loss. He had to admire her dedication, if that really was her out there. He was never quite sure, but who else would have stake claim in the empty lot across from his window? If it wasn't her, then why would some of the letters arrive hand delivered?

It has to be her . . . well, it had to have been her.

No longer, though . . . The hillside was devoid of any movement, except for the gentle sway of sea grass. He never realized how he might feel with her gone. Once upon a time, he wanted her to go away. Now, he admitted, he missed her. He tried to remember when he last saw her . . . years ago, it seemed. The last few parcels were postmarked Texas, but no address had been included since the first tour. Her phone number changed frequently, but luckily he had been able to keep it current. The recordings had given him 'the new number.' The last number he called, she had answered. He still said nothing. She quit writing. He quit singing.

The cool ocean breeze refreshed him as he made his way to the front gate. It wasn't often that he left the premises on foot. The passage towered overhead. The unfinished lane crunched gravel beneath his feet, leading him up the hill. His footsteps muffled as he stepped off the path onto the unbroken ground of the tract. He imagined the girl's vision of his not-so-humble abode, cold and uninviting in the California night. He tried to perceive what she might have felt as she made her lonely pilgrimage to this point, night after night.

She must have wanted me to come to her, to take her in, to say 'hello' at least, and all I could do was shut the shades between us.

Chance trekked through the low lying shrubs to the place where she always seemed to sit. He could see light peek through the drawn shades; he could almost see himself looking out the window.

When he came to the spot, he tripped over something in the brush. For a moment, he almost overlooked it but upon investigation, he found something. Half covered by overgrowth, a glint of silver caught his eye. Bending down to dislodge the article, he removed a tin box. Brushing the thin layer of sand from it, he stared at his prize in disbelief. Engraved on the lid was a message:

CHANCE OF A LIFETIME

His legs crumpled under him. Collapsing onto the firm earth beneath him, Chance was shocked by the concussion, which brought him back to the present. The past . . . For a moment, he was lost in the memory of that night so long ago.

Chance re-lived the thrill of the Momentary Magic tour, recalling how fresh he had been back then. The songs were new and the fans flocked to him. The venues were sold-out, city after city, which led to the throngs of the strange and the beautiful as a fixture of his surrounding entourage. People came and left but the party was never-ending.

Vaguely, he envisioned the first time he met that girl. It seemed odd that he could only briefly glimpse that moment. Had it changed his life? At the time, he hadn't been oblivious to the encounter. Had it scared him? Not sure why, he had avoided her then. And later, as well. In fact, this was the first time that he had ever reached out for her . . . and she wasn't there.

Instead, only a silver box greeted the man. Inside, its contents remained a mystery. He hesitated. He couldn't decide whether to open it right then, take it home to open it, or better yet, put it back and leave. He opened it.

Inside, he found a letter, a photo, some drawings, a white candle and some stones. He produced a lighter from his pocket; it flickered in the wind. In its unsteady illumination, he read the note:

"Light your world: place your cornerstones and then add your fire of inspiration . . . SHINE . . . say the word!"

He flipped over the paper but the other side was blank. The letter was sealed with "Not yet . . ." penned across the flap of the envelope. He pocketed it.

The wind was too strong at first to light the candle, but if he propped the box on end with the lid open, it made a perfect tiny closet. Maybe this had been her intention. Just as he lit the flame, the wind picked up making it impossible to keep the flame.

Then he remembered the stones. He felt like a fool placing twelve little rocks around him. Then he was supposed to say the word? All sorts of abracadabra / hokey-pokey things came to mind. Again he fingered the lighter. This time, however, the zephyr subsided. He lit the candle and said the magic word.

Trees motioned to him, dancing in time with the tiny flames, as the breeze returned. His eyes strained to focus on tiny pages but he decided to wait until later to read them, too.

On the back of the picture, a poem read:

I thought you'd never find me here

I've waited until now, you see . . .

You thought that it was over,

this never-ending mystery.

I never meant to go this far.

My life was not supposed to be

wrapped up like this letterbox

buried by your sea.

So, go inside, put out these flames

Think of me out here.

Add the names and play the games

I'll see you soon? Next year?

(November 20)

(April didn't see him that year or the next - she was gone by then.)

"That's today!" He froze.

Blowing out the candles, he hurriedly collected the stones, and crammed all of it back into the box. His eyes scanned his surroundings, searching for HER! He tried to walk quickly but nonchalantly back across the field toward home. He failed miserably.

Sprinting straight for the garage, he pressed the button on his key chain but not in time. He had to stop in his tracks. Bouncing to hurry the door up if possible, he anticipated her. Behind him. Her black-gloved hand reaching out for his shoulder. Or his neck.

Once inside, he sighed deeply, breathless from the run and the . . . fear? He laughed at the idea but locked all the doors and windows just the same. The letter in his pocket beckoned. Whipping it from his pocket, he tossed it on the table as if it repulsed him. Soon he was drawn to open it.

The rabbit has come, the rabbit has gone

It's getting late, the show must go on . . .

The puzzle don't fit, the spirit is weak.

How can you find if you do not seek?

When you wish upon a star,

No matter who or where you are,

"I wish I may, I wish I might . . . "

See it for its former Light.

Again, he was amused. Confused. Mixing a drink from the bar out on the balcony, he saw a white flash streak across the midnight sky. He made a wish.

Later that night, he went to put the new messages into the box. He climbed the stairs, with the tin in one hand, his suitcase in the other. Setting both down on the bed, he went into the closet. He flipped through the clothes rack until he decided on a shirt.

He changed outfits, and sat back on the bed. From the suitcase, he withdrew the invitation. It started to make sense.

The Mad Hatter

cordially invites

the March Hare

to attend

the Tea Party and Charity Ball

on the Twenty-Fourth day of March.

Chance fell asleep with the clutter still on his bed. That night he dreamed of the wolf again. This time, he watched as a snow white rabbit scrambled past him into the brush. When the she-wolf disappeared after it, he heard nothing at first. Then he heard the rabbit scream.

The next morning, he thought about the dream. He had seen the wolf somewhere before, but not in a dream.

Getting out of bed, Chance compiled the scattered pages. He stacked the papers on one corner of the bed. Going into the closet, he ran his hand through the garments, looking for one shirt in particular. When he didn't find it, he shrugged. I'll ask the maid if she has seen it.

He picked a different one and got dressed. Back in the closet, he finally reached for the box under the stack of blankets. He pulled it out into the center of the floor. The phone rang just then. He walked to the bed table.

"Hello?"

Nothing. Just silence. And with a little laugh he repeated himself, then replaced the receiver. He shook his head and chuckled.

When no one called back immediately, he went back to the box. Something wasn't right. He looked on the outside of the carton but it wasn't the same. Ripping back the flaps, he realized,

Oh shit, I've been robbed!!

His face flushed red with anger and even some embarrassment. After calling the police, he contacted the security company.. No unauthorized entrance into the residence, they said. No record of anyone coming or going other than Chance. The police laughed at him when he told them what was missing. They agreed with each other that this 'fan thing' should be taken seriously but they couldn't understand why he hadn't reported it prior to this. He lied.

"I, . . . uh, thought that I could keep a file, just in case, . . . you know, if she. . . something happens."

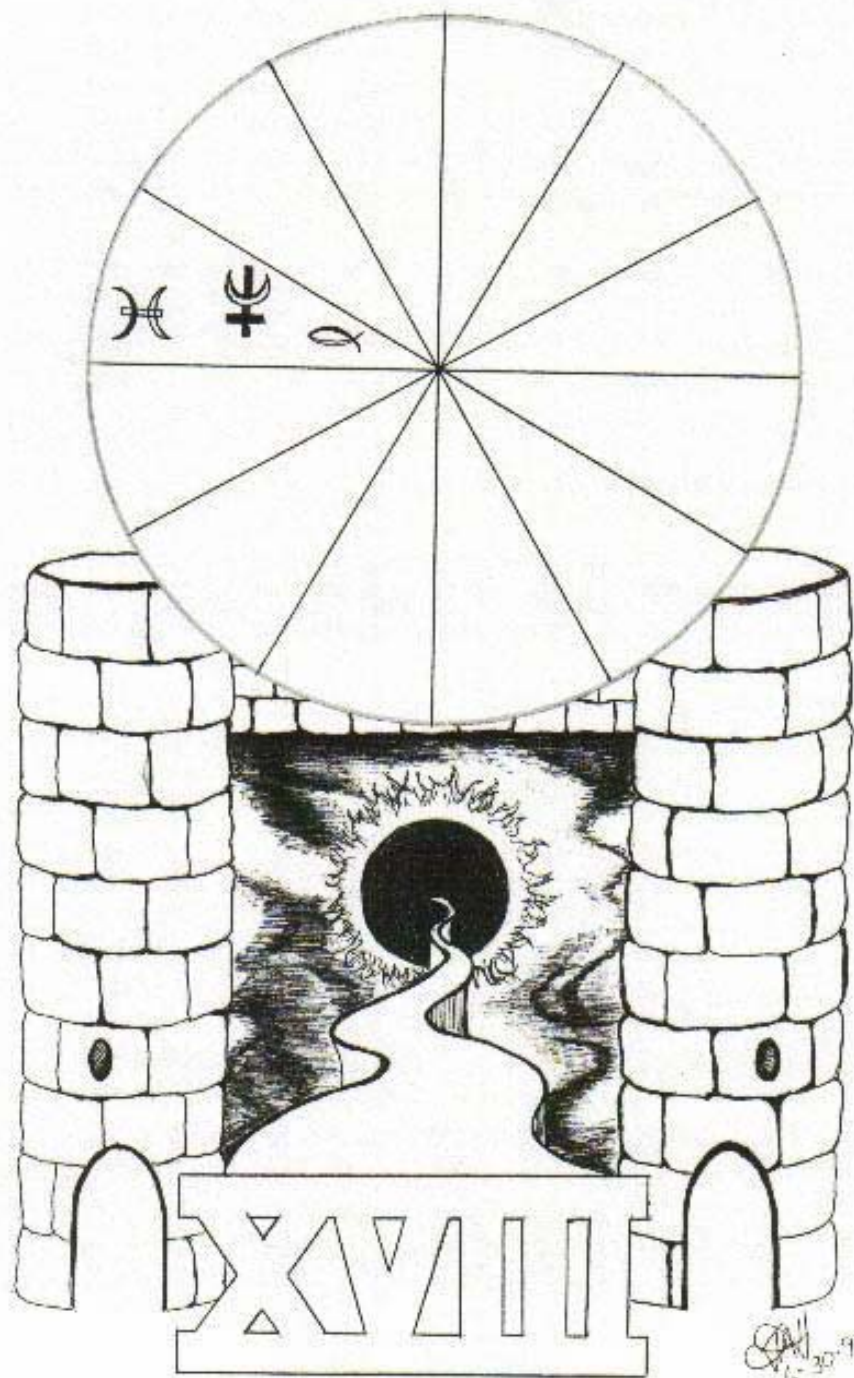
He felt wickedly bad betraying his true feelings toward the girl, but here he had the police involved who found no forced entry, nothing else missing, and no reason to be alarmed. The report was made, and Chance was alone once again. He thought should call Tara, but then he'd have to tell her . . . tell her what?

Maybe it was Tara, but the security company said no one had been here. I gave her a key and her own code . . . but . . .

He felt sick knowing that all those years were gone now. Gone . . . All he had now, a few papers on the bed. A couple of photos, some candles and the stones.

Maybe it was . . . her!

He pulled the puzzle piece from the invitation, gazed deeply into her eyes. "So, witch, where did you go?"



XVIII - The Moon

"Sitting in my la la, waiting for my ya ya, Uh huh . . .

Now she's mighty funny but I don't think she's coming . . .

Hey, Baby, hurry, don't you make me worry

Oh, you know I love you. Yes, I really love you! Uh huh!"

Tony Sheridan &

The Beat Brothers,

Ya Ya

December 21 (winter?):

. . . and while nations allied to declare peace, fulfilling the prophesy, which would lead to sudden war, and Hell's gate groaned to hold back the demons of the apocalypse, it didn't stop April from going to the mall.

Exhaust fumes pierced Greg's eyes, stinging tears blinded him for a moment. Sunglasses cut the glare a little he noticed as he scanned the busy Wilshire Boulevard. He opened his car door, barely missed being hit by a sports car. For a moment, Greg told himself in his best radio announcer mind-voice, "It should be a great weekend, . . . if you make it through the week!"

Dark windows reflected his shadowed figure, but he could still see the dark circles under his eyes. Lifting the glasses didn't change what he saw in his face. Sleep deprivation was the least of his concerns. His departure from the tour, and the subsequent cancellation of all future dates, was no secret. Trade magazines and fanzines alike called it " . . . the end of the dream."

A rush of cool air greeted him, contrast to the unseasonably warm day outside. He thought it seemed ironic to go inside for fresh air. In the mail room, he chatted with some young guys who were new to the company.

High turnover, huh?

Greg had closed the office upstairs a few weeks back, but still picked up his mail there. This too had dwindled. Over time, the mail would stop altogether, maybe. Then all ties to the past would be severed.

The box wasn't full like he expected, and after he sorted out the garbage, which he tossed unread into a nearby bin, he noticed the hand-written envelope underneath the junk. He recognized the script.

"What do you want?!"

He tossed into the trash can. Closing his box with the key, he clutched the remaining notices under one arm and left the building. A minute later, he went back and took the letter back out of the can.

Back in his car, Greg took the letter out of the stack in the passenger seat. First, he held it up to the light, but it was too thick to see any noticeable letters. Then he shook it back and forth, listening to the paper within slide back and forth. As a last ditch effort, he held it to his open mouth as if his hot breath could actually steam it enough to release the seal of glue. No such luck.

"What do you want?"

He tried to feel disgusted with her whole pitiful attempt, but even he felt the rush.

"After all these years, don't you ever quit?"

Although Chance never spoke of her after the first tour, Greg knew this one was different. But why, he wasn't sure. It nagged at him at times like this when he held another one in his hand. The handwriting was always the same. The return address was missing. He flipped it over and over trying to decide what to do with it.

"It's her alright."

He considered opening it, as this was the first time he was not under any obligation to Chance professionally, and he wasn't sure about Chance- his friend. Maybe if he opened it, he would finally see just what this was all about.

What should I do?

However, before he could be tempted, he quickly located a slightly larger envelope from his briefcase just for occasions like this. He addressed it to Chance, stamped it and dropped it in the mailbox by the front door of the building.

Chance got a letter two days later in Malibu, on which he immediately recognized Greg's hand-writing. At first, Chance was excited, glad to know that Greg was reaching out to him. But when he opened it, he found another envelope. The postmark read Majestic. It was from April. He smiled when he opened it, but his grin disappeared at once. For inside the second, he found a third envelope already open. Puzzled, he withdrew it slowly.

He recognized it at once, but couldn't believe it. It was the first letter . . . It wasn't what he expected, and it baffled him. It was as if he had reached for his wallet and pulled out a fish instead.

What's a fish doing in my pocket?

Then he thought of Greg's little stunt and looked around for the hidden cameras. But nothing . . . Back inside the house, he called Greg. No answer. Chance grew angry then. All he knew was that someone had taken his box of letters, left him an empty box.

He lost his 'happy thoughts.' Violated and robbed, he began to list all possible suspects. Greg, Tara, April - herself . . . the maid, her daughter, even his mother had a key to the place. Someone at the security company, maybe. Maybe the pool guy.

Now, why would he want my mail?

He is Chance, of course!

Subtly, he began to question everyone, never revealing his ulterior motive. No one knew a thing. And the only person who he could not ask was April. But then again, maybe he could. He called up Lou at the security to see if he would check this out. Maybe go see her in Texas, find out what she is really like.

He made the call.

Lou was rather surprised by the request, it being the second time that week. He said nothing about Tara, and after accepting his offer, said nothing to her about Chance. Double income intrigued him more so than the irony, so he accepted basically the same job in both cases, requiring no explanations in either.

Find the girl . . .

He flew out that night.

His investigation began at Big T's. He had checked into the hotel across the street, a run-down shag, even though he had plenty of money to spend. He wanted to be near the bar. The next day, he wandered over.

His salt and pepper hair mopped aimlessly across his forehead and down his shoulders, matching the scruffy beard he was growing.

With a flannel on, he looked like the others.

The posters on the wall caught his attention but he wasn't aware of April's involvement, so he noted them with mild interest as he racked the balls for a second game of pool with Bob, a local guy with a heavy accent. From the look of Bob's oily jeans and burly tattooed arms, Lou guessed him to be a biker, or a really dirty truck driver.

Lou let the guy win a few games, even buying the rounds of beer. When he asked if April was around any more, the bartender answered,

"No, she don't work here like she used to. She's got that little thang, up there on that wall."

He motioned toward the poster, shaking his head.

Lou eyed it closely now, memorizing the address of the office. After another round, and a game where he cleared the table in one turn, he nodded good-bye. Outside in the bright sunlight, he fumbled for the keys to his rent-a-heap. A few minutes later, he sat unnoticed in the parking lot, staring at the offices of Yes Oui` Si` and after an hour, watched as the girl in the picture walked into his life.

He followed her to the edge of town, backing off as the traffic thinned. By the time he came to her trailer, he had no one else on the road to blend in with, which made it more intense. Lou was glad when he finally saw her turn into a driveway. He passed by quickly, before making the u-turn to peruse more thoroughly. By nightfall, he had accomplished his mission. He didn't call it in right away.

Tara stretched the latex gloves on one by one, snapping it menacingly each time she let go. She did her doctor impression as she delved back into the box. The sound of paper rustling triggered her ire, and as she flipped through the remaining letters she felt her blood run cold.

Who are you, April? And why do you matter to my man?

It wasn't fair!

She choked back the fury. For two hours she had searched his place, not one of Tara's notes was saved - not that she ever wrote to him, but she had given him birthday cards, hadn't she? Where were they? And yet here was an entire box of crap that Chance saved, in order, from some bitch that he didn't even know. Or did he? The man got thousands of letters each year from fans and yet, here was a single box of April.

There were pictures and poems, jewelry and crystals. Mysterious writings eluded her, which made her furious. Signs and symbols, she decided to research. She wondered if Chance could read them. That thought was unbearable. She had to know.

I've seen her before . . .

By dawn, Tara had a list of addresses, and many phone numbers, that spanned the globe. Who is this bitch?! She even dots her i's with little hearts. How absolutely fucking precious!

The pictures laid in order formed a progression, each was numbered with a Roman numeral or a playing card, which obviously became a Tarot deck. She picked up one that had no person on it, but instead, it had symbols that she knew Chance wore in his custom-made jewelry. She knew who to take it to.

The late night ride through the hood, the 'wood,' was a success. Tara's driver asked several of the gang bangers on the corners where he could find her. It didn't take long to locate her, nor did it cost very much. Information was cheap sometimes. He found her huddled in a vacant apartment with no electricity, hiding from her imaginary demons. She had been strung out for too long.

Back in the hotel by the sea, Tara watched the door handle jiggle, locked. Then a knock followed. She peered though the peep hole, and through the fish-eye lens she saw May. Letting her in with a big smile, the hostess offered her anything. May took the usual.

After a brief chat, Tara decided to bring out the picture. She had put it in a lightweight frame, concealing the writing on its reverse side. She just wanted to know about Chance's necklace.

I hope she isn't too fucked up to see . . .

"Hey, Little Bit," which is what Tara knew her by, "can you tell me what this means?"

May followed Tara's finger to a sign in the center of the picture. Squinting, she tried to remember. She use to know it . . . but,

"It's been a long time since I did this stuff. It's too bad my sister's not here! She knows all about this kind of stuff."

"Well, call her! Where is she?"

"Last time I talked to her, she was in Texas."

"What part?"

"A little town called Majestic."

Tara tried not to show her reaction, intentionally keeping as straight a face as possible, but her eyes betrayed her. May did not notice.

Tara heard the man's voice spew words across her lips, seductively low, "What's her name?"

"What's her name? Why do you want to know her name? Marsha . . . Marsha . . . Marsha . . ."

"Her name is Marsha?"

"No it's April, but I was kidding about the Brady Bun . . ."

Tara heard nothing of what followed. May droned on about TV shows. Tara had to take a moment to regain her composure. Her shock gave way to the feeling that this was meant to be. As she came to grips with the realization that her quest had suddenly become too successful, Tara plotted. How could she ask without asking?

"So, let's call her. What's her number?"

"Jeez, what time is it? We can't call her in the middle of the night . . . she's got a kid, and everything. Bitch has got his kid! I'm not calling her!!"

"Whose kid?"

"Fucking Jesse James' kid. She fucked my boyfriend and now she has his kid. How can she do that to me?"

What's the problem? He's family now, right? He can still fuck you, too."

Tara listened as April's little sister purged all the dirty details, the poison which ran through her veins, feeling better for having someone to finally share this torment with who wouldn't judge her. Wasn't involved. That's what May told Tara.

I remember her now! She's the one . . .

The memory returned.

Tara listened as May told about Chance's first show. Front row, they had been, and she acted like a big bitch, wearing all that black witch's costume. Stupid flowers . . . Her sister had basically ruined him for her. She couldn't even play his music after that. She threw it all out one day.

"Besides, his music kinda sucks!"

Tara laughed aloud at that, "It does, does it?"

May ranted on about how her sister always stole her man. She had come to LA with the intention of getting away . . . and guess who showed?

". . . and then she gets pregnant, and she had to go home!" May roared, and did more to catch a buzz. It was her only barrier against feeling.

"If there was a Good Witch from the North, bad ones from the east and west, then April is the Weird Witch from the South. Yeah, let's call her! Why not?!"

"No, I've changed my mind now. Maybe next time."

"Hey, where are you going?"

Tara was packing up for the night, leaving abruptly. May was sorry to see her go.

"Hey, I guess I'll see you tomorrow . . ."

"Yeah, maybe . . . Later!"

"Uh, Tara, can I get a little more from you?"

"Jeez, bitch, don't you have any pride? Quit being such a fucking bum!"

The door slammed behind her. As May sat bewildered at the change in her, a knock came on the door. She thought it would be Tara, coming back to apologize. It was Ghost . . .

"Hey, babe, let me in!"

May backed up into the room, stunned and delighted. What timing!

"Hey, Ghost, Tara just left."

"Yeah, I know . . . look what she left behind," he held up a bag.

May's eyes grew wide, then narrowed when she smiled. She didn't know how he got it out of Tara's grip or if he 'found' it, which meant he stole it. She didn't ask, and he didn't volunteer. Ghost kept her entertained all night, per Tara's request.

May thought it was good luck that she had his company. After all, he was fine looking! She thought he might make a move on her but he didn't even suggest sex for the whole night. May made a few hints but he never responded except with a laugh. Even after she took a shower and returned wearing nothing but a towel, he still made no move. She gave up, more intent on getting high than getting rejected.

"So where did Tara run off to?"

"Couldn't tell ya," he told her, even though her did have an idea. Tara always kept a room around the corner during night like this. She always made sure someone was close by as well. Another room across the hall from . . . whoever stayed in room 101. Even though it was on the first floor, room 101 had no balcony or patio but instead, a wall of glass over looking the ocean. Beneath, the waves crashed on the jagged boulder on the beach. No escape that way . . .

"Nice view, huh?" Ghost commented, laughing privately.

"Yeah, it's better than where I was staying over in Hollywood."

He knew that. He had seen her there before.

When Lou checked in, Tara said nothing about her new friend. She scribbled the information and went to work.

The Majestic gossip was not about the mysterious stranger in town, but rather about one of their own. April's name was on everyone's lips, it seemed to Lou, as he set about to finish the second segment of his operation. His first instinct was to wait until the next day to begin the job of 'getting to know his mark.'

It was a surprise when April entered the bar.

Lou heard the woman behind the bar holler,

"April is in the house!"

He watched as the woman crossed over to give her a hug, a sight that excited him a bit. Both were knockouts, and together . . .

The two disappeared into an office, causing his imagination to erupt. He crossed the room only to lean up against the wall by the door, trying to eavesdrop. He had no luck.

Once he saw April came out of the office, he moved into position.

"I understand that you are in charge of this event, and I would like to donate some money toward it. Do I give it to you, or is there someplace else I should send it?"

"Come by the office and we'll be happy to have your contribution. I don't have a receipt book on me, but if it is tickets you would like to buy, you can talk to my girl behind the bar, here."

April continued to walk toward the door.

"Maybe we can do lunch?"

She turned with a sideways glance over her shoulder,

"I haven't heard that in a while! Maybe . . ."

A few days went by, and Christmas brought with it Natasha's second birthday. Her arrival on that special holiday had inspired the newborn's name. Nativity has to do with natal, pre, post, neo, or chart.

New Year's Eve brought with it the first date of April's since the baby's arrival. She dressed with care, smiling at her reflection. The evening promised a new possibility, which she pondered with reservation. Lou and April . . . what might come of that? Her eyes tried not to read too much into it, but her mind ran with images just the same.

By midnight, she kissed him.

It's been so long . . . but I can't . . . yes . . . No!

She tried to resist his advances but between the loneliness and the champagne, April was unable to say no. It was the first time since the baby. It felt so good, so bad. Her vow to abstain until . . . until what?!"

In the morning sun, she watched Lou dress to leave, secretly happy to see him go. She saw the used condom in the trash, which she took outside immediately. Back inside, she showered for a long time. She stood under the running water for so long, she never even heard the phone ring.

Three days later, Lou met with Chance. He gave the client the facts.

"Here is her address. I went to her house, her trailer, to be exact . . . and I didn't see anything out of the ordinary."

"At her house, were there . . . uh, any . . . uh, any pictures of me, anywhere? Or anyone else that, you know, wasn't like her friends or family?"

"You mean, did she have any other famous people on her walls?"

"Yeah."

"Other than a picture of the Virgin Mary, a broken one, no."

"Mary, huh?"

"Will that be all?"

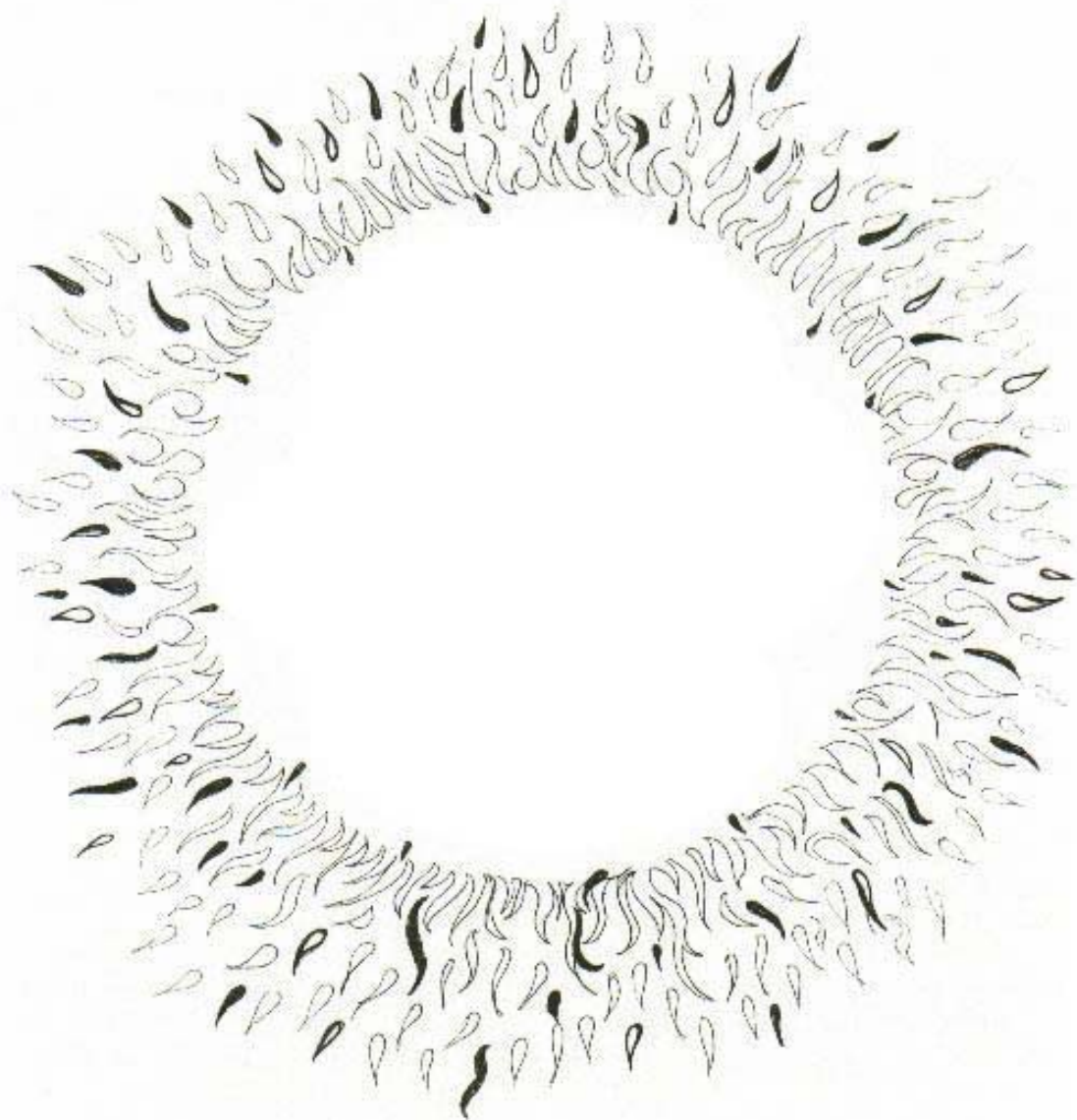
"Did she seem like a religious fanatic, a freak, or anything? Any guns?"

Lou had to laugh, remembering her nude body glistening in the light of the moon, "No . . . She isn't too strange."

"Okay, thanks . . . Here's what I owe you."

Chance peeled off four hundred dollars from his wad, handing it to the detective. Lou put it in his wallet as he stood up, heading out the door. As his hand reached the door knob, he couldn't resist the temptation,

"Oh yeah, by the way, she's a really good fuck!"



XIX

CSA
2007

XIX - The Sun

*"In the beginning, God created Light,
and you could see it for fucking miles!"*

Lemmy Kilmister

Motorhead

*"In the beginning, God created Lemmy,
and you could hear him for fucking miles!"*

julia

January 22nd:

April, finally with a moment to herself, sat cozy in her bed. Tonight was hers. Natasha was at Grandma's house. What she was about to see would change April's life. She held a remote control in each hand. Just as she pointed them toward the entertainment center, she stopped. Setting them down, one on either side of her legs, she reached over for the bottle of tequila on the nightstand. Salt, shot and lemon . . . she was ready!

Three, two, one . . .

She pressed play on each unit at the same moment. On the video, April watched The Wizard of Oz. On the stereo, Dark Side of the Moon swelled. The title faded in at the exact moment that the heart beat from the first song began. She thought of the beginning of Twister, the other tornado movie. She felt goosebumps on her arms. The voice started I've always been mad . . . as the credits for the music composers/arrangers flashed on the screen.

Hey, there's old man George . . . I wonder where he's been since I left LA.

April sat transfixed, it did correspond, the movie and the music.

Hmmm . . . I wonder . . . Dark Side of the Rainbow.

She remembered a sign at the Rainbow . . . The Hollywood Vampire Club. Its elite membership listed the legendary. Many were deceased.

No, they're not . . . They're Vampires!

She missed the sign.

Two months away was the big Party, and she hadn't heard a word from Chance, nothing. All this, for what?

Then she remembered.

In the beginning, God . . .

Where did I read that those four words added up to the number of years between creation and Christ?

April couldn't remember, all those years jumbled together in a haze of acquired knowledge. There was no way she could recall the

source.

So, why bother? Was it Playboy?

She sat stunned in the aftermath of the TV viewing experience, knowing that she would have to go on-line to investigate the connection, or was there one? The milestone had been crossed, and soon she knew she had her next project. Her new baby was conceived that night as she lay alone in her bed.

Reaching for pen and paper, April tried to put her vision on the blank page before her. Her mind raced with visions.

Page One (1, Won, Juan)

The End

No, too brief . . . which brings me to my next point . . . Page Two (Too, to, Tiew) Tiew - Tuesday, named for the god of war, or the warlord.

Sunday - Day One - Here comes the sun . . . Son . . . the Sol, the soul, the sole. I am the Light . . . 186,000 miles per second, are you catching on pretty fast? Are you picking up my vibes? I know it sounds weird.

She had to locate four books for this sitting: The Bible, The Metaphysical Bible Dictionary (Unity School of Christianity), Qabalism (Dr. H. B. Pullen-Burry), and her dictionary. If she was going to attempt to write the story down, she would need all the help she could get.

In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. Genesis 1:1

And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. Gen. 1:2

And God said, Let there be light, and there was light. Gen. 1:3

And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness. Gen. 1:4

And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day. Gen. 1:5

"That's original!" April laughed at what she had written on the page. "But it is good!"

She referred to the Metaphysical Bible Dictionary first. It read: Light is the symbol of intelligence. We cannot affirm too often, "I am intelligence - I am the light of my world."

She could hear the protests from the masses already. But she wanted to note that spiritual things are spiritually perceived (Qabalism).

Jesus spoke in parables for a reason.

If the veil was lifted, Truth would blind . . . it must be a gradual process.

Qabalism again: Everyone must verify these observations for himself (herself), like the story of the Prodigal Son. April saw spiritual evolution as a full circle.

What goes down, must come up.

The fallen angel is you/me, The born-again soul is yours/mine. Whatever your path of enlightenment, whatever gets you to the light, it's alright . . . alright, just don't forget that at some time, you must go HOME.

Home is where the heart is . . . Leo rules the heart. The heart of a lion, its pride . . .

Light is a constant, time is relative . . . and the time spent with your relatives is the longest time known to man.

Spiritual enlightenment cannot be handed to you on a silver platter . . . like John the Baptist, and divinity doesn't come from an outside deity, but is a work that goes on in an individual.

The Kingdom of Heaven is within you, know thyself.

The body is God's temple.

". . . and the screen of God's movie is time expanding."

The paradoxes that come from trying to decipher The Word, are there for a reason. Truth was concealed as it was revealed.

In the beginning . . . God said, " ."

The Word was spoken, then it was written, then it was wrong? True Spirit can't be captured, not in words, not on paper - only the essence can be discerned by the seeker.

You can't handle the Truth!

The Light brings us to the bringer of the Light . . . Prometheus . . . Lucifer. For unlawful carnal knowledge, the big apple will do. Cut it in half sideways, you'll see the star.

"Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight . . ."

Morning star, Eastern Star, how I wonder what you are . . .

Metaphysically speaking, "Jesus represents God's idea of man in expression (Son of man); Christ is that idea in the absolute (Son of God). Jesus reached a place of understanding where He realized His relation to Being."

I am he, as you are he . . .

April looked down at the page before her, under the Bible quotes which were to begin her book, all it said was Page 1. After that, the book was blank. When she peeked out of the window, she saw it was dawn.

So much for writing a novel.

To at least feel like she accomplished something in her book, she wrote:

Sun - Son

Sine - Sign

Sun Sign

It wasn't much, but it was something.

"You are pretty presumptuous to say that you are God!"

"Well, that was one of the original sins, the pride that I am God, but . . .," April told Tara, one night in the office, "believing yourself to be a god is different than being God-like, or Christ-like."

Christ, I wish she'd shut the fuck up about it! Tara didn't want to hear anything except what she came to find out. She knew she couldn't just ask the question. She would have to do her homework, research the bitch.

For April, Tara was just another in a long line of volunteers. When Kelly quit, Tara was there to pick up the pieces. At first, April didn't like her. During the interview though, she came across professional enough to seem like she could really help. Tara did help . . . at first.

While you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, it is possible to read a person and situation completely in the initial few moments of meeting. April had ignored her first impression. Or had she?

Tara was looking for evidence that this girl was after her man, and couldn't seem to find his name in the computer . . . anywhere. As it was, only a few people knew where the guest list was kept . . . and only April knew who was to play certain characters.

She asked repeatedly, but April would only smile, holding one finger to her lips. She told no one . . . and it made the sponsors nervous.

It made Tara furious.

XX - Judgment

"Insanity is repeating the same mistakes and expecting different consequences."

author unknown

February 23rd:

"History is destined to repeat itself; and if you don't learn from it, you are going to re-experience the lesson, over and over, until you get it right," April replied, stirring the cup of coffee aimlessly. "In fact, if you pay attention to the details, I'll bet you can see the patterns emerge. Did you ever date one person, break up, and then find yourself back in the same situation with someone different?"

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe the same name, same sign, same anything?" April eyed Tara, looking for that instant of realization, which traced across her face in a smile. Tara found an example.

"My fiancé` is an Aries . . . so is my dad," she revealed, even if she didn't see a connection, otherwise. "They are both in the entertainment industry. Is that what you mean?"

"Sure, there's two similarities. Do they act alike?"

"No . . ."

Tara sat, remembering what her childhood had been like . . . and then she thought of Chance.

"No, they are not that much alike."

April knew that something more was going on in Tara's head than she let on, but she tried to handle these situations with kid gloves.

"Aries are, stereotypical, a sign that has definite qualities that can be defined. Of course, there are exceptions to the rule, but stereotypes aren't there without reason. Unfortunately , , , but anyway, what was I saying?"

"About Aries . . ."

"Oh yeah, Aries! I love Aries . . . except when they pick fights. They love to argue and once it's over, they can't figure why everyone is still bent out of shape. For them, it over . . . move on! "

"Okay, I guess I can see that."

Tara recalled the beatings, and how it was 'over.' He just passed out afterward, and the next day, she'd get a new toy. Or worse . . .

Although, April knew not to judge her, lest she be judged, but it didn't mean she couldn't discern her spirit. Whatever Tara was remembering didn't look good. "Sometimes, you have to judge people, which doesn't mean to insult them, or label. Just be aware of what they are, and the rest will come naturally. For example, if you know someone steals from everyone, just remember that you are one of everyone."

"So, tell me more about Aries."

"I am . . ." April paused for a pregnant pause, causing Tara to respond.

"You are what?"

"That's what the Aries aspect states: I AM."

"So?"

"It is the demand of the first personality. The child who cries, 'I am hungry! I am sleepy! I am going to cry until I get what I want.'"

"Now that I can see in them.:"

"Aries rules the head . . . so, many Aries have either a prominent nose, shaped with the eyebrows like the sign of Aries. Let me show you. Where's a pen?"

She drew out the symbol: ^

". . .or maybe they have a scar on the head. The face. And because of the way male sheep like to fight, I like to think of them as buttheads. But I have to admit that I'm in love with one . . . more or less . . ."

"Really? I didn't know you had a boyfriend?"

"Well, . . . I wouldn't . . . I mean, not exactly . . . anyway!"

April tried to change the subject.

How am I supposed to answer that?

Tara watched as she stammered, knowing what April felt . . . she figured with a few more days like these, she'd have the answers she needed. She needed to know why Chance and April were . . . together? Not together?

The best way she could think of handling the situation was by infiltrating enemy territory. Her smile was the Trojan Horse, and her love would conquer all. Now that she put her mark on him, no other woman was going to occupy his thoughts!

Especially this one . . . Why her?

Tara worked late nights with April, who began to hear the horror stories of Tara's past. She listened as the years of rage spewed from Tara, more intense each night until, she began to feel like a therapist. It drained her, leaving April weary from the conversations. She began to look for reasons to leave.

I thought she would never leave!

Tara was anxious to get started. She had to find out who was on the guest list. She had to affect the outcome. But how? When midnight came, she sat alone in the office still rifling through the files. She had no better luck in the computers. There was no hard copy list anywhere.

I know she has to invite him! Doesn't she? I mean how can she be so obsessed and yet have absolutely nothing around her to show for it? What is his character? Who will he be?

Chance wondered where Tara had been lately. He never asked. Since she had an answering service which returned calls so quickly she didn't ever seem too far away. But where was she when he needed her . . . like now? He felt trapped by shadows right in his own home.

It was hard to believe, but from the window upstairs, he could see it. Flapping in the breeze, it waited for him under the wiper on his windshield. He didn't want to know, but he had to find out.

It isn't a parking citation!

He held the police detective's card in his hand, but he remembered how dumb they made him feel and didn't really want to call. But

who should he call? Lou? Not!! So he ordered a pizza and waited for a painful forty-five minutes until the delivery guy arrived. The price of a tip, and his problem was solved.

It was just what he expected. Everyday, another letter showed, in the same sequence he had received them so many years earlier. He felt strange replacing the letters into a new box, strangely glad to get them back but sick at the way in which they were arriving.

But then something caught his attention. It was in her handwriting. He looked at the outside envelopes and sure enough, these new ones seemed different; but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

Tara ended up asleep on the couch by three AM, no more successful than when she started. She set her watch alarm to go off in two hours, which would give her time to look again before anyone showed up to work. The office grew still as she drifted off to sleep.

Out of the corner of her eye, April spotted the entity in the room. This one was new. She crossed herself with a prayer, before lighting a candle. It glowed brighter and came toward the flame until it hovered two feet above the fire.

You need to get the guest list out . . .

April heard herself think. There wasn't anything that she needed to do, and yet, the thought still nagged at her. She tried to fight off the urge, especially since Chance had yet to respond. The whole thing seemed pointless.

Get the list!

"No! Damn it . . . I'm not going to get the list!"

Get the fucking list, you bitch!"

April couldn't believe she was arguing with herself over the stupid guest list. And the more she resisted, the harder she debated it. Finally, she got up. Under the rug, she kept her secrets in the crawl space under two boards. She pulled out the list and looked at it. The March Hare - Chance Lee was not circled.

Tara woke, refreshed, from a dream about the country. She had seen a rabbit, and the woman. Under the floor . . . She knew it was an omen.

April watched the formless apparition follow her, still unconvinced that what she was seeing was real. She waited and watched but it disappeared into the corner. Hmmm . . . what did it want with the list?

April shuddered at the idea.

The next day she woke up refreshed, the memory distant and fading as her busy schedule demanded her attention. She had to concentrate on the Party for now. Today was the day when she could reveal a new piece of the puzzle to the press, which were hungry and long overdue for news.

"This is all I can give to you right now, you understand."

April unveiled the giant display hidden behind a curtain she had constructed that morning from a trunk she had brought over from her house only hours before this press conference. Stunned office workers were mesmerized as she pulled piece after piece from the treasure chest. Little by little, the image became clear.

"So . . . Who is going to be first?"

As Tara watched intensely from the dark recesses of the room, April motioned to a brunette woman, reporting for one of the networks.

"I'll give you the numbers, you fill in the blanks."

April reached into a box of felt tip pens and pulled one out.

"Here, this one is for yellow journalism."

Before the crowd, a huge puzzle was drawn in a thick black outline where each piece had a number.

"Each of these pieces represents a person or group that is on the guest list, and today, we're going to start putting the puzzle together. This is our guide to who has responded. And let me tell you, now, . . ." April couldn't stop herself,

" . . . our special guest hasn't RSVP'd yet. We're still waiting!"

Tara gasped louder than anyone. But no one noticed, as the news of 'the special guest' sank into their minds.

"I know I've denied it until now, but to answer your next question, yes, there is someone I want to attend that hasn't said 'Yes.' Yet . . ."

"Who?" Several reporters shouted.

April just laughed, "It's a secret."

Tara smiled.

"Okay, are you ready?"

April led the woman to the exhibit, and the coloring of the map began. This path was leading April to her destiny. She watched in awe as the next man chose red, and filled the second blank. It wasn't long before everyone had a turn.

She observed one by one each of a thousand pens appear, be used once and be put into a barrel for donation to the charity. Each pen had to be different, and it had taken a long time to get all the companies to send one of each from their styles. April had positioned three volunteers at the barrel to record who used which pen on what number puzzle piece. Each participant that day immortalized themselves by signing the official Mad Hatter Register. Most of these people were not on the guest list, therefore this would be as close as they would get to The Tea Party.

"All I'll tell you is this," April tried to appease them, "keep the faith, keep asking questions and who knows, maybe you'll get the answers you want."

She left the platform, resisting the urge to point out which piece was his.

Maybe he'll see the news or something.

Tara's mind raced with poisonous notions. She would have to stop this soon. The next letter she mailed that night, with one pair of gloves covered with blood, the other pair was clean for the outside envelope. She put a note in this one, scrawled in her perfect forgery smeared with blood from her steak.

It read:

YOU WILL MAKE THE PERFECT SACRIFICE

COME TO ME YOU DEMON SEED

IT IS TIME TO DIE

Be led into the slaughter, you.

If that doesn't scare him away, nothing will!

Tara sealed the envelope with a touch more of the bloody juice, and dropped it into the mailbox outside the Yes Oui` Si` office.

Back at her hotel room, Tara looked through the rest of the envelopes. She laughed at her perfect crime. She packed her bags and checked out. With a quick call to April to say she was too sick to come in the next few days, which would lead into the weekend, therefore she would see her on Monday.

At the airport, she stored the rest of the letters in a locker, except for the next few. These had been postmarked from California, so Tara went home for the next phase.

On the airplane, she fantasized how it would be to see the look on his face when this next little gem showed up in the mail. With her right there by his side, she created the perfect alibi. Los Angeles greeted her with open arms, and her driver waited in the bar by the terminal. She called her man from the car.

"Hey, Chance, I'm going to come over tonight. Okay?"

"Great!"

She tried to picture where he might be hiding the letters this time.

An hour and a half later, Tara and Chance were together again. Even as they kissed, each felt the distance between them. No one said a word. They fell into the bed where Chance removed her blouse one button at a time. He slid her underwear off, pushing her mini skirt up over her hips, She tried to get up to take it off but her pushed her onto the bed, this time holding both of her hands over her head with one of his hands locked through her fingers. With his other hand, he touched her between the thighs.

April felt a warm sensation spread through her body, tingling. She wanted to believe that he was thinking about her. Her eyes darted around the room, hoping to glimpse a shimmer of him anywhere. She saw nothing. When she went to check on her sleeping child, she paused in the doorway. Holding her breath, the young mother waited for the rise and fall of another whisper before she relaxed.

Just as she turned to leave, something caught her eye in the mirror.

A H S A T A N

Ah, Satan?!?!

April gasped for air, crumbling backward into the hall. The wall behind her broke her fall, but still she slid it down until she was on the floor. Blackness swallowed her world.

The dragon moved in the shadows where she traveled, until the spirit of April could see that the game was nearing its final stage. She had to move a pawn until it became a queen, which was unlikely since the serpent waited there to devour it. Since when does chess have snakes?

When April came to, she rubbed her head tenderly, wondering how long she lay unconscious. With one swift move, she tore down the banner.

That night, Tara waited in the doorway, hoping that Chance would ask her about her quiet sadness, but he said nothing as he watched TV. She paced back and forth through his bedroom, trying to arouse his attention, but with no success. Finally, she couldn't help it,

"Chance, I'm pregnant."

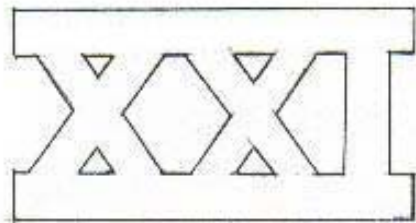
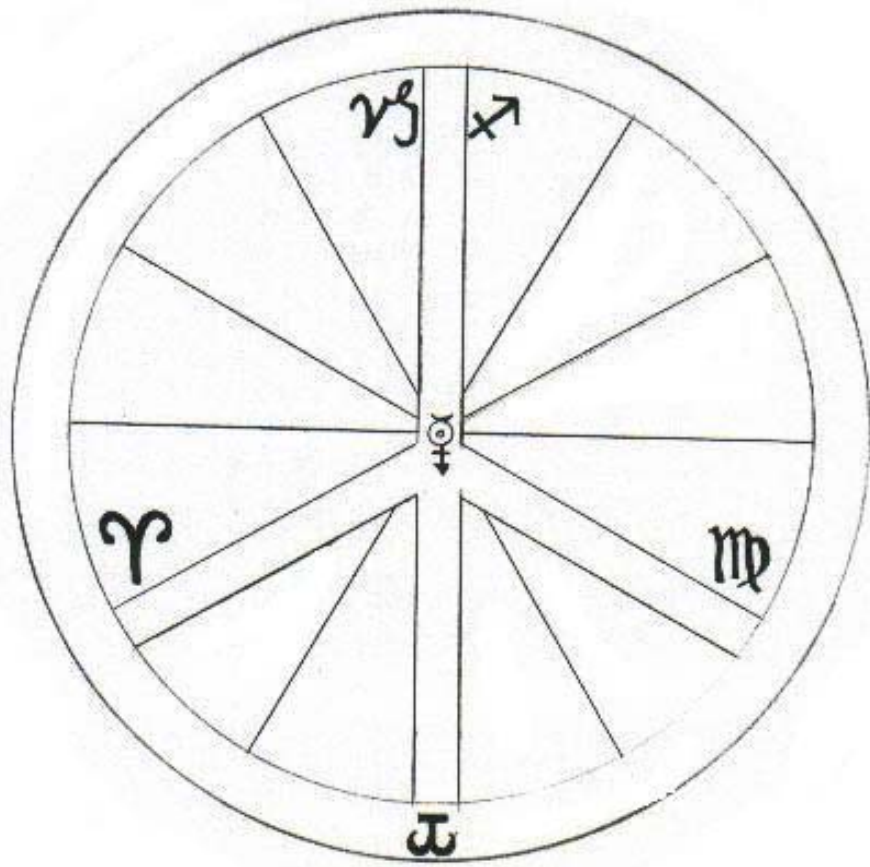
At first she thought he hadn't heard her, so she swallowed hard and repeated herself. He still didn't respond.

What was he supposed to say?

Finally, he turned to look at her,

"Are you happy?"

"Are you?"



QAN
7-3-97

XXI - The World/Universe

"... for well you know that it's a Fool

who plays it cool, by making his World

a little colder."

Beatles

Hey Jude

March 24th (The Day):

It was apparent that April was not as excited as everyone else that morning, and yet no one bothered to ask her. They knew. It didn't take Sherlock Holmes to figure that out. Special guest #1 hadn't responded. Or so they assumed.

They were only partly right.

That morning, April had broken down and called Sarah, inviting her once more. No amount of begging would change Sarah's answer.

"I really can't come. We're going out of town in a few days and I have got to get ready?"

"Not even for a few hours?"

"Really, I just can't."

She hung up knowing that she would never see Sarah again. It was over.

April wandered through the auditorium, watching as each participant filed in with their entourage in tow. She greeted them with directions to the costume department, praying that the measurements sent ahead would still fit. There would be no dress rehearsal for this. It had to be right the first time.

Each time she drifted past the costume department, she looked in the door, her eyes involuntarily focusing on the unclaimed March Hare costume. She had to guess his size, only she figured it a little on the large size, jic.

From there, she automatically went to the registration desk, where overhead glared the puzzle outline, almost completely colored in except for his space . . . and a few others.

Soon she would have to get dressed herself.

Tearing herself away, she went to her dressing room, where she was met by a throng of reporters. She ducked quickly past them, into the room where she alerted security over the hand-held radio tucked in her pocket.

""They need to be in the hospitality room or out on the floor! People are getting dressed back here! Make sure they are kept away from the costumes . . . yeah, we don't want . . . yeah, okay!"

She hung up, listening for the group outside her door to be directed elsewhere.

I used feel lucky to be in that group! My how things change!

April wasn't ready to get dressed, since it was hours before The Tea Party started and she secretly wished for more time to wait for . . . to wait for what?

If he was going to come, he would have been here by now. I am just going to have to fall back on plan B.

. . . but there wasn't one of those!

She called back to the registration desk to see who all was unaccounted for at this point. They were happy to report that every piece but one had been colored in at last. She knew better than to hope, but she asked anyway,

"Which one?"

"Number 324, right in the middle," the girl answered, wanting to ask but still too new a volunteer to cross that imaginary line. She had been warned.

April sighed, trying to imagine whom she could use to replace him . . . sad that it seemed inevitable that she would have to do so. She open the safe and from it, she pulled a box. It was the second copy of the puzzle, which contained duplicate pieces just in case of this. She flipped through until she found the one she needed. She put it in her pocket and the box, she put back into the wall. The single cardboard puzzle piece became her personal worry stone as she rubbed it endlessly, hand tucked away.

Tara, smiling sincerely for the first time in ages, hurried Chance from the car into the airport terminal. She practically dragged him to the counter, as she made her way through the crowded lines. Eye contact brought her friend over from the other side of the desk, leaving his line of travelers to watch in horror as he abandoned them for the newcomers.

"Thanks, Roger! Here's my credit card."

Chance noticed the hostility emanating from the tourists, but he chose not to respond. Only one couple recognized him, coming over for a closer look. A moment later, the guy asked for his autograph. He obliged.

"So, where are you going, Chance?"

"Oh, she wants to go swimming somewhere . . . says it's a surprise."

"You're not going to The Party, are you?"

"What party?"

Chance knew what the kid would tell him, and he wished he hadn't let him go there. Already, the liquor was wearing off and he was starting to regret his future decisions.

"Do you think I should go?"

"Oh, dude! If you don't want to, let me go!"

Chance's hand dropped into his pocket, where he kept the invitation - the piece. He almost gave it away when Tara said behind him,

"Well, if I've crossed my eyes and dotted my T's, then I guess we're all finished."

That's it! April said she wouldn't do that . . . She never dotted her i's. She put hearts, stars, whatever but never a dot. I can't remember why, though.

He pictured the new envelopes, and tried to picture the i's. Was that the difference? Still lost in thought, he watched Tara's suitcase disappear into the loading area chute. Then she took his, handing them over to her friend as well, smiling brilliantly, not noticing the look on his face.

She waved good-bye as she took the tickets from the man behind the desk, and with a wink and a nod, she led Chance away.

"We leave from gate #6, and we have time to get a bite to eat, maybe a couple of drinks, and hey, . . . look at this!"

Tara pulled him into the gift shop. She pointed to a rack of souvenir t-shirts, the one she picked out to try on had a silhouette of a wolf howling at a full moon. When his eyes saw that, he gasped. Then he looked up at her face. He knew what he saw was from the dream.
His heart stopped.

"I'll be right back . . . I'm going to try this on."

"Uh, . . . okay. I'm, . . . uh, . . . going to the bathroom. I'll meet you in the bar in a few minutes."

She waited in the bar for an hour until the plane bound for the islands left. By the time she boarded the airplane bound for Texas, Chance was less than an hour from landing there himself. He was lured there, drawn by her mystery. He was petrified by the idea that he was actually going but unable to resist the temptation. He had to know!

A hundred dollar tip would see to it his bags would be forwarded to his hotel, whatever that meant. He would have to call later, he told the lady in the baggage department. The limo he had ordered from the sky-phone was waiting for him as promised. He told the driver that he had to hurry.

"I'm late for a very important date!"

Chance smiled out the window as the miles flew past, with the trees. Everything seemed so green.

Another hour, and the car pulled to a stop at the concert hall. He waited a moment before opening the door, still wavering on whether to get out or not. The parking lot was filling up quickly, people milling about straining to see who was behind the tinted windows of the limousines that line the sidewalk.

"Uh, driver, could you see if there is a better way for me to get in here? I don't really want to fight a crowd of people, if you know what I mean."

Around the back of the Majestic Colosseum, Chance recognized the back stage door. It had been a long time since he played this theater. The nervous energy swept over him just like back then. Only then it was his first show . . . God, I'm nervous!

The driver opened Chance's door and let him out. The smell of fumes reminded him of so many venues, but this one was not like any other. He remembered April. He knocked on the limo window, and asked for the driver's pager number just in case he changed his mind. He started to pay the driver to stay but the crowd around the arena was thick with security, which made him feel slightly better.

At the backstage door, he was stopped by a young volunteer girl who didn't recognize him. He laughed but it made him feel old. Another attendant, a man with a thick beard, sunglasses and a radio, took Chance in to the registration, as he signaled the others that another guest had arrived. The guy talked in code, but Chance heard that he had his own trailer in back where he would spend the night.

I wish I hadn't sent my luggage to another part of the world . . .

Inside the pavilion, Chance put on his sunglasses, half afraid to be recognized, but too much was going on for anyone to notice him as he snaked through the winding halls. He remembered these corridors. As he turned the corner, Chance ran into a woman dressed in black from head to toe.

Oh, no! It's her!

He ducked back around the corner, but when he poked his head back around the corner, she was gone. He realized that was what she had looked like when they met in this very place so many years ago. Chance had seen a ghost of the past, but was it in his mind?

He laughed nervously, checking again to make sure the image was still gone. Then he reached in his pocket for a cigarette, turning back toward the way from which he came, still fumbling for his lighter. He stopped short to keep from running into the person behind

him.

"Oh sorry, I didn't see you coming!"

Chance looked up as he apologized, and came face to face with April. Both gasped involuntarily.

"Uh, . . . uh, . . . I, uh . . . Oh, my God! It's you!" April stammered as her face flushed bright red.

"Do you have a light?"

Tara steamed as she waited for the next flight to Texas. She drank more. By now she was bent. She made a few calls. And waited.

April tried to keep her voice steady and professional as she guided him to the costume department, just like she had all during the day. The thrill she experienced each time she led another legend here or there that afternoon was nothing compared to this. She wanted to throw up.

What do I say to him? How do I . . . does he know . . . did he get . . . oh, God! I'm going to die right here.

"Hey, Kelly! I'm glad you decided to come back to work with us today! We sure did miss you!"

The little red head came to the door, eyeing Chance with a silent smile.

"I'd like you to meet The March Hare! Chance Lee!"

She nodded, with a seductive look that made April feel a twinge of jealousy, even though Kelly looked at everyone like that. Chance didn't notice. He had other things on his mind.

"Have his costume delivered to his trailer, please, honey! Thanks!"

April continued to lead him down the passageway until they came to the registration table. By now, this was media grand central, roped off but anticipating the next arrival. April stopped.

"Maybe we should wait . . . You are . . . uh."

She took his arm and led him away, back toward the halls.

"Uh, you're the . . . you're the special guest."

April's averted eyes finally looked up into his. She melted.

"I've got to sit down for a minute . . ."

April felt embarrassed but she wasn't able to stand up on her own. He watched her collapse onto the cement floor, sitting Indian-style, with her head between her knees. He looked around but no one seemed to notice. Chance bent down to her, putting his arm around her shoulders. Her hair smelled like her letters. Now he felt faint.

Next thing, they were both sitting side by side on the hard pavement with their heads down. After a long moment, they looked up at each other at the same time, and busted out laughing.

"Guess it's catching," Chance explained.

He helped her to her feet, not sure what to say. Luckily she had her spiel all worked out, about event time, coordination and such, but none of this is what she wanted to talk about. She wanted to ask him about the dream and the dragon, the chart and the revelations that she tried to share. Instead, she talked about who was all there so far.

They walked down heavily guarded corridors until they reached the trailers that lined the parking lot out back. He reached out and stopped her.

"Why am I the March Hare?"

She thought of his Chinese astrological sign, how he was born on Easter, how fertile he made her feel like the pagan rabbit of that season, and how Alice had chased him so. That was how April met the Mad Hatter in the first place.

I can't tell him all that.

"You're no bunny 'til some bunny loves you!" was all she could say.

"Have you ever read the book on the chess game that is played in the Alice in Wonderland book?" Chance thought about the picture on his wall that she had sent. But with that came the memory of the recent rash of letters, sent with their poison.

"No . . . is it good?"

"Yeah . . . did you, um . . ." he wasn't sure what to ask. "Did you send me some letters recently?"

April flushed, embarrassed, "Yes, I sent a bunch of letters over the last decade!"

"No, I know about those . . . no, what I mean, is did you send me all those letters again?"

"No, I don't think so? What do you mean?"

"Somebody sent me all your letters again. Never mind, I think I know who might have done it?"

April's mouth shot up to her mouth, "Someone read my letters?"

"Well, actually, they stole your letters, then sent them back."

"I don't get it."

"That's why I'm here . . . I didn't tell you I was coming because I wasn't going to. It was really spooky getting robbed and stalked all over again. Oops, I'm sorry . . . I didn't mean to put it like that."

"Yeah, look who's stalking!"

"Never mind. I know who did it now . . . you told me once that you would never dot your i's unless you could dot your eye with my apple, whatever the hell that was supposed to mean . . ."

"You didn't get that reference, huh? I'm not surprised."

She started toward his trailer once again with him right behind her. They were at the door a moment later. He knew his trailer was better than all the rest, and it flattered him. Once inside, her adrenaline returned, causing her heart to flutter again. She didn't want to leave, but felt awkward standing at the door.

"You didn't bring much luggage with you?"

"Oh, shit, I forgot! Can I use the phone? I need to contact the airlines to let them know where to deliver my stuff."

"If it's any help, we have an assistant assigned to help you. Whatever you need can be handled by one of the volunteers . . ."

His thoughts flashed to Tara, and he laughed.

"They can help me with my bags . . . but there are just some things better left alone."

Chance sat on the sofa, kicking his feet onto the table, making himself at home. He watched her shift side to side in the door, feeling her nervous pace. It wasn't unusual for people to act like that around him, and it was all he could do to appear calm himself.

"Well, I guess you'll want to freshen up a bit, so if you want, I'll send someone over . . . "

"You're not leaving, are you?"

"Never! Leave? What was I thinking? I'd never leave . . . until I heard the sirens. Or if I felt like it, I guess . . ."

His eyes followed the curves of her body, which was fuller now than the first time they met, more voluptuous. Her blue dress clung to her, causing him to notice the swell of her nipples. She felt his eyes like hands across her. Lust rose in her but she had to fight the urge.

"You're not going to do anything weird, are you?"

After all those letters, that stalking thing, this whole damned event . . . you are sitting right here, asking me that?

"You mean, I haven't been weird yet?"

"Yeah, you've been pretty weird!"

"So, what are you saying?" she asked, not really sure she wanted to hear the answer.

"Well, . . . you know!"

Tara boarded the flight, stoned drunk and vicious. No one said a word to her. The crew could see the rage brimming just under the surface of passenger #57, the dark imp of first class. Staring out the portal, she never even saw the clouds. What she gazed at was in the back of her mind, and it wasn't pretty.

"Well, no . . . I don't know," April insisted, even if she did have an idea.

"You aren't going to . . . you know, like kill me, or anything?"

"Oh, God! No! I love you! I mean, I don't really even know you but . . . I don't want to hurt you! I might wrestle you or something . . . I can't believe I said that, but no, yeah . . . No!"

He laughed, rolling his head side to side and in a circle, trying to release the tension that built up during this trip.

"So, why am I here?"

How am I supposed to answer that?

"Chance . . . I don't really know how to tell you anything without telling you everything. So, where do I start?"

"How about starting at the beginning?"

April laughed, In the beginning, God . . . and knew that was a little too far back. So she skipped most of the story, figuring that in Time maybe she'd get around to the really good stuff. For now, she just raised her palms toward the ceiling in a exaggerated shrug, looking all around, motioning toward the trailer around them.

"Let's start with the end . . . here we are! Actually, this is where I first met you, right here in this building . . . well, not this trailer . . . but you know. Do you remember?"

"You gave me a flower!"

"Yeah . . . you were so hot, dude! I wanted to kiss you right there. But I tried to be a good girl."

"You looked pretty good to me . . ."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah . . ."

"Yeah?!"

Chance winked at her. April had to remember to breathe, gasping suddenly inspired.

"I know what we should do someday?"

"What's that?"

"All your albums so far have been basically done in black and white, right? Well, your next one should be in color!"

His forehead wrinkled as he tried to comprehend what she was trying to say.

"Like Dark Side of the Moon! Just the other day, I put it on with the Wizard of Oz, and it blew my mind. I want to help you do the rest of the movie."

She continued to brainstorm, detailing the change of his cover art work from black and white to color, market the fact that this album fits right in after the Pink Flood as the audio track to the Wizard of Oz, and after this Party, he and she could create this next adventure.

Chance, still burned out on the idea of working, didn't see it as clearly. It rubbed him the wrong way for a second, but then he remembered something she had written:

Friction and resistance cause heat and Light!

Maybe he should listen to her for once. She didn't know his situation but seemed to be inside his head, when she spoke of the next project. Childhood memories floated to mind as she relayed the layers woven in through the lyrics of his other albums with the lines in the movie itself. April explained how Brain Damaged was the Scarecrow, how the Tin Man had his heart,

"Thump, thump . . . thump, thump . . ."

. . . and now if he'd do it, Chance could be the first person to finish where they left off: the Cowardly Lion!

"That's if you're not scared!" April said teasingly.

He hadn't seen the first half dubbed with DSOTM. She promised to show it to him, if they had the time.

"Oh, what time is it?!"

"Well, LA time is two PM, so carry the one, divide the total by zero."

"It's four, then . . . When I came back here from California, I had to set my clock two hours ahead. When I got to my parent's house, I had to set it twenty years back."

Chance was amused but he didn't want to see her go. Nor did he want to ask her to stay. April needed to do something; she did have a show to put on and yet, she didn't want to walk away.

"Well, I guess I should send for your assistant, your costume will be here soon . . . do you need anything before I go?"

"A kiss . . ."

"A good-bye kiss?"

"No, just a kiss."

She waited for him to get up but he didn't. Standing by the door the whole time, April realized how nervous she must look. Transfixed on the magic of the moment, she froze.

Chance said nothing.

Finally, she shuddered, bringing her back to the proposition.

"A kiss . . . huh? Is that all you want?"

"I'm not sure. Let's start with that. Come here!"

April floated to him, choosing to kneel between his legs, until her arms rested on his knees, bringing them face to face. Their eyes searched for answers, recognition, something unspoken and perhaps, as of yet, unknown. She hesitated, refusing to make the first move.

I think I've made enough first moves. It's your turn . . .

His hands cupped her cheeks, tilting her head to the left. Eyes opened, Chance kissed April for the first time.

When they parted, each felt the electricity between them, and it was good. Maybe there was really something to this, he wanted to say but couldn't find the words.

"Your girlfriend is one of the volunteers, you know."

Chance suffered the blow. Visibly shaken, he knew trouble when he heard it. What he asked next, he already knew the answer.

"What girlfriend?"

"Tara . . . she works for me."

"Don't ever let her hear you say that she works for you! She'll ruin you!"

"What . . ."

Chance rubbed his eyes, then stood up, pushing April gently away. She didn't like what was transpiring, wishing she hadn't said anything . . . at least, not at that moment.

Just one more kiss . . .

Pacing nervously, he blurted out,

"I have to go!"

"No!"

He looked at her, fear in his eyes.

"You don't understand . . . she, you . . . this isn't happening!"

"Look! She hasn't been here today. She hasn't returned my phone calls. I don't think she's coming."

"Oh, she's coming, alright . . . and she's going to be pissed."

April switched on her hand-held radio.

"All security bulletin. Detain the Bitch! Put her on the train . . ."

Chance watched her replace the radio onto her hip, this time leaving the volume on low. He waited to get an out.

"It's all set up . . . uh, I'm sorry I called your girlfriend a bitch but that's what the volunteers call her . . . not to her face. I'm sorry . . . I shouldn't have said that . . . Jeez, this is great. Please don't leave!"

"What did you tell security?!"

"Well, she came to work for me a little while back, and we just watched her work. Big city girl ain't too wise to our country folk ways, and she tried to, you know, get overly involved. We had many a meetings about her, put it that way. I knew she was your girlfriend, so I just had to work around that fact."

"How did you know she was my girlfriend?"

"Uh! Hello!!"

Oh yeah, she's obsessed with me.

"So, what did you tell them?"

"You don't really want to know!"

"Maybe you're right. Look, I don't think I can wait for her. I don't like the feeling I'm getting from this."

"You will, come on!"

She led him to the door, but paused before opening it.

"You don't think I'd get you all the way here just to let a little thing like Tara stop me? I eat people like her for lunch."

April opened the door, and started out. She stopped, looking over her shoulder at him,

"Figuratively speaking . . ."

I've got you now, Chance. I'm coming to get you, and your little bitch, too. Tara knew where to send her luggage, and was working on getting his sent with it. She was hustling the clerk, and soon money would appear. Tara was a master of the craft. And either way, she was going to catch up with him . . . and with her. I'm right behind you . . .

Chance felt better as they rode in the white limousine away from the venue. He wondered what would happen to him . . . to the show . . . to the bitch.

"So, we're on plan B. This was expected. I knew she was there for a reason, but she never mentioned you, and that seemed odd."

"Did you?"

"Mention you? No way! When she walked in the door the first day, I thought she might kick my ass. I mean, I've sent you a lot of strange shit. I half expected the feds."

I thought about it . . .

Chance listened as she explained that Tara would be detained at the gate, diverted to a secluded spot until further notice.

". . . and upon that notice?"

"Well, Chance, . . ." April didn't want to tell him that. "I think we should wait and see how she acts, . . . if she even shows."

"She'll be here!"

The man looked out the window at greener pastures, hoping that he could feel as sure about it as April appeared. She spoke in code on her cellular, which then made her look out the windows herself.

"I don't see you! Oh, there you are!"

She pointed to the police car, which waited for the limo to pass before falling in behind them. April covered the mouthpiece, whispering,

"Quick, Chance! Hide the dope!"

He jumped in his seat, before realizing that he didn't even have any.

"Thanks, officer!" April continued the call. She gave some more directives before hanging up the phone.

"Okay, we're going to put you up at the house behind mine. We furnished it, and it's all yours. While you're in town, you will have as much or as little security as you wish. She thinks you're the Mad Hatter, by the way. Or so rumor has it."

"Who does she think you are?"

"Alice, of course. Told her myself."

He had to smile. Someone had out-hustled Tara. He wondered what April meant to do to her if she didn't act right, whatever that meant.

She'll get what she deserves.

Something told him.

When the limo turned the last corner into the drive that led to April's trailer, and the house farther back in the woods, Chance got a chill. He had seen the house before.

"You don't have a dog, do you?"

"No, but put in the rider contract and we'll have one shipped to you."

"That's okay . . . I don't want a dog."

"So, what do you want, Mr. Lee?"

No one called him Lee, except Greg.

"The question is: What do you want, Ms. Leigh?"

Her mind raced with the sacred and the profane.

"A kiss . . ."

This time, she moved into his arms immediately, and their tongues met, wet with fire. All the rush of energy which flowed from her, burst into him like a surge of electric spirit. His breath filled her nostrils, warm like an old memory. The kiss didn't end until the driver opened the door. Busted, they laughed and pulled away from each other.

April got out first, almost falling, weak in the knees still. She tried to picture how her home looked in his eyes. Embarrassment almost overwhelmed her but she managed to assure herself that the house he was to stay in was really set up nice. Maybe not as nice as he was used to, however.

Chance stretched once he got out of car, surprised that the air was clean. He hadn't experienced that in a long time, and had almost forgotten it existed.

"Wow, there's a cow over there . . ."

"Stay calm, just don't look it in the eyes."

April wanted to make him laugh. She had never wanted anything so much in her life. He seemed like he needed some good times.

Lord knows he's had his share of bad times.

Inside the house, he could see her trailer, which she pointed to from the front window, so he could watch her for a change. A quick tour of the place revealed the detail to which she had gone to arrange this.

"But what about that huge trailer you gave me back there?"

"Where do you think Tara's going to look for you first? She'll be entertained, detained, or contained depending on what transpires."

He remembered the letters.

"You didn't break into my house, then?" Like she wouldn't lie, too.

"No, honey, I don't go where I'm not supposed to . . ."

"Except, that time we kicked you out of backstage, huh?"

"Oh, . . . I didn't think you knew about that."

"I had security, too, you know."

April hadn't thought about that until now. She had been detained, too, hadn't she? Now it came clear in an ironic twist of Fate.

Tara knew the road, and was able to judge the time it would take to arrive. Nothing would stop her now. Her smile returned as she prepared for the fight of her life. There was no way she would go quietly into the night.

The tender kisses came easily for the couple, as if they were old friends. April knew she wanted this moment to last forever, but the Tea Party nagged from the back of her mind. She had to get back to the show. She summoned the driver.

"Get the costume from the car, please. And send another car out here for Chance."

"What do you mean? You're not leaving me here! I've seen too many scary movies about the country and you're not leaving me alone."

Seriously!"

"Okay, okay . . . We'll work something out. I need to take a shower. Let's go to my trailer . . ." she pointed out the window, "over there, and I can change."

"Don't change a thing."

"Just my clothes, okay?"

Chance grinned, "Can I wash your back?"

"Mighty presumptuous, aren't you?"

He waited in her living room, aware of the water that ran over her body from the other room. Chance imagined her nude body, wet and glistening. His hand reached for the remote control as he tried to distract himself with a baseball game, but five minutes later when she returned wrapped in a towel asking about the score, he couldn't even tell her who was playing.

It's working.

April wanted to make love to him right there, but the time wasn't right yet. Or rather, she didn't have the time to do it right, and she would have to make herself wait, even if it meant that she might lose her opportunity . . . might lose her Chance. She forced herself into clothes, leaving the door open just in case he made the first move. A few minutes later, she was ready to go.

Back in the car, she called ahead to let the volunteers know that she was on her way, and it was time to ready Chance's new dressing room. He was anxious to see what she had in store.

The crowds poured into the auditorium, even though the show was still two and a half hours away. His mind flashed to that first night again. The limo then had made the same path around the venue, only the girl no longer stood in the streets. She sat beside him now. It was hard to believe . . .

His hand crept across the seat until it found hers, grasping it firmly. She looked at their entwined fingers, then into his eyes.

Do you remember me?

"I remember you standing over there with some girl, and you were waving and pointing. That scared the hell out of me!"

"Why?"

"How did you know it was me in the back of the car?"

"I didn't!"

He grinned, surprised.

"Then who were you waving at?"

"You."

Shaking his head, the man had to laugh. Then he recalled,

"That's right - you see shit, don't you?"

"When you put it that way . . . don't."

Chance apologized, ". . . I mean, you have visions, or so you claim."

April shifted in her seat, "Yeah, I'm psycho . . . I mean psychic . . ."

"No really! You sent me some stuff that I can't explain how you knew what was going on in my life. I can't really tell you what exactly I'm referring to but I just know that you read some of my cards, so you said, and it was too true."

"Master of the Obvious!"

"No really! I'd like to know how you did it!"

"We're here . . . Are you ready?"

"I'm not sure . . ."

"That's good enough for me! Let's go!"

April opened door herself, once they reached the curtain which cloaked the car from prying eyes. She had it all arranged. His dressing room was the only box seats occupied on the north side of the building, which she supplied with both a telescope and a good pair of binoculars, he could watch the event unfold from above. A switch engaged the monitors overhead, closed circuit, which covered all entrances and most of the grounds.

"Hey, that's my trailer!"

"No, that was never your trailer . . . that's your girlfriend's trailer."

He felt watched again. This girl was more cunning than he realized. But then again, up until now, he hadn't a basis for opinion except . . . those letters. Even before Tara fucked with them, they were scary.

Looking at his face, she had to laugh.

"Don't worry . . . my love! You will be able to see it all from here. If you don't like what you see, here's a radio, a cell phone . . . do you want a weapon?"

"Sure, I've always wanted a slingshot . . ."

"How 'bout a taser? Here's one!"

He became concerned.

"Do you really think I'll need all this?"

"I'm not going to let you feel at all vulnerable, if I can do anything about it. And so it seems, I got you all this so far . . . you tell me what you need."

"Take a guess . . ."

Her eyes watched a bulge appear in his pants.

"A kiss?"

Tara knew she was early, having plenty of time to do the hunt. She sensed that security would be tight, but when she saw twice as many guards at the participants' entrance as she expected, her instinct made her back away.

"Driver! Pull this beast to the far corner of the lot back there, and give me a minute to get ready to go in. And close the privacy shade!"

As the black machine wheeled slowly away, she began to scheme. A moment later, she put it together. She would go in with the media. Who could she bribe? Her focus fell onto a radio station's promotions truck. Bingo!

A few minutes later, she was in . . . dressed to kill in her new t-shirt and baseball cap, with the station's logo right on it. Tara was smart enough to prepare for an emergency, so she already had her backstage pass on when she came to the first security checkpoint.

Anybody? Anyone? Nope, not a soul . . .

And Tara was in.

A box of t-shirts and bumper stickers concealed her identity from the first line of defense, and now all she had to do was find out where Chance was staying. Look for the biggest trailer!

She knew how April worked, even if she never said a word. A few minutes later, Tara popped open the unlocked door of the largest trailer on the lot. It was empty. She closed the door behind her. The waiting game began.

"What the hell?"

April looked at the lone figure shadowed in the monitor on the trailer. She whipped out her radio.

"This is Mother Hubbard, wondering why the hell no one told me that the bitch was in the cupboard. Over . . ."

A perplexed male voice radioed back, "This is news to me . . ."

"Well, Bitch is wearing t-shirt and radio station cap. Full alert status . . . Cujo is in the Hole."

Chance watched the monitors come alive as people launched the security routine April had pre-determined. It was almost like watching a movie. In every camera, they moved into position around that trailer, where Tara sat impatiently. "I almost feel sorry for her."

"Do you want to go talk to her?"

"Hell no!"

They laughed. It was getting very comfortable, almost familiar. He realized that April was sharper than the average fan . . . and much more fun to be around than he expected. Up until this, he pictured her as a clingy, whining weak little freak. Except she kind of had a pretty face.

Now he realized that she wasn't weak. It made her that much prettier. She didn't have a bad vibe about her, even in this her most manipulative time of her life. She had power.

"Oh, we need to call about your luggage . . . I almost forgot!"

"Oh, yeah! But if I'd known she was involved, I wouldn't have waited so long. By now, I'm sure she's managed to get access to them, which wouldn't be so bad except I left my invitation in it."

"So? You're here, aren't you?"

"Yeah, but . . . I feel really bad telling you this. I left my piece of the puzzle in it. Who knows how long it'll take to track down the bag. I'm so sorry."

When he looked up to see her reaction, she held up the final piece.

"Where did that come from?"

"My pocket. Come on . . . it's about time to make your appearance!"

After fifteen minutes, Tara stood up, heading for the door. She was met by Kelly, who was the only volunteer willing to take up the challenge. If anyone could convince Tara to stick around, it was a girl like Kelly. Tara met her match here. They were two of a kind. Kelly made the first move.

"Who's that?"

Chance watched with interest as the second woman appeared. He observed the two kiss, feeling warm blood pump through his veins.

"Hey, Lee, it's all on tape, right over there. You can watch them later. I'm sure you'll get a whole eyeful of what I'm expecting to get on tape. You just wait."

She really is strange.

April tried to get him to follow her, but he stared at the television wondering what she thought would happen. Then he saw his girlfriend begin to undress the red head. He had to get away from this. It was turning him on.

"Yeah, uh . . . it's time to go," he agreed.

"One more kiss?"

" . . . at least!" Chance held her close, shutting his eyes to the scene in black and white which played itself out with its naked truth. He couldn't bear it; she was still his girlfriend. And here they were, each in the arms of another. One sin didn't cancel out the other. Two wrongs . . .

"Do you feel okay about this, Chance?" April tilted his face to read his eyes. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to do."

"As if . . ."

That is what April wanted to believe. She had to be sure he was completely free to back out at any time. Praying that he wouldn't didn't prevent her from offering him a way out at every turn.

Even if you choose not decide, you still have made a choice . . .

Rush blared over the speakers, like trumpets heralding the coming of the new day. The show had begun, and yet only April knew what she meant by it.

"I remember this song!" Chance brightened. "You turned me onto it . . ."

She thought about the decisions of biblical proportions, and he thought about the two girls kissing in his trailer. It was only natural.

I will choose free will . . .

Tara broke out her stash, immediately attracting Kelly's attention. She saw renewed interest glint in her hungry eyes.

For Kelly, she loved drugs . . . who doesn't? But this meant more than a free high. The next phase was in place, ready to be kicked into gear if necessary. She smiled directly into the camera's eye, which if she hadn't known where it was hidden, she would have never seen it. The higher she got, the more she performed for the camera.

"Man, Tara, you sure get good drugs!" was the audio cue. Now it was radioed back to April that the Dog-Catcher was on-call.

"It is done . . ."

April smiled at Chance, who wanted to remain oblivious to the details. She kissed him again, fully aware that he wasn't asking any

questions by now.

"Your girlfriend isn't going to bother us tonight."

". . . or tomorrow, huh?"

"Or tomorrow."

Chance watched her work the floor from the wings, where he could see the crowd filing in to the Mad Hatter's Banquet Hall, which was designed to serve over a thousand people lunch and to seat up to twenty thousand spectators. He marveled at the precision with which the event progressed.

Then Tara flashed into his mind.

I've got to be sure . . .

"Mother Hubbard . . . Energizer here. I gotta walk the dog."

April looked up from where she was, waving at him from across the stage where she was double checking the audio channels against her list of cues. She motioned as if to ask if she could go with him. He nodded eagerly.

I don't want to face it alone . . .

April handed over the clipboard to the bearded guy, directing his attention to the place where she left off. Ready to take another break with him, April refrained from hugging Chance, knowing that prying eyes were everywhere. His smile greeted her once again.

They walked away from the stadium, through the double door that led to the hallways. Once they passed into a completely isolated area backstage, they turned to each other and rushed into each other's arms. Their lips met, and moved gently, passionately over cheeks and eyes, until their tongues caressed.

Chance wanted her right then, but April knew that in these halls many lunatics roamed.

"Therefore, we should really wait."

His hand pulled her to the hyper-secure second dressing room, where he saw Tara and Kelly still partying in the first. He noticed that Kelly was wasted and her clothes were slowly being removed, piece by piece. When he turned up the audio, he witnessed one of Tara's famous rants that he had heard about but never seen. At first, he pitied whomever she was talking about until it dawned on him. She was talking about him.

The endless barrage of profanity that spewed from her mouth cut the final link between him and her. The end of an age was upon them. He and Tara were no more. Chance felt relieved.

"Can I turn this down? It's being recorded, and for nineteen ninety-nine, you can add this to your video library. Next showing is at eleven . . ."

She didn't wait for his answer. Chance didn't need to hear what was being said. April hoped she had what he needed, or at least some of it.

But when her mind thought back to the girl in the field so long ago, who had given 'it' up so quickly, she resisted Chance's more intense advances. When his hand slid up under her shirt, she wanted him so much, and yet told him no.

What am I saying? April, are you being stupid? Here he is and I just heard you say no. Oh, my God, don't stop, Chance! Please stop!

April's face showed her pleasure and her pain, as she tried to fight her lust for him. She wanted to make love to him more than anything; her body screamed!

"Do you think we should wait?"

Panting unevenly, April struggled with her own animal urges which garbled her speech. She shook her head, holding up her hand to signal that no words would come.

I'm not ready for this!

Chance was surprised. It wasn't often that he was rejected by a fan.

Especially this one . . . you'd think, if anyone would . . .

He knew she wanted him, didn't she? Maybe there was something else. The rock star stepped back with an air of bravado that masked his confusion. Before his thoughts turned inward, his eye caught the monitor.

Tara was through waiting, and had finally decided to go hunt down her man. Kelly was no longer amusing, starting to geek. It was time to go. So, with one swift move, Tara threw open the door to leave. The tape would show her leave the room, and seconds later, she would be pushed backward into the room, spun around until she was hand cuffed face down on the bed. To Chance, it looked like any episode of COPS, except for the star.

"What the fuck is happening, April?!"

She cringed, afraid that he might get enraged at this turn of events. April winced as she filled him in.

"Well, she's under arrest, it looks like . . . Look, Chance, I'm really sorry about this but we had to keep her from fucking up this event. She isn't a very nice person, can't you see?"

Oh great, I'm insulting his girlfriend . . . she's being arrested . . . he's mad! What else can I possibly say to really screw this up?

"It looks like she tried to leave . . ."

Chance's face was grim, concerned as he stared at the incarceration of his lover. If he had wondered how elaborate this plan really was, now he began to get an idea. The two watched as the police led her away, from monitor to monitor until she was placed in the back of a squad car and driven off the premises. She had fought, resisting by trying to kick anyone who came near her.

For a long time, neither person spoke a word. She held her breath in anticipation. His somber expression turned to April, forcing her to see his troubled eyes. Her heart skipped a beat.

"You had her arrested?"

Before April could explain, Chance burst into laughter. He rolled off the couch and onto the floor, holding his sides, shaking uncontrollably. Her wet eyes darted between tears and relief, flickering on the edge briefly until she accepted his mirth. Then she rubbed away the moisture, and almost laughed herself. Mostly she was relieved.

"Now I know why you wanted to wait, you know . . . until later. That was priceless! So that's the Dog Catcher, huh? Pretty serious business you got going on, huh? Wow, April, you are something else . . ."

"Yeah, but what?"

"Do you really want to know what I think you are?"

April was taken aback by that question, not sure she wanted to hear any answer to one like it, "Oh, uh . . . well, I uh . . ."

"I think you are a very creative person, who has had an over-active imagination for lifetimes and way too much time on her hands this one."

April wrinkled her nose at him, "I bet you say that to all the girls."

"And you've seen too many movies . . ."

Dress call was an hour before The Tea Party, which gave a window of opportunity to fix any last minute emergencies which might arise. Everyone should have been fitted by this point, but with all the excitement, Chance hadn't even looked at his costume. He poked at it with a hanger a few times after April laid it out on the couch, obviously unimpressed with his role.

"Why can't I be someone cool like the Mad Hatter or, I don't know, one of the Kings? Even Humpty Dumpty had a great fall . . ."

"Humpty Dumpty represents the Cosmic Egg of truth and knowledge, which fell to earth and 'broke' or rather became mundane. What was once sacred, became profane . . . and none of the King's horses and none of the King's men, here on earth, can make it whole again. Only the King Himself can!" April pointed up, referring to something bigger than any of them.

"Any other questions?"

Chance gave up the argument, and put on the outfit. He became The White Rabbit, and although he hated to admit it, the costume felt good. He wasn't himself today.

"Guess I don't have to hurry, huh?"

"Yeah, I know," April laughed, "you're late . . . you're late . . ."

"So, let me get this straight. We're just going to eat today, and then the actual event is tomorrow?"

"Yeah, we have it simulcast and a live audience on both days, but basically, no one will reveal their identity until tomorrow. The first day will just set the stage for tomorrow."

"When do you have us scheduled?"

"For what?"

"Us . . . me and you? I want to touch you. I want to be inside you. When do you have that on the agenda? When are you going to let me come inside?"

April stammered, fidgeting with her shirt buttons, unable to reply. She took a deep breath, looked him straight in the eye.

"I don't know!"

After she left, Chance watched her on the monitors until she disappeared into her trailer, which he realized suddenly that he had no idea where it was. He tried to memorize the path on the monitors, but unable to picture the path, he blew it off somewhat.

I'm sure she won't let me get too far away. I think she likes me . . .

He tried to decide how he was feeling about this whole situation. It was so dream like, that he became numb, almost melting into the scene like a trip through a memory. But here he was, sober and yet surreal.

I feel . . .

"God, April's a trip . . ."

He tried to find her on the monitors but she was still absent.

"I don't even know what she will be dressed as! She didn't kiss me good-bye, either!!!"

Chance had to stop himself from talking aloud, especially seeing how Big Brother was definitely all around this place. Then a thought made him chuckle. Looking at the screens on the wall, he mused,

"Today, it's me . . . I'm Big Brother!"

He had to get out of this room. If no one watches what the fish-eye sees, does it make a sound?

"Oh, God, I'm beginning to think like her! I am out of here!"

One last sidelong glance in the mirror, he resigned himself to being born under a bad sign - the Year of the Rabbit.

He took the stuffed carrot fastened to his belt, and pretended to nibble it.

"What's up, Doc?"

He hated what he saw.

"Are you talking to me? Are you talking to me?"

His accent needed work. Trying to be tough guy wasn't easy in a bunny suit.

". . . behind the rabbit? No, it is the rabbit!!"

He didn't even have to try to sound like Monty Python.

Some things just come naturally!

April felt so jittery, this being the first moment away from him. She hadn't anticipated this great good fortune. He wanted to be her lover.

He wants me . . .

She sensed all the doubts in the back of her mind, packaged them into a dark recess to be dealt with later. It was fortunate that this event was so well-prepared. There would have been no way for her to concentrate on anything else at this moment. Thoughts of the future, after the Party, lingered, but she did what she could to change her mind.

I want him . . .

Dressed in a flash, she was back out the door to find him.

The monitors in the corridors backstage showed the program, linked to the booth where the television broadcast originated. April was oddly disinterested with all of it. Her hands-off approach was to be commended, many would report later. She felt like a guest. No one asked her to help, and she did little to affect the outcome. Her priorities had changed, maybe.

I should be doing something . . .

Then she remembered Chance.

All he saw was a huge rat looking creature heading towards his lair, and knew it couldn't be April. He expected her to be the Mad Hatter, or Alice. When she came in, he just stared at her silently.

"Well? What do you think?"

"You look like a big rat?! What the hell are you?"

"I'm the Door mouse!"

"Why?"

April smacked her lips, offended, "You just don't get it, do you? You just don't get it?"

"Nope!"

"Well, I can't really bill myself as a major character. Who the hell am I? That's what the crowd would be asking. So, I figured I'd be the gate keeper, thus, The Door Mouse!"

"You look like a rat!"

When the two went to the Banquet Hall, they were greeted with a frenzy of flash photos and the cheers that came from the crowd when they recognized the White Rabbit. He waved to all, and then jogged his way around the perimeter of the floor, shaking hands with the fans. His talent shined as Chance acted out his portion of the scene in the book, without saying a word.

Once he came back to her side, he panted, "Man, I wish I hadn't done that! Now I'm sweating my ass off."

"We can disappear for a few minutes, if you want to cool off."

"No, that's okay. If I had you alone, I don't think it would help me cool off."

"Oh, shit! I forgot your piece!"

"The puzzle!"

"Hey, Chance! I'll race you!"

Together, they dashed out of the huge double doors, racing toward April's trailer. She knew the way. He didn't. Even when he was in the lead, she turned corners that he had run past already and he was forced to back track to follow her.

"I won!"

Chance leaned against the wall, trying to catch his breath, too tired to argue.

Inside the trailer, she located the single puzzle piece from the pocket of the pants she had tossed carelessly on the floor. Holding it between her finger and thumb, April offered it up to him. He tried to take it with gloved hands and great difficulty, dropping it twice before she finally put it in his special pocket, where each participant carried the puzzle piece. She knew it might be a problem and had tailored a solution.

He kissed her as much as she would let him, but with each of them wearing a fake nose, it quickly became a pointless endeavor. Laughing, he pulled away,

"We should really be going. It is bad etiquette to be late your own party, I'm sure."

"No, Chance, this is your party . . ."

The Hall was still when the lights went out. Overhead, a single beam of white light, grew wider and stronger as it slowly scanned the auditorium. It started its search slowly at first but sped up until it touched everyone at some point. The guest were still milling about on the floor, trying to locate their places at the table. April led Chance to their seats, which she personally chose next to the Mad Hatter himself. She wanted to be next to the spotlight, not actually in it. Just to bask in its warmth was enough. Right as they reached their spots, the light paused on the Mad Hatter. A voice announced,

"Ladies and Gentlemen . . . The Mad Hatter welcomes you to the first annual Mad Hatter Tea Party and Charity Ball. Let the carnage

begin!"

The overhead lights came brightly back, revealing the full effect of the crowd and participants, numbering twenty thousand at least. Hands and faces surrounded the theater, grotesque masks surrounded the two. Amidst the cheers, a distant drum grew louder. Carnival music spiraled into the picture, bringing the surreal mist of past circuses to mind.

Volunteers now wore costumes that ranged from frogs to playing cards, each brightly colored character filed into the arena amongst the guests. Oversized menus lumbered into the room dragging behind them wagons of huge folded cardboard list of the entrees. Scrambling around, the creatures delivered these to the guests.

The cover art was April's own design, a swirl of Lewis Carroll's vision which portrayed many of the guests in their costumes, whose identities had surprisingly been kept secret. Even as they dined, no one gave away their names, only introducing themselves as the character they portrayed. April was the only person who knew everyone involved. Her skin prickled with excitement as she looked from person to person, knowing who was hiding behind each facade.

"So, who is that?" Chance would ask, pointing to first this one then that one. April would smile, mysteriously, never answering his queries.

Soon all the menus were given out. TV cameras zoomed in to reveal the mysterious choices of treats, and confusion murmured throughout the room. On the huge screen, April laughed as it scrolled down. She knew what it said but no one around her had a clue. The Dormouse, who no one knew, quickly opened wrote down the series of numbers into the blank spaces, slammed closed the menu and gave it to the nearest card, a volunteer named Steve.

Chance looked at the menu, which read:

1. Bug's Delight 1st _____
2. Boston's Finest _____
3. Face Eraser _____
4. Devil's Tool _____
5. Colorado Cooler _____
6. Big Dipper 2nd _____
7. Little Dipper _____
8. Road Crosser _____
9. Angel's Treat _____
10. Grapes of Wrath _____
11. Walrus' Munchies 3rd _____
12. Jack's Goodies _____
13. Forever Fields _____
14. Big Bessie's Butt _____
15. Sea Sand _____

16. Sneeze Stuff 4th _____
17. Big Bessie's Boob _____
18. Stoney Sidewalk _____
19. Porky's Witch _____
20. Newton's Snack 5th _____
21. Caterpillar Cap _____
22. Let Us Lunch _____

April waited for his reaction, wondering whether or no to help him. She searched his face for the answer, but he just scanned the menu, saying nothing. Chance read each entry before turning to her,

"So, what am I supposed to do?"

"Well, put a number in each space . . . and see what happens."

He looked her in the eye, making her heart flutter. She offered,

"I know the best way to order . . ."

"I'll bet you do!"

Chance picked a huge purple crayon from the bright yellow basket of edible crocuses, and as he started to fill in the blanks, he looked up at her. He pointed to the first blank, then to number eleven. She nodded with a shrug. The White Rabbit wrote 11 in the first blank.

The next few blanks weren't so easy. April knew that if Chance ordered 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 together, he'd be sorry. For the first course he would end up with the #11 - oysters on the half-shell served with fried oysters, which would be fine but if she let him continue, she knew he would end up with a napkin, a fork, a glass of water and two different size spoons.

Even after her suggestion of spreading them out, he still managed to order quite a bad mixture of items. She just shrugged,

"You'll see!"

She was glad he didn't want her help. That was the idea.

In Majestic City Jail, papers were being shuffled but no one would let Tara make her call. Standard procedure is what they called it. She paced the cell, furious that right now her man and that whore were together!

And these country fucks won't even let me have my phone call.

She paced and pleaded, pushing her tits out a little farther as she whined and batted her eyes. It usually worked.

"Hello? I've got money. Can I post bail or bond or whatever? Please! Hello?"

This was not the place to be herself. She had to try hard to keep her cool. This wasn't her town . . . was it? It was April's.

"Did you know that you and Buddha have the birthday?"

"So?"

Chance found it odd, Where did that come from? He was flattered but that same old disturbing feeling came back. Here was this person right next to him, an obsessed fan who had stalked him for almost half her life. Why did he suddenly feel like running? It wasn't too hard to figure out . . .

April sensed something ill at ease, and rather than worry about it, she reached over, took his hand and smiled. She looked ridiculous in her costume, and it made him laugh nervously. He never did like mice. Or rats.

Uh, oh! He's getting a look that I don't like. What am I going to do?

April was right thinking that he was thinking about Tara. She was never far from April's thoughts anyway; it would only be fair to assume that he thought of his girlfriend at least some.

"You know one day Tara brought this bag into the office, and she was kind of acting strange about it so I asked her what was in it. She said, 'None of your fucking business!'"

Chance looked at her with a smile because it sounded just like Tara.

"So, anyway, as the day went on, she kept looking in it and wherever she went, she carried it with her. It started making the volunteers nervous, and so I had to ask her again, 'What is in your bag?' She told me, 'None of your fucking business!' Later that night, she was riding around with some of us in the van, when she went into the store, we opened the bag!"

April went back to drawing on the tablecloth with a giant red crayon. Chance waited for more but she just kept doodling. Finally he asked,

"So . . . what was in the bag?"

"None of your fucking business!"

He bellowed a side-splitting roar, realizing that he walked into that one. This girl isn't so bad, after all. In his mind he began to strip off her Dormouse costume, remembering how it felt to kiss her. He wanted more.

April hoped her joke wouldn't upset him. After all, for Tara, this wouldn't be such a trivial matter. In fact, it might have long range consequences that right now weren't evident, but

To Hell with Tara! She would ruin this if she could! It's my party and I can have you arrested if I want to. But what is he thinking? He must think I'm nuts . . . and I wouldn't blame him. But I know me, and most of the time I don't fuck people over. That's more than I can say about her.

Still holding her hand, Chance lifted it to his lips. A gentle kiss reminded him of her smell, which brought back the rush of sensuality that she gave him. He had been with prettier but then again, all he could see of her right then was mask. "Why are you the Dormouse?"

"Because I like to sleep a lot. No, I just like to sleep when everyone else is awake. Kind of like a vampire . . ."

. . . I suck! was what April didn't say.

"So, are you going to keep me up late tonight?"

He said 'up!' huh, huh, huh, huh . . .

"Chance, I'll keep you as up as you want to be kept!"

He raised an eyebrow.

The food arrived a few minutes later, at least for some. Chance wound up with strawberries #13, the oysters #11, baked beans #2, a plate of steamed carrots garnished with tiny peeled raw ones, still with the greenery attached #1, and a napkin, which he would need

since he was trying to eat the beans by using a toothpick that came with the oysters. Chance picked up one of the uncooked carrots, doing his best Groucho Marx impression.

Little flags stuck out of each plate, naming each item, as were all the utensils and drinks. People were trying to remember what they ordered for the other courses, but only a few could see the impending disaster. Twelve minutes later the voice returned, drowning out the music which was being piped in through the speakers. The video cut to the Mad Hatter who said,

"Change seats!!"

The cast of volunteers came rushing trying to hurry each guest out of their chairs, telling them to step back and prepare for Round 2. Once every guest was away from the table, April held her breath hoping this next portion of the event would go right. Thin cables with clips on the end descended from above, which the cards and creatures hooked to the edges of each table cloth. A moment later, all the tables were empty. The tablecloths were whisked away, raised to the catwalks overhead to be dealt with by the creatures from above.

Guests attempting to keep any of their first course items, were challenged by the servers who wrestled it out of their hands and went screaming to tell everyone else. The embarrassment was met with laughter. It was a mad dash to get all the guests seated again. The second course was as strange as expected

Each new course had them move one seat to the right, and every new tablecloth was a different color, the first was white, then came red and yellow, blue and green.

But by now, some of the characters were beginning to share their items, and for those without napkins, the tablecloth became useful. Silliness spread like fire, as each watched another struggle to eat. Small food fights erupted. The audience watched closely, trying to figure out who was who. The speculations had begun. Now Chance was better prepared for what was to follow, except this time he was delivered a fork, angel food cake #9, a glass of wine #10, a goblet of mountain spring water #5, and tarts #12. The sugar rush gave him a buzz.

By the third course, he was getting full even though the portions were overly small. April knew how much food would fill up a stomach, and with so many elements, she thought it best to serve extremely small portions. Chance discovered why. His third plate showed up with three slices of steak (rare, medium and well done) #14, but since he insisted upon it, Chance wound up with both spoons. With that round, he also received a jug of milk.

"The Big Dipper and the Little Dipper have to go together, just like Big Bessie's boobs and butt," he had told her. She just smiled and let him write it down. "This is like taking a test in school where you have no idea what they are talking about but the exam is multiple guess. There are no wrong answers!"

April agreed, "There's only wrong questions!"

Chance replied, "Change your view on life to what life means to me then grade me accordingly!"

The character who dressed as Alice came to the screen, acting out a scene where she pretends that she's being served up as a snack. The Mad Hatter was sitting next to Alice and when the camera pulled back, The White Rabbit and The Dormouse, seated on his other side, were kissing. Busted! The press took notice.

Chance had to move his nose to get in close, but he managed to feel giddy enough to kiss the rat next to him. This was turning out to be pretty fun after all. He was reaching out to stroke her breast when the lights of the video crew fell over them. They jumped apart. He blushed under his mask,

"Uh oh, what will people think?"

"People think?"

"What will my girlfriend think?"

Tara gave up on the officers, instead asking for a blanket. Napping always passed the time.

Time flies even when you're not having fun!

"Did you know today is Houdini's birthday?"

April smiled, "Oh yeah? We invited him but he hasn't shown up yet!"

"You're sick!"

Tara watched the man and the woman as they met on the porch, kissing hello. Inside her, the demon raged. She licked her lips, trying to catch the scent, but the breeze came from behind her. In the brush at the edge of the clearing, she waited for the sign.

Chance's fourth course was a ham sandwich #19, a salad #22, rocky road ice cream #18, and half of a green apple cut sideways to reveal the star inside #20. He had trouble eating the salad and ice cream without utensils, but tried valiantly to finish before the next course. The fifth one came with a stuffed mushroom #21, salt #15, and pepper #16. He was full.

April was the only person who had no trouble. The Mad Hatter himself sat through the last course with a napkin, a fork and the glass of wine. Upon his signal the balloons were released. Some were dropped from the ceiling, while others floated up from under the sheets that held them down. Somewhere in the middle, they met.

After this, the voice returned, "The Mad Hatter would like to thank you for coming to the Tea Party, and wants to invite you back tomorrow for the Charity Ball. And for now, let's dance!"

Music boomed, swirling to the light show that ensued. The characters who wished to remain, began to pair up and boogie. But for April and Chance, there were other things on their minds. They sneaked out immediately.

Backstage, they went straight to April's trailer, because it was closer than his box seat. There, she changed into a long black lace dress, with antique flowers printed underneath. When she returned from bathroom, all signs of the Dormouse were gone. He still dressed as White Rabbit.

"Do you want to hang out or go?"

Chance scratched bunny head as he thought about it.

"Where are my clothes?"

"At home."

"Then I want to go home!"

Flight #2112 touched down in Houston where a car awaited the traveler. Soon the two were heading toward Majestic. The minion in the back wore a wicked smirk. I'm coming to get you . . . run! Wake it up.

In the back of the limousine, Chance and April watched the faces of the crowd through tinted windows. He remembered this from the first tour.

"This is a first for me!"

April moved toward him as she spoke. On her knees, sideways in the seat, she began to remove his costume one piece at a time, starting with the whiskers. Gently tugging them away, she leaned in and brushed his cheek lightly with her lips. He felt her warm breath first on his face, then down his neck. The hair on his arms bristled.

By the time we get home, I wonder if I can undress him completely!

She stopped short, almost afraid of fulfilling the fantasy. What if it wasn't so perfect after all? After tomorrow, he would go and she would stay.

Oh, but he tastes so good!

Her tongue found his. And both of their eyes were wide open.

When the road got rough, April knew they were getting closer to home. Dark country nights were the calmest. The driver passed April's trailer, heading instead for the house in back. Cool air flooded the car when the driver opened the door for them.

"Hey, there's no need for any more of that tonight, you're off! You did great, Randy. Thanks a lot!"

From the way that April hugged the driver, Chance could see that they were friends. He watched April take the keys to the car and open the trunk herself. Inside were his bags. And Tara's.

"Come on in and have a beer!"

"No, thanks. I've got a date so I gotta run!"

Chance watched Randy leave in another car. April started hauling all the bags in herself.

"Here, let me give you a hand."

"I guess you know which is which and whose is whose," April deduced, as she was heading out the door. "Wait a minute . . ."

She forwarded her call to his phone, and switched on the answering machine. Pressing the record button, she created a new outgoing message.

"I'm a little busy, so leave a message . . ."

As an afterthought, April pulled back a cloth cover exposing the sound system she borrowed for tonight. She turned it on for him, directed him to the CD collection, and with a soft, quick kiss, she left him.

At her place, she showered faster than she ever had, dressed in silk, grabbed her bag already packed with her mysterious potions and pages. Candles and perfumes were her magic. Fresh make-up made her feel the power. What she saw in the mirror was her own reflection. It glowed.

Meanwhile, Chance chose Stoned Cold Believer, a song by one of his friends in the industry. He always like the guy. Maybe I should give him a call about April's idea. He always liked Floyd.

It surprised him to realize that he was even considering her idea. The more he thought about it, the better it developed. He hadn't ever worked with a girl, not like that anyway. Maybe there would be something to it.

He showered and changed into sweatpants. His wet hair left drops of water in his bare shoulders. In the refrigerator, he found a wide assortment of food and drink. Opting for a beer, he returned to the living room where he located the light switches. Playing around with them, he picked a low level mood which allowed him to see outside when he opened the curtains. From the sofa, he could see her house.

How ironic!

He saw her shadowed figure walking out of her door, toward his. It was about a hundred yards away, so he hoped it was her.

She felt eyes upon her, when she noticed his outline in the window. The spirit of the moment made her memorize the feeling, the taste of this experience. Her nostrils enjoyed the fresh air. Overhead, just a sliver of the moon slit the dark sky. This had to last forever.

Once she reached his place, he opened the door for her, helping her with the bag she brought. She thanked him before turning back around to go outside. He followed.

"I need to get this tarp over the car before someone sees it. I should have done this earlier, but I don't think anyone else is out here yet. I've had some media here back at the beginning, and I kind of forgot that they might show up."

April had it completed before he could even lend a hand. She turned him around to walk back inside, traveling so closely behind him that she kissed his bare back. Her warm hand slid gently across his rib cage to his stomach. Once they cleared the door, she spun around to lock the door behind them. Then she closed the curtains.

Dim head lights crept through town, roaming the streets searching for the hall. No longer were the stadium lights on. Only the crew remained to clean and set up for the next day. A few stragglers partied in the parking lot had no idea where April was . . . or who.

A rough map sketched onto a wrinkled piece of paper appeared in the hand of the newcomer. He didn't wait for further instructions.

Once April slowed down, Chance was able to embrace her. She had stopped him a few times, first pouring the wine, then lighting the candles and incense, and such, but finally he reached out for her and she glided into his arms. He could tell she was nervous.

Chance pulled her closer, brushing her hair back to lick her neck. He could taste the honey dust powder she wore. He licked his lips.

I remember . . .

For the first time in her life, she didn't want to hold back. She let all her best moves return to her life. No longer would she make herself be so 'nice.' She gave to him all her heart, and now she would give him all of her love. Her desires were many. She remembered what a man liked . . . and for one night, he was her man.

Just as she felt his mouth slide down her neck, tracing the cleavage which disappeared behind the lavender silk of her negligee, the telephone rang. His hands ran up her side until they cupped her breasts, fingers tugging at the thin straps over her shoulders.

There is no way I'm getting that.

"Aren't you going to get the phone?" Chance asked but without releasing his grip on her. He slid one side off her shoulder. Then his fingers found her nipple. Then his mouth.

She sucked in when the explosions of light burst across her closed eyes. Her heart pounded in her ears. April heard herself whisper, "Yes . . ."

The answering machine kicked on after the second ring, but after the beep, there was nothing but a click. No reply. The phone rang again, with the same results.

"I guess somebody has a hang up . . ." he replied.

"Oh, I get hang up calls all the time!"

Oh, shit! Should I tell her? His eyes flashed open as his mouth stopped licking her skin.

April looked down at him, trying to decide whether to talk or fuck. When she saw his face, she made her choice. She'd ask him!

"Do you want to talk or make love?"

Even if you choose not to decide, you still have made a choice . . .

"Oral sex?"

She laughed at him, "Whatever you want . . ."

Chance raised one eyebrow, with interest. It never was one of Tara's fortes. He pulled her over to the sofa, sitting down with her next to him. They both felt awkward, like two teenagers on a date, and in a way they were. The first date is usually the toughest. But this

one . . .

Their movements were stiffer than they expected, clumsily trying to find each others pace, like dancing. But it led to some deeper sensations taking place. As April regained her confidence, the more she controlled the tempo, the smoother the progress. She repositioned herself on her knees, as she had done so earlier in the car, but this time there was no costume to interfere. This was her chance of a lifetime.

Silently pulling away from the trailer, Ghost could see his little package on the doorstep from out of the car's rear window. He was well down the road when it went off.

The blast wasn't very large but the sound of it jolted the two apart. They looked into each other's eyes, neither wanting to hesitate, but feeling obliged, they stood up and went to the window.

The night sky was lit from the glowing orange flame that glowed from the far corner of April's trailer. Chance started to head toward the door.

"Stop! Don't go there!"

Instead she reached for her cell phone, and called Bob. A moment later, April pointed out the window to the fire truck that appeared on the horizon, its red lights flashing. Within minutes, squad cars led the media to the scene. All the while, she and Chance peeked from around closed curtains.

"Aren't you going to go see how your house is?"

She closed the curtain, replying only, "Everything I want is here . . ."

She returned to her lover, blocking out the flashes of red and blue that beat with the music. Turning up the stereo, they could muffle out the sirens as well.

"Don't worry about anything, Chance! Bob is taking care of everything. He's the head of the Fire Department and a dear friend. We're cool! He will stay all night, that's what he said."

"Are you sure everything is cool?"

"Whatever it is, it can wait . . ."

Free as a bird just like a feather in the wind. It is illusions . . .

April didn't worry about all her treasures which were jeopardized, or the clothes she might no longer have. She thought about asking him for his autograph however, just in case hers had been lost to the fire,

to start my collection over . . .

But rather than speak, she stroked his body tugging at the top of his pants. The elastic band gave easily, allowing her to run her fingers along the top while brushing his skin. His stomach tightened.

He tried to push her backward, onto couch but she resisted.

"I have something to give you first . . ."

April didn't pull away this time like he expected, but instead, she kissed him on the lips. He tried to pull her in again, and once more she released his grip. Her tongue dipped slightly between his lips before she dropped to his chest. Her cheeks felt the downy fur of his chest, course but soft. When her tongue found his nipple, her hand found the other and gently, she persuaded them erect.

"Stand up, Chance."

Her words were music to her ears, intoxicating yet bigger than life. This moment stopped time, and Chance. He rose up long enough for her to pull off his sweats. When he sat back down, she saw his lust for the first time.

He worried a little about what she thought about his personal parts, but from the way she acted, it didn't seem to matter. She refrained from talking dirty to him, half afraid that it might turn him off.

Her tongue traced over the ridges of his belly, first down one thigh, then up and over to travel down the other. She played all around, but never touched his cock. It grew even larger. With a flick of her tongue, she tasted him. Her mouth sent shivers down his legs. One gentle hand grasped it, then the other.

April lost herself as she concentrated on the moment, vaguely remembering how many times she pictured this moment. Her mouth watered, which she slid both palms through and down farther on his shaft. Her hands alternately gripped and released, rhythmically, as she let her tongue discover him.

Oh, my, my . . . she's, uh . . . so . . . she's so . . .

His blood pumped warmly in his veins, as the world around him faded into the gray haze of indifference to it. He tried not to orgasm, but she brought him right to edge right away. He felt her slow down, which was good because he couldn't speak to her. Her mouth pulled away, making him feel the cold air as a shock, but her hand replaced it. Now her tongue went down, wandering through the fur.

He felt himself become more aware for a moment, until she noticed it in his vibration. Once she knew he was back, she picked up where she left off. Now her mouth was hot. He melted slowly back into bliss as he sensed her hands, her fingers, her tongue. She did things that no woman had ever done to him before. Her timing was flawless. She brought him back up then again slowed him down. She wouldn't let him finish and it was making him crazy.

April was aware of her power over this situation and she sensed that she was making it too painful on him . . . too hard!

She let her hands grip slightly harder at times, now working them opposite of each other, which resulted in Chance's groan of pleasure. The sound penetrated her, taking her to the dream state while she sucked hungrily until she felt what was coming.

"Oh, my God! April . . ."

His eyes rolled back as he was propelled over the top of the roller coaster and the real ride began. He forced himself to open his eyes and look at his #2 fan. Her hair spilled wildly over his whole body, which she rubbed into his skin. He thought, "This is a Kodak moment!"

April relished every bit of the moment, eyes turned up to watch his face as she drained him of the poison. She loved his taste, his smell, his eyes. Never in her life had she wanted someone so much. And here he was . . .

She kept her face buried in his lap until every tremble quaked through him, wanting him to keep this moment forever. When she finally sat back up, she spoke,

"Can we talk?"

He laughed, "Yeah, for a few minutes anyway! Until Mr. Happy comes back. Then you are in trouble!"

"Oh?"

"Yeah . . . so what did you want to talk about?"

"Want to smoke a joint?"

He smiled, "Thought you'd never ask!"

When she got up to get it, he stopped her. Instead he pointed to one of the bags piled on the floor.

"Hand me that one . . ."

She brought it back over, sitting next to him on the couch. He fumbled through the pockets until he produced a perfectly rolled joint from a silver cigarette case.

"Smell this."

She took it, put it to her nose and smiled.

"You're right . . . we'll save mine for later!"

He lit it off the yellow candle, which he knew was her color. He hoped she picked up on it. From the look in her eye, she did. When she took it from him, it wasn't lit all the way around, so she leaned forward to get the light from the red one.

"Back at you . . ." erased any doubt he had.

They smoked in silence at first, listening to the music. Then he had to ask,

"So what did you want to tell me?"

"Tell you about what?"

"You know. Why am I here?"

"Because you're here . . . roll the bones," popped out, but when she had a chance to think, she realized that she didn't have an answer. All the crap that ran through her head flashed quickly by, but all she could say was, "I don't know."

He was disappointed with her answer.

"No, there's more to it than that! You and I have been through this for too long for you to give me an answer like, 'I don't know.' What is the deal?"

She stood up, offering him a drink. He argued that she was being too elusive suddenly, but shell shocked, April could only get the bottle of tequila. She poured two shots and brought them back with lime slices and salt. The bottle was tucked under her arm.

That's when he realized that she was still dressed.

She put her finger to her lips to silence him, while handing him one of the shot glasses to him. He held it still, watching her pick up the other. She held it out in a silent toast, before shooting it back. She gasped, following it with lime.

Chance didn't move, "I don't want a shot. I want an answer . . ."

She took the shot from him, nodded again and slammed it, too. Still without a word she filled both glasses again, and put his back in his hand. Hers sat on the tray.

After she could speak, April opened her mouth, pausing as if what she had to say was earth-shattering, monumental. She took a deep breath.

"Damn good tequila. You should have some!"

Under her breath, she muttered, "You're going to need it."

He took her advice, shooting his and hers back to back. He could tell she was at a loss of words, yet under the surface, the mysteries exploded behind her eyes. She had so much to say. But April knew it had to be right before she ever said a word. Tomorrow . . .

"Chance, I do have so much to tell you but it can't be said all at once. Do you understand? First off, we need to know each other a little better before I feel I can say what must be said. Secondly, when the time is right, you won't have to ask. It'll become apparent."

"If that's all you have to say, then I guess all I have to say is . . . okay, whatever."

She expected to see him pull away, but instead he moved closer. He tugged at her sheer veil, hinting that it should be removed.

"I'm in charge now!"

. . . and the one that comes after you is greater still.

April had to keep herself quiet, too much talk might ruin us. He made her undress, watching her from a slight distance. Once she was nude, his eye explored her curves. She fidgeted uneasily.

"Where's the bed in this place? Don't say a word, just lead the way."

She obediently turned, glancing back to make sure he was behind her. When she opened a door, she flipped on the light. Inside was a huge four poster bed draped with a sheer canopy, wrapped with vines and flowers. April had created this masterpiece just for this occasion, and she felt relieved that it hadn't all been wasted time. She waited for his next command.

"Nice work. Did you do all this?"

She nodded.

"Nice . . . Get on the bed. Don't move!"

When Chance returned from the living room with the tray, and the rest of the smoke, he smiled. She looked luscious in the glow of the candles she lit in his absence. His free hand caught the light. Her shadow towered overhead from the tiny flames behind her. As his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he scanned the four posts around her with an idea.

"Where is a rope?"

Her womb contracted, as her hormones surged through her veins. She pointed to her mouth.

"You can say it."

"A rope for what?"

He motioned to the post nearest him. Her heart raced. She pointed to her mouth again. He nodded.

"I have a treasure chest of goodies for you, . . . sir. In the closet . . ."

The closet . . .

He backed up to the door, never taking his eyes off of her until he swung the door open wide. Inside was the chest. He smiled at her.

"Come get this . . ."

She jumped off the bed heading toward the closet.

"On your hands and knees!"

She complied willingly. When she crawled into the closet, he told her to pull the trunk out with her teeth.

" . . . if you can . . . "

I can do anything you want, Chance. I believe . . .

She paused in the middle of the floor when he told her. She pointed to her mouth. He shook his head,

"No more talking! Show me what you have for me . . . "

She began to lick her index finger, performing imitation fellatio on herself.

"That's good! But it's not what I meant and you know it!"

Her wet finger slipped out and pointed at the trunk. He nodded.

It wasn't locked so she opened its latches easily, anticipating what she knew to be inside. When she lifted the lid, Chance saw that inside she had toys and trinkets that would take all night to experience. The first item he grabbed was the riding crop.

"And what am I supposed to do with this?"

She smiled coyly, feeling her face blush. He slapped it on the floor, then on his hand. Then he tried his leg.

"Hmmm, . . . turn around!"

The girl spun around, sitting on her knees facing away from him. He lightly spanked her ass with the whip. She flinched slightly,

"Okay, what else?"

She reached into the trunk and removed an envelope. He took it, flipped it over a couple of times, and tried to put it in his pocket. He didn't have any pockets. He set it back in the trunk unopened.

"Look, I said we are beyond words now! You had your chance to say what you had to say and you blew it instead. Figuratively speaking . . . So, now we do things my way! Do you have a problem with that?"

She shook her head no.

"Okay. What else?"

April saw a pair of handcuffs, and almost didn't reach for them but when she handed them to Chance he smiled.

"You are getting warmer."

And she was. The next item she offered him were the satin cords. He took these trying to decide the best way to tie them, when he notice the wrist bands still in the trunk. He picked up one, tossed it on the floor in front of her.

"Put them all on!"

He watched fascinated as she tried to put them on with some difficulty. He finally helped her with her wrists, as she had no problem with the ankle ones. Now Chance dug freely though the container, removing all the things she put there. All of the items were new, still in the boxes. He hadn't this much stuff at one time since he was in a porn shop.

"I guess you know how to use this stuff?"

She didn't answer . . .

"You don't?"

April shrugged. He pointed with the whip at the chain with clips on either end.

"Where does something like that go?"

She touched her left nipple. He bent over, sucked one until it stood up, then did the same a second time on the right.

"Show me . . ."

The woman winced as she fitted them.

"Does it hurt?"

She nodded.

"Is it bad?"

She shook her head to say no.

"Get up on the bed."

He foraged through the rest of it until he came to the blindfold and gag. Her eyes grew wider as if she wasn't expecting him to want these. He wouldn't have ever suggested it this quick but since she brought it up . . .

"Don't act like you don't know these were here. Come here!"

April moved to the edge of the bed, rattling the chain between her breasts. He put the blindfold over her eyes, tightly.

"How's that?"

She nodded, adjusting it slightly. He had never used a gag before and wondered if she had.

"Have you ever been gagged?"

No . . .

"Do you have anything you need to say before I put this on you?"

She swallowed hard, carefully weighing each word.

"Chance, is it okay if I love you?"

He popped the ball into her mouth as he thought about her question. Strapping it behind her head, he looked at her, and her new twisted form. She appeared more grotesque now than she had as the rat. But this costume excited him . . .

Chance had no problem tying her to the bed. After he was sure that she wasn't going anywhere, he went to the kitchen to get a beer, and turn up the stereo. He peeked out the window. The lights still flashed but no one ever came toward this house.

Do they know? Do they not know?

He lit a cigarette and paused before going back to her. She on the other hand tried to hear what he was doing.

I sure hope he isn't leaving!

"So, April, would you like to make love first or talk? How about another shot? Oh, I forgot . . . cat's got your tongue."

He loosened the ties from the bed knobs, letting her sit up from the spread eagle position he had put her in. Chance poured her another shot, put it in her sightless hand. Undoing the gag, she stretched her jaw. He handed her a lime wedge. He spilled the salt onto his tongue to give her with a kiss. She shot the drink, sucked the lime, and handed the glass back with the wedge in it. He set it aside.

He couldn't take off her blindfold.

I can't look into her eyes . . .

Instead, he turned her over onto her stomach. Again, he bound her securely. Her skin glowed in the candlelight. From the trunk, he retrieve the tasty oils and the vibrator and batteries.

"Some assembly required, huh?"

She could hear him play with the motor, revving it a few times before he set it aside.

Where are you going now?

When he came back to the bedroom, she heard the CD he put on. This time he turned it way up.

The voice on the stereo came in a whisper. She tried to place the song but it wasn't one she had in her collection. He sat on the edge of the bed, stroking the back of her leg with the cool tip of the vibrator.

"Remember April, so long ago, the spring was in your eyes?

You were just a little girl, spreading letters, sending lies . . .

Something you said went straight to my head and I don't think I ever forget.

The day that we never met . . .

I tried to tell you not to go away,

but every time you called me, I had somewhere else to play.

You tried to warn me about the demons in my past,

I tried to downplay the history of the cast.

What were you going to say about the Eastern gate?

I may not be the last in line, so what if I'm late?

You've got to tell me the secrets of your soul . . .

Show me your doorway so I can see your goal.

Momentary magic was just another phase . . .

I'll be content with a better life spent living out the final days.

I tried to tell you, but I haven't said a word . . .

If you believe it, you'll see that it's absurd.

The magic of the moment is fleeting just the same,
so when it all is over, will you give up this nasty little game?

The music continued to play, and as it faded away, Chance sang a verse that wasn't on the CD. She listened carefully.

". . . so when will you tell the truth? This isn't your own scheme!

I know you always tried to tell me that it is just a dream .

But who can you talk to if you never say a word?

Did you think I wouldn't listen? You're all I ever heard!"

Her heart raced, but she couldn't speak. After the song faded, she heard him turn the vibrator on. It sounded just like the beginning of the next song. He pressed it into her flesh, sliding it slowly over her legs and back, actually using the item as directed for the first time. His other hand massaged her inner thigh.

She took a deep breath.

The music grew more intense, filling her mind which focused on his hands. He prodded the recesses of her private parts, testing her reaction. Finally she couldn't hold back any longer and a moan escaped from deep within. He smiled.

"I didn't put any lyrics to this one . . . just like you told me once."

She felt the vibrating tip probe her closer than before. Flooding sensation pulsed inside, causing her to succumb to the waves of pleasure. His hands were skilled.

"You used to dwell on my back door, now it's my turn . . ."

He spilled the cool scented oil over her back, tasting it on her skin.

"Are you a virgin?"

The tip touched her ass, and her back arched. She couldn't say a word. He let the toy slide gently where it wanted to go. His slow pace made her want to scream for more, but gagged and bound, she waited.

The third song wasn't one he was ready to play yet for her, so he disappeared into the living room to change it and check the window once more. All was calm, as he noticed by the live footage going out over the airwaves from local coverage. No one was rushing around now.

When he heard the fourth song's intro, it jarred him back to the task at hand. Back on the bed next to his hostage, he contemplated taking her in that position, but he didn't want to hurt her. It would wait. He teased her body instead, knowing that every moment he lingered, the more she would enjoy the final wave.

This song was short, another first.

All it said:

Be careful what you wish for when you wish upon a star . . .

You might not be expecting what you are hoping for.

All your wishes can't come true . . . at least that's what I'm told,

so no matter what your visions say, nothing is foretold.

Chance loosened the ropes again, starting with her feet, only letting her turn over so he could re-tie the cords. This time, she was face up. Her removed the clamps from her nipples, noting how red they were, thinking,

I bet that hurts.

He sucked the soreness out of them. She moaned. Chance next removed the gag, letting her mouth readjust, before he kissed her. His tongue strolled directly to her sweet, wet cunt. He watched her face contort with desire. She looked beautiful when she came the first time. His fingers worked her flesh into passion. This is power . . .

She wanted him inside of her but forced herself to remain silent. He was in charge now. Tugging against the restraints, April remembered how helpless she was and the feeling made her orgasm again.

It's been so long, Chance. So long . . .

When he finally couldn't keep himself away from her, he lowered his strong body over her, aware that this was the first time their naked bodies ever touched. She arched into him, silently begging for him. He stopped.

Sliding aside, she reached for her wrists. Quickly, he released her hands and feet from the straps. Then he tugged the blindfold from her eyes. She wondered if he was through but before she could say a word, he looked directly into April's eyes.

"I want to watch your face, your eyes, and see what you really feel for me! You think you love me, huh? I want to see it . . ."

His legs forced hers apart once again as he mounted her trembling body. The look in Chance's eyes overwhelmed her, and emanating from him, she witnessed white radiance. A blue halo surrounded the light, with flashes of colors which danced before her very eyes. She couldn't even see his face any longer. All she beheld was Spirit. His Spirit.

When he entered her, she screamed uncontrollably words that he didn't understand, which she repeated until they fell together to make sense.

"Om, oh my, oh go . . . om . . . oh my God, Chance! I'm cumming!!!"

His eyes opened to watch her face. He didn't see a light, instead for a moment, her face faded into the shadows. Wide-eyed, the man watched her features obscure into the faces of women he had never seen before . . . but who were so familiar. Blinking, he saw her face once more.

When she finished riding wave after wave of ecstasy, her attention returned. He almost feared what he would see in her eyes, but he didn't look away this time. "Can I come inside of you?"

She didn't answer, knowing that he shouldn't . . . he had to . . . but no. Just as she tried to form the right answer, she felt peace flow through her soul. Her tongue remained silent. Her body screamed Yes!

He couldn't stop, and her waves spread through him until he knew what she felt. It felt right . . . for once . . . His desire for her spilled from him into the supple body of his young admirer.

This isn't happening . . .

Both thought at the same moment. Each waited for the dream to end, expecting to find themselves far away from this place, alone and hungry. But the room didn't fade. Around them swirled the glow that only April believed she could see.

"What is that?" Chance inquired, ready for anything by now.

"I don't know . . . but it's been here a lot lately."

It concentrated into a vivid orb, but only for a moment. Then it expanded to swallow them both, welcoming them into its ghostly embrace. When April yawned deeply, she didn't cover her mouth, like she was supposed to, and she felt the pressure in her throat as something slid down unimpeded. Choking slightly, she realized how exhausted she was and the strange sensation faded away. It sank into the pit of her stomach.

The man went back into the living room to get a couple of smokes and put on song #3. When he returned, she smiled at him sleepily, thanking him for the cigarette, which she only puffed at a few times before she was overcome with somnolence. She handed him back the lit ember of tobacco, which she tried to tell him was one of his herbs, but she could say no more than his name, which she whispered inaudibly as she drifted away.

"Sweet dreams. baby . . ."

He was slightly disappointed that she fell asleep so soon, but he didn't wake her. Once he realized that she was gone, he talked to her aloud,

"Okay, you can talk now. What was it you wanted to tell me? You never want to snuggle after sex . . . Are you through?"

He laughed aloud as her peaceful face made no response.

"Oh, yeah, by the way . . . I love you, too!"

She smiled, opening one eye, "Yeah, I bet you say that to all the girls!"

"Well, not all of them . . ."

April slipped away again, with an even bigger smile. He didn't say anything more. Instead he started song #3 over again, hoping that she would hear what he said, but assuming that she was really asleep this time. Her steady breathing changed, becoming deeper, more rhythmic.

In the other room, he re-lit the doobie and checked out the window. The lights were no longer flashing, but it was still busy with people milling about her yard. It was odd how she could sleep with that going on but maybe she had a point. He didn't want to see anyone, so why should she?

But that's her home . . .

The song began with the sound of a train pulling out of the station, which he had recorded himself and was so proud of. This whole CD was his first attempt at engineering his own music, so he felt it was rough around the edges.

And she is sleeping right through it.

"Hey April! Listen to this, if you are in there . . ."

He watched her from the doorway, knowing that she was oblivious to him and the song he played to the empty room around him. It was hard to keep from waking her up, making her look once more into his eyes. He tried to see a disembodied spirit like she claimed she could see at times . . . but there was nothing in the room. He felt unwatched for the first time in a long time.

Maybe she really is watching me!

Chance looked once more in the corners of the room, and all around, just to be sure. Nothing caught his attention except what #3 would have told her if she hadn't gone away.

The Next Step

by Chance Lee

For you know who!

Speak to me when I say "hello!"

Tell me what you want me to know . . .

(What do you know?)

Do you even know?

We met so long ago . . .

and faraway . . .

The next step is not necessarily so!

But here you are, you little witch,

I'm caught within your spell.

Do you have the keys to Heaven?

Or are you the keeper of the gates of Hell?

Where do I know you from?

I seem to recall your face

but where . . .

Where are you now?

I heard you ask. Never lifting up your mask.

Never telling of your task . . .

and yet you want to tell me how . . .

You know . . . or so you say . . .

You say you know what is good for me . . . so what more can I say?

Well, what have you got to say to me?

I bet you don't even know?

The next step isn't necessarily so . . .

He left her a note telling her to play #3 if she woke before him. As an after thought, he added a post script asking her not to leave him alone.

Both slept without dreaming, which was unusual.

When she finally stirred the next day, April expected to be alone, all of the day's events fading away with the awakening. Her heart deflated at the thought until she heard him sigh in his sleep. The smile returned to her sleepy face.

Rolling over, she touched him lightly, as if expecting him to be a mirage. When he didn't ebb away, she said another prayer of silent thanks, which seemed to happen more and more these days. His cool skin felt like velvet beneath her hand.

Don't you dare wake him up!

She had to leave the room to keep from falling into the temptation. Coffee called, and after she made a pot, April spied the note left on the coffee table. She picked it up but glanced out the window before she read it. A crowd still appeared concerned with her fire. April turned on the radio.

I wonder how bad it is?

It was odd that she wasn't concerned. Natasha was safe at Mom's and there wasn't one thing in there that she would have traded for what she had in here. She found the pair of binoculars in her bag and attempted to view the damage. The only thing she could see from this angle was the faces of the people in the yard. "I'll bet if you turn on the telly, you'll see what is happening"

April practically jumped out of her skin.

"Oh! Good morning, Chance! Did I wake you?"

"Yeah, but that's okay."

He pulled back the curtain, to catch a glimpse of the mess.

"Aren't you worried about your house?"

"Well . . . yeah, of course. But when the dragon is chasing you, a little fire is to be expected, right?"

"What?!"

April tried to play it down but the look in his eye told her that she had said the wrong thing. Just then a song came on the air, which caught her attention but not his:

. . . Down in a hole, losing my soul . . . I'd like to fly

but my wings have so been denied . . .

"What Dragon?"

April wanted to wake up gently, and that little topic wouldn't exactly make light conversation.

. . . they don't understand who I was supposed to be . . .

(Alice in Chains said)

"Honey, can't we just have a few minutes before we talk?"

"Okay, get a rope!"

She remember that night before with a smile. Eventually, she would have to tell him something but what? How could she even begin?

Quickly, she brushed her teeth, and when she started the shower, she almost changed her mind. His smell was on her still, intoxicating, and she hated to wash it off. Maybe, she could make love to him again . . . after the shower.

"Wash your back?"

Behind her, Chance stood in the doorway, nude and wonderful. She dropped her robe. They kissed. Water drops ran off them as they continued to make love. The morning sun streamed through the windows when they fell back into bed. April wrapped her legs around him, wanting to hold him inside forever.

The radio played in the other room, a local band King's X::

. . . the Mystery said 'Come and see!' - the World around me!

April tightened her grip on him as he plunged into her even deeper.

. . . I can't resist. I couldn't see how this could be an accident . . .

. . . I want to see more . . .

The lovers spun over, putting her on the top. All she could see was him. How could she explain anything? She was just a girl. And he was something else!

The phone started ringing just as soon as she switched it on, not sure she was ready to listen to the answering machine messages that came in overnight. Neither was ready to break the spell. The morning had to last just a little longer. April kept waiting to wake up, expecting to find herself alone in her bedroom, but the world around her never faded into the blue. She kept anticipating, pinching herself. Her feet touched the floor, but maybe that too could happen in a dream.

"What's wrong?"

"My head is spinning."

They sat across from each other at the breakfast table, each nursing a cup of coffee. He placed his hand on hers.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm just a little nervous . . ."

"About what?"

She shrugged, assuming he would know why.

"Did you really do all this for me?"

April felt her cheeks get warm, and with a wicked little smile and a nod, she put herself back in place. This was her world!

I can't sit here and dread the dream. I have got to get my shit together or I will be lost! Jesus, Chance, you look so good sitting there across the table from me. Where have you been?

"Hey, Chance, guess what? I feel much better now! I just have one question? That's a lie! I have a million of them but just one for now. Is this a dream?"

"Probably!"

April laughed as she went to get ready for the day. She returned some calls, being careful to use the cellular phone. The radio was too loud but she liked the song and wouldn't turn it down. Metallic made her say to herself, Fuck 'em!

. . . I wish I may, I wish I might have this wish I wish tonight,

I want that star! I want it now! I want it all

and I don't care how!

Careful what you wish! Careful what you say!

Careful what you wish you may regret it

Careful what you wish you just might get it!

It was definitely battlefield music, which she hoped Chance liked since she cranked it up in between calls. He seemed more concerned with the idea of going through Tara's bag. Although he hadn't touched them, it made him wonder what was in them. Maybe more letters. Maybe drugs.

"I don't know why I can't open these things, especially after what she did."

"Do what thou wilt . . ."

"Huh?"

"Hey, baby, I'd like to give you a card reading sometime, if you'd like one, that is."

Chance saw her face drain of all its color.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know. I just feel strange."

What she wanted to tell him was that after today, after the concert Charity Ball, he wouldn't be here maybe. Where do we go from here? Are you going to leave me again? How can I tell you about the dragon? Or the east. What about Tara? I know she won't be going away that easy.

"What about Tara?" Chance asked, noticing that April was looking weak again.

"What?"

"Tara? How am I going to tell her?"

April looked at him sideways, "Tell her what?"

"You know. . . about us. Do you think she knows?"

"She's in jail, no bail . . . yeah, I think she knows!"

"Maybe she's not! Somebody had to set that fire."

"Hang on . . ." A quick call proved that she was still incarcerated.

"You know you're going to have to let her out sometime!"

"Look, I know! Do you want to call them and tell them to let her go?"

Chance said nothing.

"I'm sorry . . . I'm just having a bad moment . . . it's just too much . . . oh, God . . . I can't even talk or think or anything. Give me a minute!"

He got dressed silently. April started feeling him slip away, making her feel desperate for no reason. This is my world!

"Okay, I'm better . . . Sorry about that! I just a panic attack and just the idea of how mad Tara is going to be at us . . . what's she like anyway? Is she dangerous? I mean, I don't really even know her . . . but she told me some really bad shit that happened to her as a kid . . ."

"That story? Her parents made a movie once and for some reason, she thinks it actually happened to her . . . she hasn't told me anything but other people have told me stuff. Who knows?"

"Look, I know she's your friend so if you want we can go right now and get her out. I've got it all set up any way that you want to play it."

He pulled over to the couch, making her sit next to him very close with his right arm around her shoulders. The closeness felt good, making them both calmer as they began to talk for the first time.

She reminded him of the video, which she had brought home.

"It's on the counter over there, and if it is used, she will be charged for what they confiscated in the bust. Or, we can let her go now! Or, we can detain her until tomorrow and release her without any charges. That was my choice, but whatever you want."

"A kiss."

The cell phone rang, which meant good news for April, he could see. He watched her move around the room as she talked, as she packed their costumes into two huge bags. She set them by the door, where his and Tara's cases still sat.

"What do you want to do with your stuff, Chance?"

He loved it when she spoke his name, "I don't know?"

April didn't want to ask when or where or anything that might not have the answer she wanted to hear. Chance, just stay another day. This is my day today.

He shrugged, "I guess leave them here."

"Great! The truck will be here any minute."

"What truck?"

As they pulled away in the back of the truck, they tried to imagine the damage, but were blind to it from the truck's walls. Neither spoke as images of the reporters and officials were conjured in their minds. April twitched an involuntary shrug, that she hoped hadn't shown. He looked at her, trying to feel what she felt. She was cooler than he would have been.

"Why didn't we take the limo?"

"Because I don't want to be seen. If that whatever hadn't happened to the trailer, I wouldn't have whoever in my yard looking for me."

"I guess they are looking for you . . ."

"Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't out to get you! Well, they say . . . what they tell me . . . So, what I understand is that someone put a pipe bomb on my porch."

"A bomb!!"

"Pipe bomb . . . I know, that's way fucked up . . . but that's what happens when people know who you are. I mean, there are some fucked up people . . ."

Chance rubbed his temples, not really sure he was enjoying this anymore. Maybe he should page that driver. Or maybe not . . . Maybe everyone was just a little fucked up. His eyes looked up at her. Maybe . . .

"Don't look at me like that!"

He looked away.

"No, seriously . . . I'm not the one you have to worry about. I know you don't know me, hell for all you know . . ." she stopped short, not wanting to put any more bad ideas into the air. "Do you know how to say 'fuck you' in LA?"

"How?"

"Trust me!"

"Trust me, huh?"

"If you notice, I never say that . . . all I know is that I put together this event and so far I have had the best time in my life . . . ever . . . and I have had some really good times! I don't want you to get spooked and run but if you want to go, we'll go back and get your stuff. You can be on the next flight out . . ."

She waited for his response, as they bounced around in the back of the truck as it made a turn. After a moment, she switched on the radio,

"Bob, stop the truck, please."

Chance felt the truck slow down, pulling into a driveway it sounded like. He felt claustrophobic suddenly. April opened the back door and the sun light greeted his eyes. She hopped out, meeting Bob who was already around back. She put on her shades, scanning the parking lot.

"How far are we from there? Steve . . . are you there?"

The voice on the radio came back, "Where are you?"

"We are around the corner, here, Bob, talk to him please . . ."

April climbed back into the truck where Chance sat speechless. She sat on the floor of the truck in between his legs. She hugged him briefly, then looked up at his face hoping to recapture that magic. This wasn't going well.

"Lee, honey, I know this isn't working out for you, I guess. When the limo gets here, why don't you let him take you wherever you want to go, if you want to get your stuff, and hers . . . you can go alone, or I can send someone or you can have this truck. If you want me to go, or not . . . whatever . . ."

He still sat motionless, looking up and out of the truck, seeing some distant image in the back of his mind.

"Yeah, I gotta go . . ."

The blow left April devastated, but she tried not to let it show. That's rock & roll! . . . my world! Fucking leave, then . . . Oh, God, don't leave . . .

"Okay . . . just tell me what I can do to help you. Look, I'm sorry if I've hurt you, or your girlfriend, but you know I didn't have anything to do with that thing at my house, and I'm sorry for whatever happens between you and her . . . look, here's the key to that house. I'm going to take your, uh . . . your costume to the place and . . . uh, well, I don't know. I'll figure something out . . ."

He had forgotten all about the Charity Ball. But it didn't change how he wanted to run. The girl before him was close to tears but she tried to brush it off, and wasn't going to have much luck keeping them back for long. She seemed so small, and foreign to him. It was as if the night before was just a dream, and here in the daylight, she was just another groupie.

"Well, . . . Chance, I have a show to put on . . . the car is here . . ."

"No, you take the car . . . you have a show to put on . . . in style! I'll take the truck back to your house, or my house or whatever, and . . . I don't know. I just need some time to think."

"Sure . . . well, at least, I had . . . I mean, thanks for coming . . .uh . . ."

He smiled at her, the night before came to mind. Chance almost reached out for her but she turned and jumped out of the truck. She opened the car door, reached for the costumes which were just far enough out of her grasp that she had to motion for help from him. He stood up, carrying them with him as he stepped to the pavement. Putting them in the back seat made him think about the car at the house.

"Hey, since I'm going back to the house, what about that car out there?"

"Here's the keys if you want to use it."

"Yeah, okay . . ." he mumbled. He fidgeted, watching as she dug them out her purse, and as she put them in his hand, they touched. She felt a chill.

"Hey, Chance, one more thing . . ."

"What?"

A kiss . . .

"Nothing."

"Well, then, um . . . can I ask for one more thing?"

Her heart fluttered, "Sure!"

"Can I borrow your sunglasses?"

April took them from her face, handing them to him as she got in the car. The driver shut her door, and off they went.

Chance watched the roads carefully, trying to memorize where he was. All the roads looked the same, fields and cows, no road signs on many of the streets. Maybe he would page that driver after all.

The sunglasses disguised him from the prying eyes.

"Would you look at that?!"

The driver had already seen it, but for Chance it was his first glimpse of the damage. The gaping hole where the front porch once stood was charred, with pieces of metal that hung down like teeth in a skeleton's mouth. It was obvious that if she had been home, she would have been dead.

"If you hadn't shown up, she probably would have been home last night, you know? You're a hero!"

"Huh? . . . yeah . . ."

Chance didn't recognize where he was until he saw the throng of media, that swarmed the road ahead. The truck turned to the left, way before they reached the edge of the thong. Bumping over the rough surface of the unpaved driveway, a White Zombie song came to his mind.

. . . yeah, I am the one. King of the world and the Devil's son . . .

. . . run baby run baby run away run baby run

escape LA . . .

April took out the wine which she had specially ordered for this ride into the city. The car was fully stocked, and empty. Her bottom lip quivered, as she gripped the bottle white-knuckled trying to hold back. She acted like it was baseball bat, pretending she was Keith Moon. But instead of pulling a Pink, she opened the bottle and blew off the glass, instead sucking it greedily from the bottle.

She started to make a phone call, but put the phone back down. By the time she got to the show, she was feeling very Pink . . . and blue.

The security around the show tripled. She noticed the men in black and tried to cap the wine, but not before she chugged a bit more.

I have a feeling that I'm going to need it.

Backstage, she ran into the sheriff and a few other men in sunglasses.

Chance asked the driver to wait, because he wasn't sure what he was going to do. From his wallet, he tipped him \$100 just to get him to watch TV for a while, which wasn't any better since all the major networks were covering the story. Live remotes in the yard . . . great!

Shit, even I never had that many in my yard at one time . . . Girl, you sure know how to get attention! But what the hell are you up to?

He walked from room to room, pacing as he thought. Then he saw the trunk. Inside of it was the letter that she has wanted him to read. He opened it.

It was a card reading::

Dear Chance,

If you are reading this then I guess we have become friends.

I can't even imagine! So, here is a card reading that I did for you the other night. If you are reading this, then lean over here and give me a kiss . . .

Chance looked around at the empty room, and at the guy watching TV.

So, here it is as the cards fell. Maybe one of these days I can give you a card reading face to face. What are you doing right now?

Anyway, I used my Alice in Wonderland deck:

#1 - Current position -

The Tower - This card depicts two events. The first is Alice grabbing at air and the Rabbit falling into the cucumberframe (a small greenhouse) as a result. The second event is Bill falling after Alice has kicked him out of the chimney. Both creatures are extremely ruffled by the unexpected turn of events. The White Rabbit thought that Alice was Mary Ann, his maid, and therefore felt he could order her about. Alice got her revenge when she grew to mammoth proportions, and the Rabbit was forced to change his position in the world after giant Alice made a shambles of his house.

Divinatory meanings: Rapid change. Failure of events to go as expected. Beliefs don't live up to their promises. Anything unforeseen, with a negative implication. Good friends turned bad. Loss of money, security or love. Setbacks, disasters, insanity, disruption. The end of grace.

#2 - What crosses the present position (what holds you back or pulls you forward - it crosses you) -

The Queen of Peppermills (the Queen of Clubs - usually a Leo, Aries, or Sagittarius - The Red Queen, "Off with their Heads!")

D. meaning: An honest and homey woman, able to cure ills of the mind. A dark woman who is very secretive. Sincere and charming. Capable of love and affection.

Reverse meaning: Jealous and overly emotional. Unstable and fickle liar of a mean stripe. Opposition. (the Red Queen is on her head, go ask Alice . . .)

#3 - Goal or Destiny - The best that can be accomplished. 10 of Flamingos (10 of Spades) Reversed * - A Victory won at excessive cost. A moment of Power.

#4 - Distant past - Influences which existed in the past and upon which the present events are based. -

9 of Flamingos (9 of Spades) Reversed * - Suspicion of a close friend. Imprisonment and intrigue. Gossip, shame and timidity. A reasonable fear.

#5 - Recent past - The most recent sphere of influence or events that has just passed or is just passing.

Knight of Hats (Jack of Hearts) Reversed * - (First off, right side up it means this - A message. Arrival. Moving up or forward. Requests or challenges. Attraction for a place or person. A gift, opportunity or invitation. A proposition. But this card came upside down just like the White Knight of the Book)

Reversed meaning: Artifice. Fraud. The bearing of false news.

#6 - What's next - (self-explanatory) -

IV The Emperor Reversed * - (Aries) The Cheshire Cat is not really a cat, but can appear as one through his strange powers of teleportation. He is pictured sitting in a tree, grinning. Contrary, to general belief, he is brown and black, not orange. Originally seen in the house of the Duchess, he pops up now and then to give Alice advice. His is the wisdom, the floating conscience, in Wonderland. It is assumed that Alice is not the only person to benefit from his insight.

(The meaning right side up is - The Emperor is higher than the kings, more worldly wise and confident, a symbol of stability and leadership, as well as of a male family member. Logic above emotion. A giver of aid and comfort. Sometimes, an overly dominant person) but this is reversed.

Reversed: A benevolent man, but immature and ineffective. Given to petty emotional outbursts, and extremely retentive of gains. Confusing to those who don't know him.

#7 - The Questioner's (you) present position or attitude - VIII Strength Reversed * - (this major arcana card is a Leo) The Lion and the Unicorn are engaged in mock combat. The Lion wears glasses. The unicorn appears to be winning, but the animals are actually equally matched. They each must do what must be done for the sake of their own prestige.

(right side up it is - Control of a situation. Bravery, unwavering attention to a quest, elan, ability to overcome temptation, physical strength. Mind over matter; matter over mind. A herculean effort for a personal end or for the sake of the world at large. But this was reversed *)

Reversed: Inability due to weakness of body or soul. Sickness. Drive for empirical knowledge at the expense of others. Indifference to others' thoughts and feelings.

#8 - Environmental factors - Your influence on other people and their influence on you.

Four of Peppermills Reversed * - (right side up - The best of home and hearth. The warding off of evils. Romance or unexpected happiness. Prosperity, peace and tranquility. The achievement of a dream that leads to wealth and/or happiness. Country life. A rest after a struggle, but this on is upside down, too) Reversed: A false sense of security. Uneasiness, even in the face of full security. Never sure of what one has. Ruthlessly holding onto possessions. Happiness diluted by subconscious inhibitions.

#9 - Inner emotions - hopes, desires and anxieties -

Knight of Flamingos (Jack of Spades) - Rushing without fear into the unknown. Bloodlust. This card magnifies other cards dealing with death. With cards of wisdom, indicates foolishness. War, opposition, heroism.

#10 - Final result - Culmination of all influences -

Two of Hats (two of hearts) - The relations between males and females. Discord, with unity and happiness to follow. Cooperation. Marriage or engagement. A mutual understanding of divergent opinions. New friend or relationship.

#11 - Due to - (you know I always do that extra card) - Queen of Oysters (a Taurus, Virgo or Capricorn) - well, she is the Queen of Diamonds, what else can you say about her?

So, I guess this reading may or may not be right. We'll have to see, huh?

Chance Lee shook his head with a look of disbelief. He sat staring at the pages in his hands, wondering how she could have seen this coming and yet . . . It crossed his mind that perhaps she created all of this intentionally, but then he remembered the trailer.

Tara is a Leo.

He jumped up when he thought of her, looking at her luggage. Grabbing the first bag, he emptied its contents onto the bedspread. Tara's clothes, a wild assortment of lingerie, tumbled out. He poked through the pile, when he noticed a tiny silk purse. If he hadn't been looking, he would have never seen it. Inside, he pulled out a picture of a girl that seemed familiar, but he couldn't quite place her face.

Then he unearthed the necklace.

At first, April tried to avoid the questions being fired at her from the men who invaded her trailer.

"Look, I'm not trying to avoid your questions," she replied unconvincingly. "It's a busy day and I've got a lot on my mind."

"So, you haven't had any threats? No unusual people?"

The man who spoke was young, clean cut federal agent who stood rigidly before her in a military stance, never removing his shades. The others with him moved through the trailer, searching at will.

"Look around, dude! There are thousands of unusual people here."

The door opened, as another agent entered, "Sir, we have word from the President. He heard about the trouble and has declined to participate in today's events."

April should have been disappointed but she really didn't care anymore. Then she remembered him. What if he was in danger? She spilled her guts about everything. April told them about Tara, where she was and why. She told them about the house, which she called as they watched her dial first her phone number, which was still being forwarded but since there was no telephone at her house, or a house for that matter, she dialed her hiding place.

Chance didn't answer the phone, but turned the volume up just enough where he could hear.

"Chance! Chance, pick up the phone . . . it's me, April. Hello? Chance?"

A moment later, she hung up. Then she tried to reach him over the radio, which he heard faintly from the other room. Swinging the door wide, he blurted,

"I'm not here!!"

"Yeah . . . this is Bob."

Chance danced around, motioning that Bob should tell her that he was gone.

In the limo . . . I'm gone in the limo.

Bob wasn't the kind of man to let a little freaky musician make him do anything. He took his finger off the button, long enough to listen to her, and to give Chance a look. The old biker was not likely to budge. Chance gave him another hundred dollar bill.

"Nope . . . the boy's gone."

"Oh, shit! Bob, I've got to find him . . ."

The driver watched as Chance shoveled clothes into the bags, grabbed the luggage, tossing it onto the ground next to the covered car. He wore the sunglasses and a baseball cap, ducking behind the cloaked car. He had trouble getting the door open, and finally took the cover off the near side of the vehicle, hoping to obscure himself from the press. Then he saw a helicopter appear in the sky and begin to circle.

Chance jumped backward onto the house, leaving the car door open, the luggage on the ground. He remembered what it felt like to be watched. He still hated the feeling. Except on stage . . .

"No, April, I don't know where your little friend is going . . . What do you want with a pussy like him, anyway? You need a real man!
Like me!"

Chance stopped, turning to look at Bob who still sat back on the couch, rubbing his scruffy beard. He was too big to argue with on that point. Chance faked a smile, which faded to a sneer.

"Bob, honey, if you hear anything, please let me know!!"

"Yeah . . . okay . . . so what do you say, you know, about you and me? You ain't got no one, do you? I got two hundred dollars in my pocket, why don't we get together later?"

"Uh, Bob, . . . You know I've got a date . . . well, I had a date anyway! Besides, I've got a bunch of suits standing right here and if I'm not mistaken, they may be looking for you, too! So, why don't you take the rest of the day off . . . take your wife out for a change."

"I'll take you both out! It'll be like old times!"

Chance raised an eyebrow, waiting for the static response.

"Bob! We've never had any old times!"

"We'll make some . . ."

After Bob ended, Chance had to say something, but what? 'Thanks' didn't really seem appropriate, but forced to speak, he muttered,

"Well, at least you didn't rat me out . . . Pussy, huh?"

"Yeah . . . pussy!"

He looked out the window again, wondering how he was going to get the bags into the car, and,

"How am I going to get the car out of here?"

Bob, stood up and stretched, clicking the television off with the remote.

"Well, son, that's your problem!"

"Hey, how much for the truck?"

"You want to buy my truck?"

Chance looked out the window, trying to locate the helicopter.

"No, I guess not but can I rent it? Or pay you to drive me?"

"No! You are on your own now, in fact as soon as you go, I'm calling her back and telling her how much of a pussy you really are!"

Chance coughed, looking at the guy, "What . . ."

"You just better get on out of town."

"Excuse me?"

"You don't get it, do you?"

Chance went to the fridge to get a beer, not offering one to the asshole driver in the other room. His mind raced with all his options, but once he pulled that tarp off that car, the world would know.

"Look, Bob, thanks for your help and everything . . . but I think I'm going to hang out a bit and get my head together . . . you can go ahead and go."

Bob jingled the truck keys.

"No, son, I'm afraid not!"

April paced as she pulled out the costumes, trying to hang them unsuccessfully in a closet. She continued to tell them men what was going on, when a voice on one of the men's radios came back.

"She's right, we just talked to Majestic PD and they have the subject in possession. Tara . . ."

"Mater . . ."

"Yeah, that's her . . ."

"They say they are going to release her into our custody . . . Over."

The woman stared astonished at the men in her office. In an instant, all of her efforts were destroyed. All bets were off.

"Excuse me?"

"What I'm saying, kid, is that you ain't hanging out here!"

"Why?"

"This is my house!"

April begged for them to keep Tara away from the Charity Ball, but no one would disclose anything. She regretted ever saying a word.

Fuck it!

This world was no longer hers.

Chance walked upright out into the sunlight, not caring who saw him now. He finished putting the bags in the car, and yanked the tarp off the car. He didn't feel anger, even muttered a thanks before he drove away. The white stretch limo crept over the bumpy road just quick enough to stir up some dust, but it went unnoticed . . . or so he thought.

The Dragon saw him ride quietly away from the house, sent with him the fear of a lifetime of betrayal, fear of everyone. It was his only weapon, at the moment. All he could do to affect the super star, the scared young musician running for his life, was plant the seed. Chance couldn't see the whole picture yet, and if the serpent had its way, he never would. It shimmered into the back seat of the car.

"What the hell is that?"

When Chance looked in the rear view mirror he saw its eyes, but over his shoulder, it was gone. He rubbed his eyes, checking the rear view mirror again. Hello, again, son . . .

Chance slammed on the breaks, sending up a cloud of dust. He jumped out of the car in the middle of the deserted street, backing away from the automobile. He looked around to see if anyone was nearby, or coming. No one. The gravel crunched under his boots, fanned as he kicked chunks of it aimlessly. He looked up at the big, big sky.

"God? I don't know what you have in mind . . . or in my car, but think, maybe, you could, you know . . . help me straighten this stuff out."

He walked first one way past the car, then the other. When he looked up again, he saw a rainbow over the horizon that he hadn't noticed earlier. Staring at it for a moment, he muttered under his breath,

"Yeah . . . promises, promises . . ."

At the concert hall, people were meandering about - some costumed, others dressed in three-piece. No one was having much fun. Televisions were tuned to the news, which attracted groups of people to the monitors to watch the live broadcasts. April finally went over to one group where everyone split apart to let her in to see the screen. She didn't recognize her trailer, at first.

"Wow! That's pretty bad, huh?"

The crew didn't know what to say, how to comfort her. No one spoke. She stood there ashamed of the way her heart ached. It wasn't for the house, either.

Chance opened the back door of the car, jumping back, ready for the demon of all horror movies to jump out. Nothing. Feeling foolish for feeling foolish, he got back into the car. . . . things that go bump in the day.

He put the still running car into gear, checking the mirror one more time.

I'm still here, Chance . . .

Back out of the car, the man retreated once again. This time he opened the car, yelling,

"Come on! I'm not afraid of you!"

But it wasn't true. Fear was the Dragon's tool, and he wielded it like a sword.

Don't lie to me, Chance! Get in the car . . .

After she had seen enough, April went back to her trailer. The men had gone their own way, leaving her exhausted from the interrogation. So many questions, so few answers. They didn't seem to understand her priorities, so when she seemed unconcerned

with the details of the blast, they chalked it up to either shock, or something suspicious.

They just don't get it . . . I wish I never started any of this.

She felt stupid, all this and she didn't even care. Anyone else would have been ecstatic being backstage at The Charity Ball. It was her baby, and she didn't even want to attend it.

The costumes had fallen to the floor. April picked them both up, taking them to the couch. She put them sitting up side by side on the couch, and stepped back. Leaning forward, she put the hands together. Then she opened the little pocket of the Rabbit disguise, removing the puzzle piece. Then she opened the one on her attire, retrieving hers. She held one in each hand.

Flipping them over, again and again, she searched for answers.

Absently, she put the two together, where they fit precisely.

Chance finally got in the car, tired of playing this game. When he looked in the back seat, nothing. In the mirror, he saw the Dragon. He rode the entire way with it over his shoulder. In the mirror.

A knock on the door scared the hell out of April. She jumped up, scrambling around as if she was busted. She shoved the two pieces into her front pocket, and as she went to the door, she noticed the costumes. Impulsively, she heaped them together, so that they were no longer holding hands.

It didn't make much sense for Tara, when she was woken up the next day and released with no charges pending. No phone call was ever placed, nor were any pictures or paperwork done. The men to whom she was handed over seemed tight-lipped but vaguely familiar.

She was surprised when they took her past the Majestic Colosseum, but didn't turn in to the parking lot. She watched as the crowds of concert-goers were getting out of their cars, wandering toward the theater.

"What are we going to do with her, Gabriel?"

April opened the door flustered, flushed, and there stood The Mad Hatter himself. Only he wasn't in costume. She had forgotten to talk to him the day before, which would have been risky. She had already tempted fate by sitting herself next to him, but with Chance on the other side, she had managed to keep preoccupied. Putting the White Queen on his other side, kept Chance's attention, as well.

"Hello, there!"

The man walked into her trailer, without being invited. She looked outside to see who noticed him. No one seemed to care.

"Jeez, dude! Think you could have made it any more obvious?"

He was already sitting on the couch, checking out the costumes with some interest. She locked the door behind him and offered him a drink.

"By the way, I guess you know I'm April!"

"No need for introductions now . . . I think we're past that, aren't we?"

"Yeah."

Chance drove around in circles trying to find his way back to Majestic. Or the airport, or whatever. Maybe a bar. He spotted a building with some cars around it. When he pulled in he realized that the limo stood out in the company of the pick up trucks. He didn't care any more. The eyes in the mirror were too much for him to take any longer, sober anyway.

When he walked into Big T's, suddenly he found himself surrounded by a roomful of Bobs. He nodded, as they tried to place his face. He ordered two shots, and asked for a telephone.

"It's in the john . . ."

Two shots later he found himself in the bathroom, face to face with mirror. His reflection was out of focus. He found the card with the other driver's number on it, but hesitated putting it back in his wallet. In the phone book, he looked up the number of the arena but couldn't find it either since the page had been ripped out of the book. He decided to call information. Picking up the phone, he started to press the buttons but there was no dial tone.

Frustrated he hung the phone up, and started to leave the bathroom but came face to face with a poster on the back of the door.

The Mad Hatter

Tea Party and Charity Ball

March 24 & 25

Majestic Colosseum

Chance looked at the picture of the Mad Hatter, and Alice, but the White Rabbit seemed to catch his eye the most. He had to look a little harder for the Dormouse. It didn't seem to be there. Then he saw it, asleep in the pocket of the White Rabbit. It figures . . .

Then he noticed the map. So he pulled it off the wall. He folded it gently and stashed it in his pocket. When he walked out, he asked the bartender,

"Which way to Majestic?"

"You're in Majestic."

"No, I mean which way to town?"

"Depends on where you're going."

Chance gave up. Outside he tried to gauge east, west, by the sun but since it was lunchtime, he had to figure something else out.

The map . . .

He started to get in the car, but he remembered his passenger and thought twice.

Unfolding the poster on the hood of the car, Chance noticed the building behind him, Big T's. From there he was able to find the concert hall. Then he noticed the tiny airplane. He now had the directions to the airport.

"So, where are you taking me, fellows? "

The men sat on either side of Tara, ordering double Scotches for her, drinking sodas themselves.

The airport bar was crowded this time of day. People were looking at Tara suspiciously, for the more she drank, the louder she became.

"We're taking you back to Los Angeles."

April straightened the costumes nervously, sitting on the edge of the couch. She felt so tiny compared to him, as all those old insecurities returned. Her thoughts turned to Chance, and she almost burst into tears.

"So, where is he?"

She had to tell him she didn't know.

Chance slowed the limo slightly as he passed in front of the auditorium complex, where he saw balloons and bubbles, crowds in costume. Each face seemed twisted, trying to peer into the back of the car. When he looked up into the rear view mirror he had forgotten that he had yanked it down and now it sat in the seat next to him. Just for kicks he picked it up, checking the back seat one more time.

I'm right behind you . . . Chance!

Still the back seat was empty.

April watched the man as he stood up to leave.

"Well, good luck. It's your turn now! Just between us, he's your answer."

"And yours."

"If you say so . . ."

She walked him to the door, "Hey, if, uh . . . something changes, we'll be in touch, right?"

"Yeah, sure . . ."

At the terminal, Chance chose the long term parking lot, and managed to drive it in without wrecking the huge vehicle. He tried to get a cart, wrestling it away from the rest. He loaded all the bags onto it, locking the door with the key ring. He figured he'd mail them back. Right now it was just time to go.

It was his lot to run. Why not?

. . . run, rabbit, run . . . dig a hole, forget the sun,

when at last the work is done . . .

don't sit down it's time to dig another one.

Inside, the cool sterile hallways led to the open area, where travelers of all shapes and sizes strode in directions unknown. He started to head toward the ticket counter, but froze in his tracks when he heard her voice. Poking his head around the corner, he saw Tara.

Beautiful, stunning Tara . . . alone in a booth at the airport lounge. When he approached her, he watched her lean over to look at something,

"Is it that time already?"

She looked up at Chance, squarely in the eye,

"Oh good, you brought my bags."

He stared in disbelief as she stood up, came over to him and gave him wink. She slipped him a twenty dollar bill, and said,

"Okay, I'm ready."

She brushed past him, leaving him paralyzed in amazement. Fascinated, he followed her to the ticket booth, where she showed the attendant her ticket, and checked her bags. Winking good-bye to Chance, she moved toward the security check point.

She breezed through, only having her purse to x-ray.

Chance got left behind, as they scanned each bag. He watched her continue ahead of him, chatting endlessly. Once cleared, he

practically ran to catch up. She stopped at Gate #6. The woman at the door to the terminal checked her boarding pass. He was panting when he called out,

"Tara!"

She turned around to see who called her name.

"Tara?"

"Uh . . . Hi? Thanks for helping me with my bags. I have to go now, bye!"

As she turned away, he could hear her voice echo as she walked down the path,

". . . what's the deal with him? I did tip him, didn't I? So, what are you guys going to do when you get there? I've got a great little pad at the beach . . . but we'll have to be careful not to let my boyfriend catch us."

April walked around backstage, still in her street clothes. Her eyes were wet with tears that she fought to keep back. She still laughed and chatted but she couldn't keep them from watering. It must have been her house, they deduced.

Chance stood in shock, staring open mouthed at the empty tunnel.

"Sir, may I help you?" the woman at the doorway queried.

"Sir, may we help you with your luggage?" Chance spun around, beholding two men in suits and sunglasses behind him.

"What?!"

The woman asked again, "May I help you, sir?"

Chance looked back and forth between her and the two men, trying to decide who to answer first.

"Sir? Are you with the passenger that just boarded?"

"Uh, no . . . I mean yes. No!"

He looked again at the two men, one of whom looked at his watch,

"It is Time, Chance . . . "

The woman at the door shook her head with a laugh as she watched Chance walk away, talking to himself just like the last passenger on the flight to LA. People are strange . . .

It was getting close to show time, so April went back to her trailer to get dressed. She put the two puzzles pieces, still connected, into the tiny pocket of her attire. The other costume, she took to the security room, leaving it hanging in front of the closet door on a hook.

With one glance backward, she sighed.

Que' sera' sera'. The show must go on.

He sensed that the men were taking him back to the show, though they never said a word. They led (knew) the way to the limo, with him in tow pulling the cart behind him. Opening his own door, he checked to make sure the seats were empty before he got in. The two men rode in front. Riding in the back of the car was much more to his liking.

Too bad I'm alone . . . thank God I'm alone!

He rode in silence the entire way, expecting the serpent to manifest itself. When the limo pulled into the parking lot, it was rushed with a throng of paparazzi. Slowly, it pulled into the gates behind the wall of security, where it came to a halt. A volunteer, armed with a radio, opened the rear right-hand door, helping Chance out. Snapping his fingers, the young man called for the valet to help him with his luggage. A moment later, he was on his way to the security room. As he walked away, the volunteer slapped the car door,

"Okay, move it . . . Let's get this out of here!"

When the car didn't move, he became agitated. Knocking on the passenger door, he began, "Hey, buddy, let's get this . . ." but he stopped short when he saw no one in the front seat. Looking around, he saw no one to claim the car. Shrugging, he went around to the other side, noticed the keys in the ignition, still running. He got in, whistling to another volunteer to take over. As he pulled away, he noticed the mirror in the seat, and the empty place where it should have gone. When he put it up where it came from, he could see the back seat of the car. It was empty.

By the time April was face to face with the press, she had a belly full of wine, and some relief through resignation. She still had the night before to remember, . . . or to forget. Either way, she had won.

"Hello, my friends of the universal remote department, I bid thee good tidings to this - the first annual (and the last maybe) of the Mad Hatter's Charity Ball. For those of you who haven't heard, we've had some changes in the line-up. Due to circumstances that you are all aware of, we've had word from the President that he will not attend today's event, but has decided to party with us via satellite, so let's get this Ball rolling."

She ran past the cameramen and into the arena itself. They streamed in behind her, waiting for what she said next:

"Yeah, it is time . . ."

The crowd roared, realizing that the creature at the microphone was talking to them. Tiny flames from the disposable lighters in the hands of the fans lit the dark auditorium as all the lights on the stadium went out.

From the back of the hall, a girl stood alone high above the crowd holding up a microscopic speck of light that came from the lantern in her hand. Her tiny voice called out,

"Little bunny, where are you? Little bunny? Oh, oh! . . . oh no!"

The audience gasped as they watched her arms flail, sending her tumbling off of the catwalk. She flew toward the stage, twisting and turning, until she crashed onto the stage itself, which sent up a cloud of dust. A moment later, she stood up brushing herself off.

"I wonder where I am!"

As the story began to play itself out on stage, April disappeared into the shadows. She had to find a radio, to tell everyone the news that the White Rabbit really was late. It didn't matter yet, because Alice had to perform. That set lasted for twenty-two minutes.

April still had time . . . tick, tock.

Chance took his time in his dressing room. He waited for her to come, but she was nowhere to be seen. Checking the pocket in his vest, the White Rabbit found no puzzle piece. He went through his luggage until he found his invitation. From it, he withdrew the piece.

She was the first in line to put her piece of the puzzle into position. As she turned to the camera, she waited for the red light to come on. When it did, her mousy face appeared over every monitor and TV set at that moment.

"I am the Dormouse, your humble gatekeeper. It is by me that you enter this doorway to the Mad Hatter's Lair. I have the first piece of the puzzle, and here it is."

April pulled out both pieces, quickly palming his before anyone saw it. She held it up over her head.

"And I put it in its place . . . It is time to introduce your friend and mine, the Mad Hatter himself."

April went away, letting the Mad Hatter greet the guests. She noticed on the split screen that she was still being watched as she put the first piece of the puzzle in its place.

Each consecutive guest followed suit as the night progressed. Most of whom were on the floor of the auditorium watching the events unfold before them. They wandered back at will. Only the performers were interviewed. As each act came to the stage, their identities were revealed.

April watched and waited but no sign of Chance ever came. She finally decided to check in his dressing room. Trying to get through the crowd was much more difficult than it had been the day before, especially since the blast. She couldn't have asked for a better advertisement.

. . . but my home!!

She reminded herself to not think about it until later, but sure enough, one TV she passed was still Live at the Scene. Holding her hand up to block the view, she walked quickly by the image.

. . . and the earth shall be destroyed with fire.

At first she went to the door and stopped there, not wanting to enter. She looked around, then knocked. Nobody answered. A moment later, she opened the door with her master key, and went inside.

The costume was missing.

Chance felt better in the facade today, because it made him anonymous in the spotlight. He was not himself today. Not quite ready to be in the limelight, he chose to wander through the halls backstage, half looking for April - past, present or future. No one was there at all.

Now April got on the radio, cutting in on the conversation between unseen players who were now running the show. She felt kind of bad interrupting the dialogue, but when it didn't ebb, she chimed in,

"Hey, it's me Mother Hubbard. Has anyone seen the White Rabbit today? Or the stray dog?"

She waited for a response, but there was no reply. Again, she called out, "Is there anybody out there?"

A one voice came back, "No one has seen him, I guess. Or her. Anyone?"

No response.

"Okay, thanks! Keep me posted!"

The jabber on the airwaves returned.

Chance went all through the corridors until he came out the back door which led to April's trailer. If she hadn't exited his at that moment, she would have seen him on the screens. Instead, she bolted out of the door, trying to find him.

If security hadn't been distracted by the semi-nude woman on monitor #2, they could have told April what she wanted to hear.

If Chance had waited a moment longer, he would have seen her in the doorway of her trailer, but he turned the corner toward the main hall, just as she walked out the back door.

April retrieved her binoculars, hoping to spot the elusive hare. She went out to the stage area, hoping to scan the first twenty rows of guests just in case he was mingling there. If she would have looked up, she would have seen him on the monitors, putting his piece in place without a word to the press.

By now, several acts had taken place and the later it got, the more concerned she became. She barely noticed the President on TV, apologizing while still dressed in his Lizard costume.

He spoke somberly about the tragedy of terrorism, but she failed to listen. All she could think was . . . I am the Lizard King! I can do anything.

Soon, she would have to face it. Chance wasn't going to show. She decided that she was going to have to improvise. Maybe, she could get someone else to fill his shoes, but who? No one else would do.

Maybe if I tell them that the rabbit died, no . . . that won't do! I could put some ears on Bob . . . no! Maybe I can tell them he's running really, REALLY LATE!

Nothing seemed like the right answer, so she resigned herself to fate. What will be, will be and that's life. Her cloud of dread lifted a little as she gave up trying to fulfill destiny.

Screw it! I'm just going to put the final piece of the puzzle in myself. The first and the last . . . why not? When it all comes down to it, it's always been up to me anyway. I'll just have to tell them the truth. It never was up to anyone else. She ranted endlessly in her mind all the excuses and explanations she could conjure and when she finally found the right one, she smiled.

I'll blame it on the weather. Whether he shows, or whether he doesn't, I did this to fulfill my own little void, and that's the final piece to the puzzle. I promised you a surprise . . . well, Surprise!! He ain't coming!

She was already putting the second piece in place by the time she realized that no pieces were missing from the puzzle.

Then she heard the voice,

"Ladies and Gentlemen, the White Rabbit!!":

The crowd screamed as the March Hare bounded out on stage, ready to entertain the masses. April stared at the monitor as the hulking white character made it to the microphone.

Who . . . what the . . .?

"Thanks a lot for the warm reception! It's great to see everyone today. Are you ready for me yet?"

The congregation wailed.

"I'd like to start out with a song that I wrote for this occasion, but first I'm going to need your help. Instead of clapping, I want everyone to rub their palms together. Let me hear you."

The multitude of hands brushing together made the room dwell with the sound of the surf, distant waves crashing on faraway shores. A moment later, the White Rabbit removed his gloves and picked up his acoustic guitar.

"My first song I got the idea a few years ago but I actually only wrote it a few minutes ago, so it isn't in the program. Take five, guys!"

The band sat back to watch him solo in the narrow beam of light that descended upon him. April watched in disbelief.

Still dressed in his White Rabbit costume, Chance sang his newest song:

Where have you been? My friend . . . Where have you been?

Trouble with our friendship is you and I aren't friends.

We've never had a good time, walking around the bends

of life's amazing journey.

. . . so, where have you been all of my life?

People come and go . . . so quickly around here.

When I look around me, my friends all disappear.

I am left with the memories
of good old days that came to an end
on life's amazing journey.
. . . where have you been?

April wiped away a tear, thinking about the surprise she had in store for him, now wondering if it was such a good idea. Who was he talking to anyway? She walked out of the darkness, onto the floor where she blended into the crowd of guests. Faces blurred, as she moved toward the stage, through the horde, being jostled side to side as she made her way.

April looked up again.

"For my next song, I'd like to introduce the band . . ."

It was evident from her blank stare, she didn't hear a word he said.

It's been so long since I've watched you perform. Are you still as lonely as you said you were back when we met? What were you saying, anyway? Did I get it mixed up? What am I . . . supposed to say to you anyway? I don't even remember . . .

Chance went on to sing several of his favorite songs, the crowd dancing in the aisles. April turned around to see the house. It rocked!

Then she heard what she came to hear . . .

"This next song, I would like to send out to someone here . . . you know who you are!"

And thus began, Momentary Magic.

During the song, April stared transfixed at the man on the stage. Her skin bristled as she felt the rush of spirit surge through her veins. This moment would last a lifetime.

"Here, girl, where are your manners?"

Behind her, a voice reminded her. When she turned to see who was there, she saw the red rose. And the old woman . . . Her gloved hand took the bloom slowly. She nodded her thanks to the rose lady.

"Go on, girl . . . your man is waiting."

When April looked down the gnarled finger that pointed past her, she saw Chance as he had been back when . . .

"Thank you, 'mam!"

But the woman was gone. The rose was still in April's hand.

Go on, girl . . .

The crowd separated just enough for April to float directly to the edge of the stage, stopping only when the wooden barrier prevented her from going any farther. Her arms rested on the barricade. Speechless, she relived the moment over and over again. Time stopped.

. . . when will it all come to an end . . . momentary magic.

"Thanks for coming!" Chance shouted to the fans, and left the stage.

April stood there, holding the rose, realizing that she had missed her opportunity to give him the flower. Her stomach lurched. Now she tried to make it through the audience, which seemed to hold her back. Snaking her way toward backstage, she became frantic.

What if he leaves? Hurry, hurry!

She ran into security, trying to get them to radio for him. But because the guards worked for the arena, not her, they didn't recognize her. She almost got thrown out, and might have if she hadn't taken off running through the backstage door.

"Excuse me! Excuse me!" she kept having to say as people stepped out in front of her.

I'm never going to find him, am I?

Then she remembered her trailer and his dressing room. Maybe he would be one of those places. She went by the hospitality room and the press room on her way out, but he wasn't in either area. Her trailer was empty, so was his. Then she went to his chamber.

"Hey, girl, what are you doing? Looking for me?"

"Well, uh . . . yeah. What are you doing?"

"Looking for you!" He motioned to the television sets on the walls.

April moved nervously, looking at him only briefly before her eyes looked down at her feet. She noticed the rose in her hand.

"Oh, I brought this for you . . ."

He took it, looking carefully at it before his sniffed its scent. His silence was overwhelming. April stood fidgeting with her costume in the mirror. When she looked at him, she saw the dragon standing behind him. She never said a word.

"I've got something for you, too."

The first thing he produced was a yellow rose. Then he gave her the moon necklace and the picture.

"Oh, my God! That's May!"

"Who's that?"

April told him about her sister, how it had been her idea to go to that first show, and how she was missing in LA.

"How did Tara get this? I gave it to May the last time I saw her!"

. . . the last time . . .

Finally, Chance put his finger up to her lips.

"Can we talk later?"

April nodded.

"Kiss . . ."

Her eyes closed as their lips met. His stayed wide open as he tried to figure out what he was doing.

This can't be right . . . it feels so . . . but it can't . . . it can't feel this good.

He closed his eyes, promising that he would think about it later. Not now.

"We have to go!" April managed to piece together in between sweet kisses. It was the hardest thing she ever had to say in her life.

"Go where?"

"To the show."

"Yeah, we mustn't keep them waiting."

As they walked toward the hall they could hear what was being said,

"We have time for one encore performance, and we're going to leave it up to you guys. Who do you want to see come back . . . right now, right here, on this stage? It's time to make your choice."

April hugged him quickly before running out onto the stage herself and grabbing the microphone from the Mad Hatter. She skipped in exaggerated circles around the stage, whispering Chance into the microphone.

"Chance . . . Chance . . . Chance . . ."

She gained a little volume each time, plus the audience chimed into the chant. Soon they stomped their feet, rattling the entire stadium, scaring the hell out of April. She been on stage before but this was something else!

When the Rabbit appeared, the masses went wild rushing the stage. He hadn't seen a crowd like that in years. He yelled into April's ear,

"See what you started?"

"Sorry . . ."

"No, it's okay . . . you kinda get used to it after twelve years."

Chance started to speak to the crowd but a voice boomed overhead in the speakers.

"Chance?"

The White Rabbit looked up and around, trying to pinpoint the utterance. He lifted the microphone to his face, as a hush fell over the crowd.

"Chance?"

He recognized the voice, so familiar, and yet . . .

"Yes? It's me - Chance!"

The crowd went wild as the Mad Hatter strode center stage, alongside of the White Rabbit and the Dormouse. He carried an oversized envelope to Chance.

"Chance, I have a special delivery for you . . . and if you'll excuse us, we'll be right back."

The two walked off the stage together, leaving the Dormouse alone in the spotlight.

Oh, shit! What do I do now?

"Good, we're alone now. I thought they would never leave! Is everyone ready for a game of naked Twister? I hope you remembered to bring your own oil . . . speaking of oil. Anyone here besides me with a petro-chemical dependency?"

April tried to remember any of her routine, not having been very funny since she returned to Texas. Her mind swarmed with punch lines, but her tongue had to perform. She remembered chunks of monologue by rote, which was good since she blacked out. Ten minutes later, when the Mad Hatter and White Rabbit emerged from the darkness, the crowd reacted, snapping April out of her spell.

Chance put his arm around April, speaking into the mic which she clipped to the stand. The Mad Hatter stood behind them slightly.

"I have a message . . . and I guess I can share it with you. My friend here, the Mad Hatter, has given me news from afar. My dad wants to meet with me. I guess I'm not such an apostate as I once was. I am . . . I am just glad that I have my friends here with me tonight. After this, I guess I'm off to the Vatican, to see the Wizard."

He put his other arm around the Mad Hatter, bringing him up to the microphone.

"I'd like to introduce to you, your friend and mine, the Mad Hatter - my oldest and dearest friend, Greg Appell!"

Chance embraced his friend, "I've missed you, mate!"

April felt warm, the glowing of the lights in her eyes became luminous like a new day dawning. Maybe the new age was upon us. The past and the present and the bridge between them. Maybe, all prodigal children could go home again. It gave her hope for the future, hers and everyone seeking the better way.

"And I'd like to introduce to you once again . . . the Dormouse, also known as April Leigh . . . who made all this possible."

On the monitors, the camera zoomed in to frame the puzzle, which was so cryptic that no one was positive what it meant. The Internet would be flooded the next day with a thousand theories. One for every piece of the big picture. When the puzzle was flipped over by a half a dozen helpful hands, April cringed, embarrassed. She felt like running away.

"Hey, girl, that's us!"

The audience gasped, as a murmur of questions floated throughout. There on the other side, a portrayal of her perfect world, he and she together surrounded by the world of illusions. Reporter's pencils were flying across lined pages of tonight's top story. April wanted to back away, frightened of what she might have created here. From the darkness before her, the light caressed her face. She took a deep breath.

"Did you draw that?" He asked as he kissed her, not waiting for an answer.

April fell back into the darkness of a lover's grip, sinking into the whole of the moment. She was in the arms of heaven. If he let go, she would have been lost. If he didn't, maybe they could all be saved. She took another deep breath.

This is the life . . .

After the show, April was surrounded by the media firing questions at her from every direction. She was speechless for a change.

The White Rabbit saved her from the invasion,

"The answer to all of your questions is Yes. More on that later . . ."

Chance led April away from the scene, managing to wrangle Greg away from another group. There were plenty of other people to distract the correspondents. Right now, they needed to talk, maybe have a drink and a smoke . . . a couple of valium. Something to take the edge off. As if this private conversation would make them relax.

No one spoke as they walked through the halls toward Chance's room. It wasn't until they closed the door behind them that Greg spoke up, trying to ease the mood.

"So, Chance, I guess you won't be needing your own personal postal carrier any longer, huh?"

"How could you do it to me again?"

"Hey, I didn't . . . well, okay, I did do it again, in a way . . . but I thought, uh, . . . we thought that you would want some closure. When I got the word, I believed that maybe I could make it up to you for what happened." Greg tried to apologize, and explain, "You can't deny who you are?"

"Who am I?"

"Well, what I mean, you know what you are!"

"What am I?"

Neither said another word.

April handed out the first round of beers, aware of the silent tension.

"So, I guess I've acted pretty foolish all these years. I don't blame you guys for making fun of me."

The two guys turned, first looking at her, then at each other, and then back at her again. They burst out in laughter, both falling out of their chair. How could they tell her about her nickname 'Tasia,' (as in Fan-tasia!) without making it sound derogatory? They couldn't, and the more they tried to form a response, the more their eyes met, leaving them weak with hysterics.

"I always wanted to be a comedian but I was afraid people like you would laugh at me!"

She tried to act disgusted at being left out of their private joke but she was just too happy to have them here, that she gave it up quickly.

"I guess you two have met?" Greg asked.

Chance looked at her, memories flashing by, "Yeah, we met."

"So, what do we do now?" Greg stood up. "I'm starving . . ."

"We'll catch up to you in a bit."

After, he left, the other two sat in silence, drinking and thinking. They could hear the raucous of voices outside as the television show wrapped up.

"Do you want to go out there? Your fifteen minutes await you!"

"Not really . . . there's time for that another time."

"So, April, are you a good witch or a bad witch?"

"Which witch do you want me to be?"

"I bet you are so good, you holler out your own name!"

"Yeah, Chance, I'm a legend in my own mind."

He took her chin in his hand, turning her face toward him so he could read her eyes, see what her face would betray when he asked her what he really needed to know, "You aren't going to hurt me, are you?"

"Why would I hurt you?"

He weighed his words carefully, "I don't know . . . for the notoriety?"

"If I can do all this without you, then I don't need that kind of publicity to get my fifteen minutes, do I?" She shook her head, "Have I ever done anything to you yet? . . . Bad, I mean?"

"Well, . . . no, but you scare the hell out of me!"

"I always have . . ."

Chance looked at her, "Yeah . . ."

"You judge a tree by the fruit it bears, Chance!" She leaned over, whispering in his ear, "You are going to go much farther."

"I hope so."

How could she finish the sentence? The words stuck in her throat. What she wanted to say but couldn't find her voice was . . . farther than your father. She left it unsaid. Maybe he would understand . . . probably not.

Chance rubbed her leg, "So, what are we supposed to do now?"

"Well, I don't know . . . maybe nothing . . ."

At the wrap party, Chance was greeted with many congratulations from sympathetic people who tried to understand how he felt. His smile, his eyes said little. Except to April, his eyes spoke volumes.

When they finally got a break from the barrage, the two met up with Greg, who asked, "So, how are things going?"

"She's got an idea that I think might be interesting, even profitable."

He went on to paraphrase her proposal. Greg pondered it momentarily, drifting into the realm of creativity where his thoughts bloomed into the concept. He had seen the first half of the movie/album. A second half?

"It might just work!"

After everyone said good-bye, back stage became vacant, as it was when it started. Lights were blinking out everywhere as the crew tore down the equipment. The echo of slamming doors and folding chairs floated through empty corridors. Now April had to remember, when she heard someone yell,

"Okay, people! You don't have to go home . . . you just have to go!"

"Oh, that's right . . ." Chance whispered.

"Home is where the heart is . . . I'm homeless . . ."

"Come on, we'll figure something out . . ."

We? Oui`!

That night, they checked into a hotel under assumed names, even though the clerk obviously knew who they were. The pimply faced young man smiled too big, and was overly helpful. He knew better than to 'recognize' them, but it didn't keep him from bragging to his

friends the next day.

When Chance and April were alone again, neither knew what to say. Her thoughts turned to May, his to Tara. They knew that trouble brewed on the horizon, but no one said a word.

The news of the event was on every channel, and already wondering who was on the list for next year.

"Next year?"

"You did say that it was the first annual Mad Hatter Tea Party and Charity Ball, didn't you?"

"Oh, . . . I meant to say the first and last annual Mad Hatter Tea Party and Charity Ball. Uh oh, call my PR department."

Chance laughed, "I'll have my people call your people."

"I don't have any people . . ."

"Get some people and have them call my people . . . we'll do lunch."

Lunch . . .

That night, the dreams returned, a swirling vision of home and hearth, heaven and earth. The wolves, pawns and demons of power, corruption and completion. The flames of spirit reached sky-ward, and the stars cascading to the material plane, amplified the sound of Truth, the Way and the Light. The exchange of light and dark, yin and yang, day and night. The puzzle was complete for once, but when the morning light came, its image faded. A new day sunrise called the faithful to rise and shine once again.

In the morning, two new friends started the rest of their lives, unsure but unafraid. Who knew why the future would bring? Who could claim to know? If not faith then what? Fate?

Spiritual father, natural father, Father Time . . .

"The father of a fool hath no joy. - Proverbs xvii. 21."

Necessity or chance, Approach not me;

and what I will is fate.

Milton

"So, Chance, I guess maybe we should talk sometime. What do you think? As difficult as it is, you have to come to terms with your . . . uh, your family."

"I guess I could go and complain about my family, but it probably wouldn't do any good, would it?"

"What do you mean?" April questioned.

"I researched my family tree. Wouldn't you know? Root rot!"

After second night together, they were at peace with each other. Eventually they left the privacy of the April's motel room and ventured to the trailer where April had to face the loss. She wasn't devastated, just a little sad.

. . . and there is time to build again.

Her parents brought Natasha out to the house while Chance and April were there. April told them about May, and that maybe she could find her. Bring May back. She introduced Chance to them, as much as she could, while trying to ignore the suspicious look on

her mother's face.

They exchanged pleasantries, trying to maintain an air of dignity as total strangers were thrust into each other's worlds.

Natasha looked up at Chance with all the wide-eyed innocence of a child, asking, "Who are you?"

"I'm Chance, and you are?"

"Are you daddy?"

The adults laughed nervously, as April tried to silence the child. But she continued to piece words together, "Daddy!"

Natasha threw her arms up at April, "Mommy!"

Then she pointed to April's belly, "Baby!"

Mom looked up at April with growing concern in her eyes, "April, are you pregnant again?"

The End

God sat in front of His television...

"This Earth channel sucks!"

(click)